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To Deirdre and Chesley— *Kangei su.ru!*

First edition February 2001 ISBN 0-373-63829-9

TIGERS OF HEAVEN

Special thanks to Mark Ellis for his contribution to the Outlanders concept, developed for Gold Eagle.

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But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger.

—William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

The Road to Outlands— From Secret Government Files to the Future

Almost two hundred years after the global holocaust, Kane, a former Magistrate of Cobaltville, often thought the world had been lucky to survive at all after a nuclear device detonated in the Russian embassy in Washington, D.C. The aftermath—forever known as skydark— reshaped continents and turned civilization into ashes.

Nearly depopulated, America became the Deathlands— poisoned by radiation, home to chaos and mutated life forms. Feudal rule reappeared in the form of baronies, while remote outposts dung to a brutish existence.

What eventually helped shape this wasteland were the redoubts, the secret preholocaust military installations with stores of weapons, and the home of gateways, the locational matter-transfer facilities. Some of the redoubts hid clues that had once fed wild theories of government cover-ups and alien visitations.

Rearmed from redoubt stockpiles, the barons consolidated their power and reclaimed technology for the viltes. Their power, supported by some invisible authority, extended beyond their fortified walls to what was now called the Outlands. It was here that the rootstock of humanity survived, living with hellzones and chemical storms, hounded by Magistrates.

In the villes, rigid laws were enforced—to atone for the sins of the past and prepare the way for a better future. That was the barons' public credo and their right-to-rule.

Kane, along with friend and fellow Magistrate Grant, had upheld that claim until a fateful Outlands expedition. A displaced piece of technology...a question to a keeper of the archives...a vague clue about alien masters—and their world shifted radically. Suddenly, Brigid Baptiste, the archivist, faced summary execution, and

Grant a quick termination. For Kane there was forgiveness if he pledged his unquestioning allegiance to Baron Cobalt and his unknown masters and abandoned his friends.

But that allegiance would make him support a mysterious and alien power and deny loyalty and friends. Then what else was there?

Kane had been brought up solely to serve the ville. Brigid's only link with her family was her mother's red-gold hair, green eyes and supple form. Grant's dues to his lineage were his ebony skin and powerful physique. But Domi, she of the white hair, was an Outlander pressed into sexual servitude in Cobaltville. She at least knew her roots and was a reminder to the exiles that the outcasts belonged in the human family.

Parents, friends, community—the very rootedness of humanity was denied. With no continuity, there was no forward momentum to the future. And that was the crux—when Kane began to wonder if there was a future.

For Kane, it wouldn't do. So the only way was out— way, way out.

After their escape, they found shelter at the forgotten Cerberus redoubt headed by Lakesh, a scientist, Cobaltville's head archivist, and secret opponent of the barons.

With their past turned into a lie, their future threatened, only one thing was left to give meaning to the outcasts. The hunger for freedom, the will to resist the hostile influences. And perhaps, by opposing, end them.

Chapter 1

Kane sat in the corner of the cell, his teeth chattering. Even crouched on the bunk with the heavy blanket tucked around him, he felt that he would freeze to death in a matter of minutes. He knew he wouldn't, despite the violent shudders that shook his body from toe-tip to nose-tip. The bone-deep, marrow-freezing cold was by now familiar.

For a long time, he just sat hunched over, his teeth clenched so tightly his jaw muscles ached. He listened to the slow steady beat of his heart and he imagined he felt the last bit of the drag creeping through his veins and circulating through his body. Shortly, it would be fully metabolized and the somatic aftereffects would kick in. Absorbed through the skin, the aphrodisiac gel always gave him a serious chill before utter exhaustion settled over him like chains. He doubted his cell was less than sixty degrees Fahrenheit, but he still shook and trembled as if the temperature were on the low side of zero. He fought against the growing drowsiness.

Eventually, he would fall asleep, and when he awoke his body temperature would be back to normal and his hunger ravenous. He would awaken to find a tray of food in the corner, near the cell door. It was always there after his slumber, but he never saw who put it there. This time, he was determined find out.

The food was always the same—a bowl of warm gruel resembling oatmeal, two small plastic jugs of milk and water, a sugary substance in a paper envelope, a plastic spoon and a slice of dark bread. The only way he could measure how long he had been in custody was by how many times he had eaten. He no longer had any idea of how many days he'd spent locked away in the vast complex beneath the Nevada desert, in the sprawling installation known two centuries ago as Area 51 and Dreamland.

Kane forced himself to smile as he tugged the blanket up around his ears. If he had dreamed since his imprisonment, he couldn't remember any of them. In fact, memories of a life preceding his imprisonment

in Dreamland were fading, becoming little more than half-remembered dreams themselves.

Kane knew all about the techniques of disorientation. It was a common enough procedure with the Magistrates of the Intel section back in Cobaltville. But the purpose behind his confinement had nothing to do with keeping him confused and dull-witted. He was allowed to leave his small cell at least once every two days, or at least he thought it was every two days. There was no time in his cell, no daylight, no dawn or darkness; there was only a routine eternally lit by a single yellow neon strip inset into the ceiling.

The room that he called home measured hardly twelve paces by ten. Only the small spy-eye vid lens bolted in an upper corner relieved the monotony of

the smooth, white blocks and mortared seams of each wall.

Kane's existence seemed like perpetual twilight. His reality was blurred, all the sharp edges blunted. For a while he tried to reckon the passage of time by periods of work and rest, but he lost count and it did not greatly matter anyway. Still, he clung to his old habit of thought, thinking of the sleep periods as nights and his work periods as days. Kane left his cell only to work, to be put out to stud. There was no other word, term or euphemism for it. His life had been spared by Baron Cobalt only so he could father children, plant his seed in the female hybrids in the installation.

He shivered again, and he forced himself to remember the first time he had awakened in his cell. After sleeping off the gel-triggered exertions, the first thing he saw was the tray of food on the floor beside the door. Ravenous, he snatched it up and mindlessly began stuffing himself. Then the memories of what he had been forced to do and with whom wheeled through his mind in a kaleidoscope of broken, humiliating pictures. Roaring with rage and shame, he hurled the bowl of porridge at the spy-eye bracketed in the corner on the opposite wall.

He recollected how he laughed when the thick gruel smeared over the lens. He was still laughing when the door opened and six men rushed in. They wore crisp, multipocketed gray jumpsuits and rubber-soled shoes identical to the articles of clothing he had been given. The two guards in the lead were armed

with long, black batons with thready skeins of electricity crackling between the double-pronged tips. The Shocksticks were devices used by ville Magistrates for crowd control. A little under three feet in length, the batons delivered six-thousand-volt localized shocks.

None of the men spoke-as they closed in on him from all sides. Kane bloodied his knuckles and the nose of one man before the rest of them grappled with him, bearing him down by sheer weight of numbers. One of the guards reeled away, disabled by a vicious foot to the groin. Kane caved in the front teeth of another man with the crown of his head a split second before he glimpsed the tip of a descending Shock-stick. When it touched the side of his neck, all of his muscles convulsed and spasmed. Streaks of agony lanced through his body, and he went down writhing, curling up in a fetal position.

There were more blows, both with feet and Shock-sticks, and darkness claimed him. When the light returned, the mess of oatmeal had been cleaned up and two new guards stood over him. He lay on the bunk, aching and angry. One of the men deigned to speak to him.

"Wake up, little Nemo," he said, thrusting a new tray of food toward him. He was a young man with short-cropped blond hair. "Welcome to Dreamland."

Biting back groans of pain, Kane sat up and took the tray. Although his stomach growled and hunger pangs stabbed through him, he made no motion to touch the food. He asked, "How long?"

"How long what?" the second guard asked. He was a seam-faced, wire-muscled man, his dark hair gleaming with pomade. "How long you've been unconscious?"

"That'll do for starters."

"About three hours."

"How long have I been here in Dreamland?" Kane inquired.

The young man answered the question. "About three months. Shortly after you blew the mesa."

Kane's lips quirked in a cold smile. "Heard about that, did you?"

Flatly, the man retorted, "I was there, Kane. I guess you don't remember me."

Kane studied the guard's face for a long moment, searching his memory for a match. "Your name is Maddock?"

The man nodded curtly. "That's right. I was on the hover-tank crew."

Kane arched an eyebrow at him. "I let you go."

"Only so I could deliver a message." Maddock's expression and voice were completely dispassionate. "I still remember it. 'The revolution has officially started.' I delivered it. And now here you are and here I am."

Kane's smile broadened. "Then you should thank me."

"For what?"

"For getting you reassigned to a detail this soft."

Maddock's face suddenly showed emotion, twist-

ing in a grimace. "I'm not part of that. I don't have the qualifications."

Kane's eyebrows rose. "What kind of qualifications do you need for this kind of work?"

"For one thing—"

"Shut up, dipshit," the other man snapped. "He doesn't need to hear your life story."

The man stepped forward, putting the tip of a Shockstick close to Kane's head. "Our orders are to make sure you eat. So eat."

Kane shrugged, lifted the lid of the tray, picked up his spoon and dug into the oatmeal. He said nothing else to Maddock, remembering the night when he, Grant, Brigid Baptiste and Domi inadvertently

destroyed the medical facility beneath the Archuleta Mesa in New Mexico. The barons depended on the facility, and though its destruction had been the accidental by-product of shooting down an aircraft, Kane wasn't about to tell the guards that.

At the end of the twentieth century, the Aurora aircraft had been the pinnacle of avionic achievement. Before the nukeraust, the Aurora enjoyed the status of the most closely guarded of military secrets. Supremely maneuverable, it was capable of astonishingly swift ascent and descent, could take off vertically and hover absolutely motionless.

Powered by pulsating integrated gravity-wave engines and magnetohydrodynamic air spikes, the Aurora was a true marauder of the skies, and as such, the baronial hierarchy relied upon it to locate sources of raw genetic material in the Outlands, kill the do-

nors, harvest their organs and tissues, and deliver them to the mesa to be processed.

The mission that brought Kane and his companions to the New Mexican desert was to eliminate the barons' method of harvesting fresh material—merchandise, as they referred to it. Grant shot down the Aurora with a rocket launcher while it hovered above its underground hangar. The impact of the crash breached the magnetic-field container of the two-tiered fusion generator—or at least that was Brigid Baptiste's theory. Whatever happened, Kane couldn't argue with the cataclysmic aftermath, akin to unleashing the energy of the sun inside a cellar. Although much of the kinetic force and heat were channeled upward and out through the hangar doors, a scorching, smashing wave of destruction swept through the installation. As he learned later, if not for the series of vanadium blast-shield bulkheads, the entire mesa could have come tumbling down.

Kane blinked, biting back a yawn, trying to focus not only on the memory of the night at the mesa but also on his reintroduction to Maddock. He wondered if the young man felt any gratitude toward him. Apparently, his partner Gifford wondered the same thing, so after that brief meeting, he never saw Maddock again. Only Gifford came thereafter, using a magnetic card to open the cell door and make sure he always ate the oatmeal served to him three times a day. Three times a day a smirking Gifford inspected the toilet and tiny sink to make sure he hadn't dumped the food.

It took Kane several servings of the bland food to figure out why his diet never varied. The porridge was high in protein and probably laced with both a stimulant and blood-building enzyme. The stimulant was more than likely of the catecholamine family, drugs the Magistrate Divisions used to counteract shock and exhaustion. He dredged his memory for the details of how it worked on the renal blood supply, increasing cardiac output without increasing the need for oxygen consumption.

Combined with the food loaded with protein to speed sperm production, the stimulant provided him with hours of high energy. Since he was forced to achieve erection and ejaculation six times a day every two days, his energy and sperm count had to be pre-ternaturally high, even higher than was normal for him.

Kane knew he was supposed to be special, for a variety of reasons—or at least that was the story he had been told by Mohandas Lakesh Singh who had founded the group of exiles at Cerberus redoubt. The qualities that made him unique sprang from the Totality Concept's Overproject Excalibur. One of its subdivisions, Scenario Joshua, had its roots in the twentieth century's Genome Project, which mapped human genomes to specific chromosomal functions and locations. The end result had been in vitro genetic samples of the best of the best. In the vernacular of the time, it was referred to as purity control.

Everyone who enjoyed full ville citizenship was the descendant of the Genome Project. Sometimes, a par-

ticular gene carrying a desirable trait \yas spliced into an unrelated egg, or an undesirable gene removed. Despite many failures, when there was a success, it was replicated over and over, occasionally with variations. Even the baronial oligarchy was bred from this system.

Some forty years before, when Lakesh had determined to build a resistance movement against the baronies, he rifled Scenario Joshua's genetic records for the most desirable traits to breed into potential warriors in his cause.

According to Lakesh, Kane's family line possessed the qualities of high intelligence, superior adaptive traits, resistance to disease and exceptionally potent sperm.

Kane wasn't a superhuman, but he was superior. Baron Cobalt knew that. He had access to the same records as Lakesh, and he took full advantage of them. There was more to the process than insuring Kane's superior traits. With the destruction of the Archuleta Mesa medical facilities, the barons no longer had access to the ectogenesis techniques of fetal development outside the womb. The conventional means of procreation was the only option for keeping the hybrid race alive.

Lakesh speculated that since Area 51's history was intertwined with rumors of alien involvement, Baron Cobalt was using its medical facilities as a substitute for those destroyed in New Mexico. Of course, he couldn't be sure if the aliens referred to by the pre-dark conspiracy theorists were the Archons. If so, the

medical facilities in Area 51 would be of great use to the hybrid barons since it would already be designed for their metabolisms. Lakesh suspected Baron Cobalt could have reactivated them, turned them into a processing and treatment center without having to rebuild from scratch, and transferred the medical personnel from the Dulce facility.

Baron Cobalt's occupation of Area 51 was still a matter of wonder to Kane. As far as he remembered from old Magistrate Intel reports, most of Nevada was considered Outlands. It wasn't a part of official baronial territory, certainly not Baron Cobalt's. The nearest ville was that of Snakefish in California.

Kane couldn't even hazard a guess as to how much of the Area 51 installation was still intact. The few scraps of intel that Lakesh had found in the Cerberus database were nearly two hundred years old, and had to be assembled like a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing.

Baron Cobalt might be able to provide some of the missing pieces if he felt generous, but generosity was not part of his personality. For that matter, Kane hadn't seen the baron since the day of his capture and his inauguration into stud service. He hadn't seen Domi or heard anything about her, and he wasn't inclined to ask questions. If she had escaped apprehension and was still free and undetected in the enormous installation, he didn't want one of his questions to spur a search for her. If the albino girl had somehow managed to escape, then so much the better.

For reasons he couldn't name, he knew Domi

wasn't dead. Even if Gifford told him she was, he wouldn't believe it until he viewed her corpse. His certainty she still lived derived less from faith in her survival skills than his own instincts. But, he reminded himself darkly, if his instincts were everything he purported them to be, he wouldn't be penned up and treated as a prize bull.

Very little interest had been evinced toward him, other than his capacity to plant his seed in the females. For that matter, Kane had no idea how long he would be allowed to live. He assumed it would be until

the first pregnancy was carried to full term, but he didn't know how many months comprised a hybrid's gestation period. Nor did he know if a hybrid female could even conceive a child by a human male. All he knew was what Baron Cobalt had told him upon his capture, accusing him of perpetrating an act of genocide. Rather than kill him outright, the baron had promised, "I won't let you die." The vow became a mantra, not of mercy but of condemnation and punishment.

However, Kane did know the male hybrids were incapable of engaging in conventional acts of procreation, at least physically. As he had seen, their organs of reproduction were so undeveloped as to be vestigial. Before his capture, he had actually shied from wondering if the females were similarly under-equipped, but as he discovered many times since arriving at the complex, they were not.

Sleep suddenly washed over Kane in waves. He swallowed a yawn, the effort making his ears pop.

His eyes began to water. He realized he was no longer cold. In fact, he was warm, comfortably, wonderfully warm. Snuggled in the blanket, he tried to remain upright, but it took all of his strength to keep his eyes open. Dimly, he became aware of his body falling over to one side. He was deep asleep before his head touched the pillow.

Chapter 2

A small sound, so faint and indistinct as to be subliminal, gently pierced the black cloak of slumber swathing Kane's mind. With an effort that seemed to take hours and concentration so single-minded it was an obsession, he managed to crack open one eyelid.

He saw a square panel in the wall where it joined with the floor closing almost silently. He spied his tray of food next to the door, and he smothered a laugh of triumph. He remained motionless on the bunk. It wouldn't do for him to act as if the sound of the panel opening and closing had roused him. For the benefit of the spy-eye monitor, he maintained steady deep breathing, as if he were still fast asleep.

He lay unmoving for what seemed like an hour, then slowly he stirred, rolling over, shifting position and finally sitting up. He knuckled his eyes and yawned. He shuffled across the cell and bent over to pick up the tray. As he did so, he glanced surreptitiously at the wall. Now that he knew what to look for, he just barely discerned a square outline barely thicker than human hair.

Kane sat on the edge of the bunk and obediently ate the inevitable oatmeal. He had gone to great

lengths to seem docile, but always he waited for an opportunity, for an edge, for an opening.

He wasn't used to waiting. He had been a poor student of the waiting game, but he'd forced himself to learn it. He also forced himself to accept the fact no rescue would be forthcoming. Minutes after his and Domi's arrival in Area 51's mat-trans gateway, the unit had been shut down and the jump lines cut. Grant, Brigid, Lakesh and anyone else back at the Cerberus redoubt in Montana interested in then- fates would have to travel cross-country to find out what had happened.

Kane seriously doubted he and Domi could be traced by the signals transmitted by their biolink transponders. Everyone in the Cerberus redoubt had been injected with a subcutaneous transponder that transmitted heart rate, respiration, blood count and brainwave patterns. Based on organic nanotechnology, the transponder was a nonharmful radioactive chemical that bound itself to an individual's glucose and the middle layers of the epidermis. The signal was relayed to the redoubt by the Comsat, one of the two satellites to which the installation was uplinked.

The Cerberus computer systems recorded every byte of data sent to the Comsat and bounced it down to the redoubt's hidden antenna array. Sophisticated scanning niters combed through the telemetry using special human biological encoding. The digital data stream was then routed through a locational program to precisely isolate an individual's present position.

As far as Kane knew, his present position could be

under half a mile «f vanadium-shielded rock through which the telemetric signal couldn't penetrate. The Cerberus personnel knew to where he and Domi had jumped, but he was certain they had no idea if the two were alive, dead or otherwise. So Kane resigned himself to do what was expected of him, at least for the foreseeable future.

Only Kane's sense of humor, his appreciation of the ridiculous vagaries of life, kept him sane. When he reflected on his many celibate months after his escape from Cobaltville, the irony of now having more female flesh than he cared to deal with sometimes made him laugh. Of course, the amusement value had begun to pall as of late. He couldn't help but wonder about Baptiste's reaction when—not if, he reminded himself fiercely—he told her of Baron Cobalt's concept of penance.

When he finished his meal, he returned the tray to its place on the floor and went back to his bunk. As soon as he lay down, he heard the click as a magnetic card was swiped through the electronic lock. The door swung inward.

"Kane!" Gifford barked.

Kane sat up as the man stepped into the doorway, Shockstick in one hand, a set of chrome-plated swivel cuffs in the other. Gifford never entered the cell alone, but always waited just a single step out into the corridor.

"I haven't been asleep two days," Kane said.

Gifford chuckled snidery and made an exaggerated show of checking his wrist chron. "More like sixteen hours. Poor fella, I guess those bitches wore you out Get ready to be worn down to a nub. You're pulling a double shift, you lucky bastard you."

Kane stiffened in surprise. The routine had never varied before. "On whose orders?"

The guard scowled. "It doesn't matter to me and it sure as shit doesn't matter to you. The deal is simple enough, ain't it?"

Kane didn't answer, but he silently agreed with Gifford. If he performed, he lived. If he didn't, he died. The mantra Baron Cobalt crooned into his ear upon his capture still echoed hi his mind: "I won't let you die."

"Up," Gifford snapped.

Levering himself to his feet, Kane stood hi front of his bunk, wrists together. He was unshaved, and his thick dark hair lay against the base of his neck in unwashed strands. No fear showed in his gray-blue eyes or hi the set of his long, lean-muscle body, but a spasm of vertigo caused him to totter briefly. The dizziness was a side effect of the drug-laced food.

The guard shifted his weight from one booted foot to the other and grasped the molded plastic grip of the Shockstick tightly. In a suspicious tone, he demanded, "Are you all right?"

Kane smiled thinly, showing the edges of his teeth. "I didn't think it mattered."

Gifford's eyes narrowed, and he gestured with the baton. "It might to some. It doesn't to me. Now move, slagger."

Kane moved, trying to step jauntily despite the

weakness in his legs. As cold as he had felt a few hours ago, his hopes of escape or rescue were even frostier.

As he entered the corridor, the guard pointed at his chest with the Shockstick. "Stop. Hands."

In an almost involuntarily motion, Kane extended both hands, wrists pressing against each other. The guard slapped the shackles in place and locked them with a loud, final click. Kane didn't resist. He had learned already that any attempt to do so earned a touch of the Shockstick and unendurable agony.

He preceded Gifford down the featureless corridor for a hundred paces, his rubber-soled shoes occasionally squeaking on the floor tiles. He had seen very little of the legendary Area 51 complex, and what he had seen of it was no more dramatic than hallways and offices.

The corridor ended at a T junction. Beyond it an arched tunnel stretched in either direction as far as the eye could see. A small, burnished-metal shifter engine and passenger car rested in perfect balance atop a narrow-gauge monorail track. It disappeared into the darkness to the left and to the right.

Gifford undipped a small trans-comm unit from his belt and spoke into it. "This is Gifford in section 47-12a. I've got the donor at station three."

Kane had heard himself referred to as such many times, so he no longer took offense at being objectified.

The voice filtering from the comm sounded bored. "Code."

Gifford tried to subvocalize so Kane couldn't hear, but days—or weeks—ago he had read the man's lips. He said lowly, "Jimmy six January."

"Roger," responded the voice from the comm. "Powering up."

The engine suddenly emitted a soft electric hum. At a gesture from the Shockstick, Kane climbed into the passenger car. The monorail system appeared to be the only way to move around the many and widely separated sections of the installation. Except for a cargo train he had seen in the warehouse area on the day he arrived, the cars carried only two people. Without the proper code words, power wouldn't be fed to the rail.

Sitting beside him, Gifford said into the comm, "Green. Go."

The hum rose in pitch and with a slight lurch, the train slid almost silently along the rail. It swiftly built up speed. Overhead light fixtures flicked by so rapidly that they combined with the intervals of darkness between them to acquire a strobing pattern. Neither man spoke as the train sped down the shaft.

The rail curved lazily to the right, plunging almost noiselessly into a side chute. Lights shone intermittently on the smooth walls, small drops of illumination that did little to alleviate the deep shadows. The trains slowed, then hissed to a halt beside a broad platform.

Gifford climbed out first, then gestured for Kane to step onto the platform and walk down the corridor ahead of him. Kane did so and after a few yards stopped automatically in front of an open cubicle.

"Hands."

Kane extended his arms and Gifford deftly unlocked the shackles. The first few times Kane performed the drill, the urge to deliver a *teisho* blow to the man's nose and spear his brain with fractured shards of nasal bones had been almost overwhelming.

"Strip."

Kane unzipped his jumpsuit, kicked out of his shoes and stepped naked into the cubicle. A door slid shut behind him. Kane stood in the small dark room hardly larger than a closet—or a coffin. A red ceiling light winked on, and hard sprays of liquid hit him from every direction. Grime, caked sweat and even dead skin cells slid off his body. The jet sprays reeked of disinfectant. The decontamination booth was a prelude to copulation. The hybrids didn't want him spreading any nasty diseases among their numbers. It was certainly a valid fear. Despite their enormous intellects, the hybrids were susceptible to an entire range of congenital immune-deficiency diseases, so he was periodically subjected to a cleansing process that sterilized even his thoughts.

Kane moved about in the spray, working it even into his hair like a shampoo. The streams ended, replaced by warm air gusting down from a ceiling vent. His very clean, sterilized body was dried within a minute. A light bulb flashed green on the wall and a drawer slid out. From it Kane removed a small battery-powered shaver, which he ran over his face, re-

moving the stubble. The skin of the hybrids was thin and sensitive, and the females were particularly susceptible to beard burn.

A panel on the opposite side of the cubicle slid aside, and Kane stepped into the Spartanly furnished chamber where he would spend the next eight to ten hours. Despite the muted lighting, he saw the bed and the small table holding a carafe of water and a pair of folded towels. He went to the side of the bed and stood, waiting for his first partner of the shift to come through the door.

At first the females selected for the process donned wigs and wore cosmetics in order to appear more human to the trapped sperm donors. Kane had overheard snatches of conversation about how a number of men pressed into stud service were so terrified of the hybrid females they had difficulty achieving erection, the aphrodisiac gel notwithstanding. They had to be strapped down, and for the first couple of sessions, so had Kane. He was never sure if the restraints were designed to keep him from attacking his partners or simply controlling him so he wouldn't injure the fragile females in a blind rutting fever when the gel took effect.

Lately, the restraints hadn't been employed, either. He wasn't sure if the reason was an acknowledgment of his ability to control himself during the sessions or his apparent lack of fear of the hybrids. He knew that not all of the human men regarded the females with terror. Right before his capture, Kane killed a guard

and was so stunned by the grief displayed by a female hybrid he had nearly been shot in the back.

He still didn't know who the other men in the installation were, their numbers or where they came from. He assumed most of them were Magistrates, probably survivors of the sec force assigned to guard the Archuleta Mesa complex. Since the clam-mouthed Gifford was his only human contact and therefore his only source of information, it was still a mystery how many men were donors like himself.

The door opened and a female stepped in, moving with the bizarrely beautiful danceresque grace all hybrids seemed to possess. He recognized her immediately. Her name was Quavell, and during his escape from the Archuleta Mesa, he had kept Domi from killing her. He had never let on he knew her, and she behaved as if the encounter had never happened. He knew, however, the hybrids forgot nothing, no matter how trivial. And there was something more—although his memories of seeding sessions were often cloudy, tending to blur into one another, he was fairly sure this was at least the third time Quavell had come to him, perhaps even the fourth.

She was excessively slender and small of stature, less than five feet tall. Her compact, tiny-breasted form was encased in a silver-gray skintight bodysuit. Silky blond hair topped her high, domed skull. The texture seemed to be a cross between feathery down and thread. Above prominent cheekbones, huge, up-slanting eyes of a clear crystal blue regarded him in a silent appraisal. They looked haunted, gleaming with a flicker of emotion that was not characteristic of her kind.

As he gazed at her, Kane recalled other ways in which Quavell was different from the other females he had serviced. Almost all of them mounted him and rode him mechanically, not looking at him at all. It was obvious they would have never engaged in intercourse with any human male but for the baron's orders.

Quavell, he recollected, writhed and moaned a time or two. Although his memories were fragmented, he thought she had orgasmed at least once during their previous couplings.

They gazed at each other dispassionately for a long moment, neither one speaking. Long ago Kane had come to terms with the hybrids' unusual physical appearance, their gracile builds, their inhumanly long fingers, fine-pored skin, and small ears set low on the sides of their heads. Grudgingly he admitted they were by and large a beautiful folk. They weren't ugly; they were just different. In fact, he had yet to see an ugly hybrid, male or female. They were so delicate, so elfin, so self-possessed, he understood why many of them referred to his kind—the old shambling, anarchic humans—as apekin. Yet even as he physically responded to the sexual challenge of her beauty, he felt a moment's repulsion for her alienness. He knew from experience the revulsion was transient and easily remedied.

Following procedure, Kane lay down on the bed, linking his fingers and putting them behind his head.

He stared up at the ceiling, at the light strip shedding a suffused illumination into the room. Mood lighting, he thought wryly.

Wordlessly, Quavell stepped beside him, removing a small squeeze tube from a pocket of her bodysuit. She uncapped it and, gazing down at him with solemn eyes, spread a thin *film of* colorless gel over his chest and in a line down his stomach.

Within seconds the familiar warmth began to spread over his skin as the substance seeped into his pores and caressed his nerve endings. Gently massaging and kneading, Quavell's long ringers smoothed the gel

over his rib cage and down his lower abdomen to just above his pelvic bone. In a voice so faint, so distant it sounded like the rustle of faraway wings, she whispered, "We must speak."

"Why?" Kane asked gruffly.

A flicker of fear appeared in her eyes, but was quickly veiled. Swiftly she placed a forefinger on his lips. "Say nothing. Just listen."

Kane's respiration deepened, his pulse quickening, his blood beginning to burn with a flame that first warmed then threatened to scorch his nervous system and consume his reason. His vision clouded, fogging at the edges as the aphrodisiac began to take effect. He knew from bitter experience fighting it was futile. The best he'd ever been able to achieve was a temporary balance between a horrified realization that his body's reactions were out of his conscious control and primordial lust. Always lust won out over horror.

Quavell's face hovered over his, and she was sud-

denly transmogrified from an inhuman succubus to a sensuously beautiful vixen. He felt his penis engorge and rise. She self-consciously averted her gaze from the rigid, jutting evidence of his arousal. She unzipped her suit and peeled out of it, revealing a slim, pale body with a wispy suggestion of silk threads between the juncture of her thighs. Her breasts were very small, but very well formed with a great deal of point.

Quavell leaned forward, her face pressing against his. She breathed into his ear, "Things are not what they seem. We need your help."

Kane could have easily encircled her waist with his two hands or her throat with one, but he did neither. Although sweat gathered at his hairline and blood pounded in his temples, he realized with a distant wonder that he was still rational, not blind with rutting fever like all the times before.

His tongue felt thick and clumsy, but he was able to retort in a husky whisper, "I thought that's what I was doing."

Quavell hissed sharply into his ear. "Do not speak, damn you. Concentrate on my words so you will remember later and be able to take the appropriate action. We are being monitored so you must perform, but remember what I say."

Her firm, berry-tipped breasts pushed against his hard chest, and her hand went between them. Her fingers plucked then curled around his erection. "I have given you a diluted mixture of the stimulant so you will be able to think. But you can't let on."

Quavell squirmed on top of him, Kane cupping her tiny muscular rear end. Straddling his hips, she reached down with her right hand and grasped his hard length. "Not all of us here are in service to Baron Cobalt. He brings war to our people—he breaks unity."

She positioned the crown of his swollen member between her moist labial lips and groaned through her clenched, perfect teeth. Like all hybrid females, she was excruciatingly small but she worked herself down on him gradually. "The baron believes he can use you to father a new race, one under his sole dominion."

Clutching at her hips, Kane growled a question, trying to make it sound like a vocalization of bestial lust.

"Just me?"

Quavell bent forward and replied in a trembling, whispery contralto, "Just you. The baron feels that putting you in such harness is both a punishment and a salvation. He is...deluded."

She began rocking back and forth, taking more of him inside her. She moaned into his ear, "We will help you. You'll know when. Now be silent and do as you are supposed to do."

Kane did so and for the first time since his imprisonment actually enjoyed it.

Chapter 3

Grant studied the vast blue canopy of the sky where it met the horizon. He squinted, trying to see beyond the shimmer of heat waves. He kept his Copperhead subgun pointed in the general direction of a clump of mesquite, but with one eye he monitored the readouts on the electronic sextant-compass held in his other hand. He glanced all around at the parched terrain as if expecting to see something other than a dead land stretching away in drifting dunes of ocher and saffron.

"Hell," he rumbled in disgust. "If we cut crosscountry, we'll be heading miles out of our way. And we've done enough of that already."

"That's what I told you yesterday, after that last detour we took. We've got no choice in the matter," Brigid Baptiste said crisply.

Grant didn't respond. Half the time he never responded to anything except danger anyway, but Brigid noted how he had become even more taciturn over the past couple of days. He consulted the compass again and then looked up at the position of the sun, squinting despite the dark glasses over his eyes.

"Long nights and short days. Less time for safe traveling," he muttered peevishly.

"That's what happens in late fall," said Sky Dog,

approaching with two self-heat MRE packages in his hands. "That's what I told you ten days ago when you arrived at my village."

"Has it been that long?" Grant asked with a sour sarcasm. "Time passes like nothing when you're having this much fun."

Grant's long, heavy-jawed face momentarily twisted into an expression of barely leashed anger. Droplets of heat and tension-induced perspiration reflected the sunlight, causing them to sparkle against his ebony skin like stars. His tan khaki shirt sported dark half moons of perspiration under the arms. He sweated profusely, globes of perspiration springing to his brow and body. Even the usually placid Brigid Baptiste blinked against the glare and grimaced at the unseasonably high temperatures.

Standing six feet five in his thick-soled jump boots, Grant was exceptionally broad across the shoulders and thick through the chest. Gray threaded the short hair at his temples, but the down-sweeping mustache showed coal-black against his coffee-brown skin.

Brigid wasn't offended by his dismissive comment. She understood his short temper sprang from worry, guilt and Magistrate-bred impatience with forestalling preemptive action. She shared his emotions,

though her face was expressionless. During her years as an archivist in Cobaltville's Historical Division, Brigid had perfected a poker face. Because historians were always watched, it didn't do for them to show emotional reaction to a scrap of knowledge that may have escaped the censor's notice.

She was dressed similarly in clothes of tough khaki, but she had unbuttoned her shirt and tied the tails beneath her full breasts. Despite the season, the hardpan of the Nevada desert reflected heat like an open oven.

Brigid's red-gold mane of thick, wavy hair fell artlessly over her shoulders and upper back. Her complexion, usually fair and lightly dusted with freckles across her nose and cheeks, was a colored deep pink from the merciless glare of the sun. Her eyes beneath the dark lenses of the sunglasses weren't just green; they were a deep, clear emerald. Her willowy body was slender but rounded and taut, long in the leg, her bare stomach showing hard and flat.

Sky Dog extended one of the MREs toward Grant, but he refused it with a shake of his head, returning his attention to the compass-sextant.

"No matter how long you stare at that thing," Sky Dog told him, "it's not going to tell you anything different. Following the road is the most direct route."

Sky Dog's face was lean and sharply planed with wide cheekbones and narrow eyes the color of obsidian. Shiny black hair plaited in two braids fell almost to his waist. Behind his right ear dangled a single feather, as white as the snow-covered peaks of Montana's Bitterroot Range they had left nearly twelve days before.

He wore a loose vest of smoked leather, fringed buckskin leggings and a pair of boot moccasins.

Around his waist was a heavy, brass-studded belt that carried, in loops, a knife, a set of pliers and a polished chunk of turquoise. His erect carriage exuded the quiet dignity of his shaman's position in his tribe.

Grant didn't answer. From a clip on his web belt he took a set of microbinoculars. Pushing his sunglasses back, he brought them to his eyes, peering through the ruby-coated lenses. He swept them over the gently rolling, sandy terrain, then fixed them to a black ribbon of ancient roadway stretching out to the horizon, where Interstate 15 disappeared into a sprawling jumble of rubble eight miles in the distance.

The binoculars' 8x12 magnifying power brought into sharp relief the broken buildings jutting from the desert floor and shattered colors scattered across the parched ground.

"What did the predarkers call that place—Sin City?" he asked quietly.

"That was one name for it," Brigid answered.

Grant continued studying the wreckage of Las Vegas, noting the absence of bomb craters or signs of direct strikes. Several multistoried buildings still stood, hotels and gambling casinos. But unlike the ruins of New York, most of the structures weren't very tall. He saw gaping cracks in the earth and through the highway where nuke-triggered quakes had set the tectonic plates to shifting and colliding.

There were no signs of habitation, temporary or otherwise. He spotted no smoke from cookfires or dust raised by movement. Still, the upthrusting col-

lection of buildings reminded him of sharpened stakes planted at the bottom of a pit, a tiger trap. He told himself he and his party would be safe inside the steel belly of the war wag, since it was like riding inside a mobile fortress.

Lowering the binoculars, he glanced behind him at the huge dark shape bulking up from the ground. The massive war wag rested on its double tracks like a dozing prehistoric beast of prey. The armor plate sheathing the huge vehicle was rust pitted, but its dark hull bristled with rocket pods and machine-gun blisters, and was perforated all around by weapons ports.

Nearly forty feet long and probably weighing in at fifty tons, the wag was an MCP, a mobile army command post of predark manufacture. The double thickness of steel planking showed deep scoring in places where AP rounds had almost penetrated.

The Cerberus redoubt database yielded the likelihood that the wag had started life as a C2VI automated tactical command post for mobile armored operations. State-of-the-art two centuries previous, it provided mobility, power and intravehicular data connectivity with other armored vehicles. The controls had been electrically powered from an onboard primary generator unit, as well as offering mounting provisions for onboard and ancillary equipment.

Powered by a six-hundred-horsepower drive train, the C2VI was designed to survive nuclear, biological and chemical threats, not to mention electromagnetic environmental effects. Its armor provided protection against 7.62 mm ball ammunition at two hundred me-

ters, and against 155 mm high-explosive artillery rounds at thirty meters. The wag had been playfully christened Titano by Kane some months back.

A burst of laughter commanded Grant's attention to the left of the MCP. A canvas lean-to had been erected at the starboard door of the mammoth machine. Sheltered from the blaze of the sun beneath it were half a dozen copper-colored, bare-chested men. Their long black hair was braided, and most of them wore breechclouts and deerskin leggings. They were tossing handfuls of small animal bones daubed with spots of paint.

The name of the game was *arcahey*, the Sioux game of bone casting. *Arcahey* wasn't too different from dice, except color combinations were counted, not numbers. Sky Dog's warriors played it every time they stopped for more than fifteen minutes, but Grant had never joined in the games because he didn't see they had anything worth winning. He had no idea what stakes the Indians used for gambling. For all he knew, it could have been the war wag.

Strictly speaking, Titano belonged to the Amerindians. They were the Cerberus redoubt's nearest neighbors—its only neighbors for mat matter. Recently, direct contact had been established between the redoubt's personnel and the tribespeople when Kane had managed to turn a potentially tragic misunderstanding into a budding alliance with Sky Dog. Not so much a chief as a shaman, a warrior priest, Sky Dog was CobaltviDe bred like they were. Unlike them, he had been exiled from the ville while still a

youth due to his Lakota ancestry. He joined a band of Cheyenne and Sioux living in the foothills of the Bitterroot Range and eventually earned a position of high authority and respect among them. Part of that position was to serve as the keeper of his people's great secret—the war wag.

According to tribal lore, nearly a century before, a group of *wasicun* adventurers had ridden inside its iron belly up the single treacherous road wending its way around deep ravines to the mountain plateau.

When the vehicle made its return journey, it ran out of fuel, and the Amerindians had set upon the people inside of it. After killing them all, they had hidden the huge machine and removed all of its weapons except the fixed emplacements.

When a set of circumstances brought Grant, Brigid and Kane into first conflict, then alliance with the Indians, Sky Dog proposed the people living on the mountain plateau make the vehicle operational again. They had agreed, since a fully restored and armed war wag would make a solid first line of defense against a possible incursion from Cobaltville. The task to bring a machine back to life after it had lain dormant for at least a hundred years entailed far more effort and time than any of them had foreseen.

First the engine had to be taken apart piece by piece, and then put back together again. All of the instrument panels needed to be rewired. The control systems, designed to be operated and linked by computers, had to be rerouted to manual-override boards.

Periodically over the past couple of months, Grant

and Kane visited the Indian settlement to complete the refitting of the MCP. The front-mounted 20 mm cannons had been repaired, the side and rear rocket pods made fully functional and a drum-fed RPK light machine gun reinstalled in the roof turret. Once the huge vehicle was completely operational with all of its weaponry in perfect working order, it became a true dreadnought, a mobile skirmish line, far superior to the ville Sandcats. Although the war wag was not as maneuverable or as fast as the smaller Cats, it was essentially unstoppable, as all of them had reason to know. It had completely routed a Magistrate assault force a short time before, disabling the two Sandcats that had ferried the force from Cobaltville.

Grant's eyes ran over the war wag's unlovely exterior, but he appreciated its functional form nonetheless. All of the ordnance came from the Cerberus armory, an arsenal literally stacked from floor to ceiling with predark weaponry. It in turn had been supplied from caches of materiel stored in a hermetically sealed Continuity of Government installation. Protected from the ravages of time and the nuke-outraged environment, all the ordnance and munitions were as pristine as the day they rolled off the assembly line.

Grant turned away, swallowing a sigh. All of the blasters, grens and LAW rockets in the armory hadn't proved of any use over the past two weeks. When Kane and Domi stepped into the Cerberus gateway unit to jump to Area 51, they might as well have jumped to another planet or dimension. The telemetric signals transmitted by their biolink transponders van-

ished from the tracking screen like candle flames snuffed out by a sudden breeze. Nor did their successful transit register on the huge Mercator relief map that displayed all the known working mat-trans units in the Cerberus network.

At the time, no one panicked. Any number of reasons presented themselves for the cessation of the transponder's transmissions, from sunspots interfering with the Comsat's uplink to the signals being blocked by either vanadium shielding or iron ore.

Lakesh told them Area 51 was, in the latter years of the twentieth century, a place as fabulous to Americans as Avalon had been to Britons a thousand years earlier. This particular Avalon, however, was very real and financed by the government. Also known as Dreamland and Groom Lake, Area 51 was a secret military facility about ninety miles north of Las Vegas. The number referred to a six-by-ten-mile block of land, at the center of which was located a large air base the predark government only reluctantly admitted even existed.

Lakesh claimed the site was selected in the mid-1950s for testing of the U-2 spy plane and later, due to its remoteness, Groom Lake became America's traditional testing ground for experimental "black budget" aircraft. The sprawling facility and surrounding areas were also associated with UFO and conspiracy stories regarding retrofitting of alien technology. According to Lakesh, Area 51 was a popular symbol for the alleged U.S. government UFO cover-up.

Grant had no reason to doubt Lakesh's history, since one of the experimental aircraft that rolled from the hidden hangars of the Area 51 complex was the Aurora. In New Mexico, he had downed a small, prototypical version of the stealth plane and later Kane, Brigid and Lakesh had seen to the destruction of a far larger and more deadly Aurora aircraft that had been kept in deep storage beneath Mount Rushmore.

Since the Dreamland complex was alleged to be mainly underground, Lakesh opined Kane and Domi materialized in a subterranean section where the bio-link signals were blocked. As for the mat-trans materialization not registering on the map of mat-trans units, Lakesh had an explanation for that, too. The unit in Area 51 was not part of the indexed gateways.

Grant and Brigid knew that the Cerberus redoubt had served as a manufacturing facility where the gateway units were mass-produced in modular form. Most of the mat-trans units were buried in subterranean military complexes, known as redoubts, in the United States. Only a handful of people knew the gateways even existed, and only half a handful knew all their locations. The knowledge had been lost after the nukocaust, rediscovered a century later and then jealously, ruthlessly guarded. There were, however, units in other countries—Japan, England, South America and Mongolia to name a few. The exact purpose of the mat-trans units had vanished when the ultimate nuclear megacull had destroyed civilization all over the world.

After a full twenty-four hours passed without so

much as a squirt of a signal from the transponders, Grant and Brigid decided to go after them. When the gateway's auto sequencer couldn't achieve a coordinate lock with the target unit, their dread turned to fear. An active transit lock couldn't be established, so there was no way to tell if the jump line had been cut from the other end or if Kane and Domi were speeding madly through the entire Cerberus network in the form of disembodied digital information.

The decision about the next course of action was reached very quickly. They would travel overland, from Montana to Nevada and either rescue Domi and Kane or discover their fates. Nearly two weeks later, they stood on a crumbling road, wondering whether to forge on through the rains at night.

Brigid's quiet, uninflected voice drew Grant back to the present. "If we start now, we may be able to navigate our way through the place before nightfall."

Grant eyed the position of the sun again, noting how it seemed to sink swiftly toward the flat westward horizon, aswim in a lurid sea of variegated reds and purples.

"We might," he replied at length. "But that doesn't give us time for a recce beforehand. We'll just have to push on through, no matter what we find there."

A faint smile ghosted over Brigid's lips. "Isn't that the Mag way? Just smash on through, meeting anything out there head-on?"

Grant favored her with a scowl, then he turned it into a bleak smile. "That's the Mag way, all right.

But as you keep pointing out, me and Kane aren't Mags anymore."

She kicked at a loose stone, stirring up a sifting of dust. "Sometimes," she admitted, "the Mag way has its advantages."

Grant understood she was just as consumed with anxiety and impatience as he. He went back to scanning the panorama of desolation with the binoculars again, sweeping his gaze from left to right. He saw pockets of ruins scattered all around the vicinity of Las Vegas—houses leaning in on themselves, roofs cocked sideways, the bumed-out shells of old service stations and fast-food restaurants rising from the arid landscape like headstones.

"Sometimes it feels like we spend half our damn lives crossing one desert or another," he murmured.

Brigid nodded. "That's because half the damn world is a desert now."

Someone who didn't know her wouldn't have caught the hint of bitterness in her matter-of-fact tone. Grant lowered the binoculars, glanced from her face to Sky Dog's and declared decisively, "We're burning daylight. Saddle up."

Brigid ran a hand through her mane of hair and drawled with dry sarcasm, "Viva Las Vegas."

Only Sky Dog laughed.

Chapter 4

In the Lakota tongue, Sky Dog instructed his warriors to stop gambling and strike the canvas lean-to. As they worked, he explained how they were going to penetrate an old *wasicun* center of evil, and so they had to be exceptionally alert.

All of their good humor and relaxed demeanors vanished, replaced by a grim fatalism. Since the nuke-caust, many Indian tribes had reasserted their ancient claims over ancestral lands stolen from them by the predark government. By that measure, almost every square foot of America belonged to the native peoples, so they tended to view not only the forces of the villes as interlopers but all non-Indians. Fortunately, Sky Dog's band gave the inhabitants of the Cerberus redoubt a special dispensation.

Grant and Brigid remained outside until the warriors climbed aboard the battle wagon. As they took their stations at the weapons emplacements, Grant noted how their speech became clipped monosyllables, their movements swift and tense. They were like soldiers preparing to enter a war zone.

After they were aboard, Grant made sure the starboard door was sealed, and he walked along the side of the war wag. He and Brigid climbed up into the

open hatch at the rear of the wag and strode up the long, narrow passage that led to the pilot's cockpit. Their boots clanged softly on the grillwork of the floor as they walked past the tiny, cramped sleeping quarters. The cargo compartments holding handblast-ers and jerricans of fuel took up most of the interior space. Small side alcoves led to the fixed weapons emplacements.

Grant hoped the time for their use wouldn't come, since he doubted the Indian warriors abilities to handle them efficiently. When he'd trained them with the handblasters appropriated from the Mag force,

he never could completely change their tendencies to hose ammo around indiscriminately.

That was the main reason he and Kane had taken the Magistrates' Sin Eaters back with them to the Cerberus redoubt. The Sin Eater was a Mag's assigned weapon, almost a badge of office, so when the Mag survivors of the engagement were disarmed and allowed to go on their way, Kane and Grant laid claim to their discarded handblasters. They were murderous weapons, and almost impossible for a novice to manage. Even Mag Division recruits were never allowed live ammunition until a tedious six-month training period was successfully completed.

Grant and Kane feared the Indian warriors, unaccustomed to blasters of any sort, would wreak fatal havoc by experimenting with them.

Grant sat in the pilot's chair, the gimbel squealing. Brigid joined him, taking the copilot's position. After Grant keyed on the battery power, they went through

the systems checklist, a task they performed at least twice a day, despite its tedium. Both of them knew if a minor problem was overlooked, it could swiftly become major and leave them stranded in the Outlands with no way to alert Cerberus to their situation.

One of the many frustrations of this particular trek was being completely out of touch with the redoubt and the intel it could provide. Bry, the installation's resident tech-head and Lakesh's apprentice, had recently concocted a way to establish a long-range comm channel using the redoubt's satellite uplinks. However, the link depended on the Sandcat's onboard wireless transceiver and computer system. The C2VI wasn't equipped with either, so they were deaf and dumb to anything happening not only at Cerberus but in the viles. For that matter, the only way Lakesh knew Grant and Brigid were still among the living was by the transponder telemetry. And for all Grant knew, Domi and Kane had escaped and were even now safe and snug back in the redoubt. He never allowed himself to dwell for long on another possibility.

Brigid flicked switches on the instrument panel, and needle gauges twitched and indicator lights flashed. The rad counter wavered between green and yellow. The oil level showed nominal, but that was acceptable. The engine temperature was well below the danger zone, too, so Grant turned the ignition key and the wag's engine roared into life.

Smoke puffed from the double exhaust pipes, and the entire vehicle vibrated with such building power.

Grant cautiously released the clutch, and Titano lurched forward. He carefully shifted through the gears, and, wrestling with the steering wheel, Grant guided the wag in a lumbering course down the center of the interstate.

Now that they traveled on a road, even one as ratted and furrowed as 1-15, the ride was much smoother than any during the past week. The big engine throbbed steadily without missing a beat, and the suspension didn't squeak or creak.

Brigid unfolded the map and spread it open on her lap. Blessed with an eidetic memory, she really didn't have to consult it, since she'd already memorized the route before they left Cerberus. Still, as they found out to their sorrow and frustration, there was a vast divide between what predark topographers printed on paper and the ruined reality.

"We'll be hitting the Strip," she announced.

"The Strip?" Grant echoed, not removing his gaze from the ob port.

"The main drag, the primary thoroughfare, where all the major casinos and tourist traps were located."

He cut his gaze toward her. "Tourist traps?" he asked sharply.

"A figure of speech. Not traps in the conventional sense. Besides, we're not tourists. Anyway, the Strip is the straightest shot through Vegas. It's wide enough, so we should be able to navigate around obstacles without taking a detour."

Grant grunted, his hands flexing on the wheel. "Wouldn't thjLbe a welcome change?"

Brigid smiled, not answering Ms sour question. In hindsight, almost since the first day of their journey, it seemed that all they encountered was one detour after another. It wasn't as if Lakesh hadn't warned them when they informed him of their plan to travel to Nevada.

He protested but not too vociferously, at least not after Grant told him how he planned to enlist the aid of Sky Dog and the war wag. The question of whether the Amerindians would help them never entered anyone's minds. The tradespeople owed them several debts, not the smallest of which was the virtual annihilation of a band of Roamers who had attacked their village and carried off a number of women and children.

Grant forbade the warriors to go out hunting or fishing or venture far from the nightly campsites. All of them ate the MRE packs, and though they contained all the minerals, vitamins and proteins a human needed to keep healthy, they all seemed to share one of two flavors—bland or repulsive. No middle ground seemed to exist, and even the most indiscriminating of palates eventually ended up in a form of shock.

The MCP carried a reservoir of fresh water but only to drink. Infrequently, they came across streams where the water was uncontaminated enough in which to bathe. So not only was the war wag's interior stuffy, but it stank, too. As with opinions about the food, no one complained, although Grant caught Brigid wrinkling her nose at his odor when he was in close proximity with her. It wasn't as if she were the paragon of hygiene, either. He knew she was embarrassed by her own disheveled appearance.

After the first five days, Grant stopped initialing conversation, speaking only when spoken to and then in a minimum of words. He concentrated on piloting the monstrous machine. He was the only one who could do it with any degree of expertise. Brigid wasn't strong enough to steer it around obstacles, and the Indians weren't experienced enough to handle shifting, braking and clutching.

As they traveled, Grant did not allow himself to dwell on the possibility Domi and Kane were dead. He kept their images, alive and vital, fixed firmly in the forefront of his mind. But as the short days and long nights wore on, it required more and more effort, more and more concentration to maintain the visualization.

If Brigid ever entertained any doubts the two people were dead, she never voiced them. At first Grant found her calm, unruffled composure a comforting bulwark against his own fears. Lately, he reacted with impatience and irritation not only to her cool facade but to Sky Dog's stoicism, as well.

The old interstate led through the outskirts of Las Vegas, through fields of devastation that stretched almost out of sight. The blacktop road ahead showed the characteristic ribbon effect of earthquakes. The few structures still recognizable as buildings rose only a few stories, then collapsed with ragged abruptness. The wag rolled past burned-out ruins and tumbledown condominiums. Some of the outlying areas were noth-

ing but acres of shattered brick and concrete with rust-scabbed reinforcing bars twisting around the rubble like gnarled, skeletal fingers.

Weeds sprouted from cracks in the pavement and footpaths, sickly green growth with ropy stems that twined around streetlight poles and virtually covered bus-stop benches.

With every passing minute, the broken skyline of Las Vegas loomed larger in the ob port. A towering monolith dominated it. Grant read the huge letters near the top with difficulty. "MGM Them Par. What the hell is that?"

Brigid only shook her head as the vehicle entered the city proper, rumbling down the crumbling blacktop. As they passed a corroded street sign imprinted with the words South Las Vegas Blvd, Grant demanded, "Where's this Strip you were talking about?"

"We're on it," Brigid replied tensely.

Plucking a headset from the instrument panel, he slipped it on and announced into the microphone, "We're here, Sky Dog. Tell your warriors to go on triple red."

By now, all of Sky Dog's warriors knew what the last two words meant. They had heard them often enough over the past twelve days. For most of them, they were the only English words they knew.

"Acknowledged," came Sky Dog's response over the comm link.

The street, though rutted and deeply furrowed, was wide enough for the war wag to circumvent the heaps of rubble that had fallen from the ramparts of the

taller buildings. Grant downshifted to get across a heap of shattered concrete, scattered shards of glass and twisted girders of steel.

The facades of the buildings, with their broken neon letters, crumbling masonry and peeling paint, all looked scabrous, as if they were afflicted with leprosy. Grant could still decipher the signage on some of the structures—Dunes, Circus Circus, Rally's. Although the city hadn't received any direct hits, it was obvious hot radioactive particle drift had blown in to kill off all organic life and act as a corrosive in the years that followed.

He steered the vehicle between double rows of rusted-out husks of automobiles, noting how they had been stripped of anything salvageable years, if not decades ago. A few large mesquite bushes sprouted among them, but otherwise the Strip was bare of vegetation. The buildings seemed empty of bird life, and none appeared winging through the sky, tinted now with the red-orange hues of approaching sunset. At least the oppressive heat was finally abating, and the shadows cast by the structures felt like touches of cool water.

As the wag approached the base of the towering monolith, Grant saw the massive statue of a lion toppled over in the street. The head was nowhere in sight, and the paws were chipped and cracked.

"MGM Theme Park," Brigid declared suddenly. "That's what that place used to be."

"What was it? Another gaudy palace?"

"Sort of. More of a family attraction, I think. A

place where the kids could play while the adults gambled away their college tuition money."

"Oh," said Grant. He didn't bother to disguise his puzzlement.

Some of the huge building had collapsed under the weight of the years, and in the not too distant past. A great pile of rubble and broken stone spread out in a heap across the Strip. Grant drove over the outermost part of it, the C2VI jouncing and rocking as the treads crushed the brickwork and concrete blocks to powder. The wag passed into the long shadows of the shattered tower. Black windows and gaping rents in the ancient masonry leered down like caricatures of eyes and mouths.

He steered the vehicle into a narrow channel formed by the debris field. The right-hand treads rode up on the curb, causing it and the sidewalk to collapse and crumble. A row of tall buildings blocked the light of the setting sun, washing the street with the purple hues of dusk.

A prickling of dread began inching its way up Grant's spine to settle in a cold knot at his nape. His scalp felt as if it was pulling taut. Something was wrong. He could sense it the way a seasoned wolf sensed a trap. He looked out the ob port in both directions and saw no sign of danger. Between the buildings, the sky was a crimson-and-orange wash. Glancing over to Brigid, he saw she appeared unconcerned—her posture alert but not tense.

Grant exhaled a breath through his nostrils, hoping the knot of warning at the back of his neck would relax. He told himself he was only experiencing a

bout of claustrophobia because of the way the close-packed antique structures hemmed the wag in on both sides. Las Vegas was like any number of ruined cities all over the Outlands. But he didn't like how the darkened lobbies of the casinos and hotels reminded him of shadowed caves where anything could be waiting to pounce. The statue of the lion put him in mind of beasts of prey crouching in their lairs.

As soon as the notion registered, a tiny pinprick of light flickered crimson against the black backdrop within a gaping hole in a building on the wag's right. His initial, adrenaline-fueled assumption was that it was the glinting eye of a mutie predator. A puff of powdery dust kicked up by the C2VFs passage was suddenly bisected by a pale violet thread of light. Instantly, Grant's Mag training kicked in, and almost instinctively he identified the pinpoint and thread of light as a photoelectric cell, a trigger for a proximity detonator.

Lips peeled away from his teeth in a silent snarl, Grant stamped hard on the accelerator and upshifted with a nerve-scratching grinding of gears. The war wag surged forward in a roaring rush, smoke pouring from the exhaust pipes.

Brigid blurted wordlessly in surprise as she was slammed hard against the back of the copilot's chair. Her voice was instantly drowned out by the ear-knocking concussion of a high-explosive charge.

Chapter 5

The night sky was filled with billowing clouds, completely blotting out the starlight. Lightning flared along the mountain peaks. A gale-force northern wind, heavy with Canadian cold, howled around the plateau, bringing with it swirling curtains of snow mixed in with particles of ice.

There was a flash of lightning, dazzlingly close, burning its afterimage into the retina, followed by a peal of thunder so loud it made the plateau quiver. At least, Mohandas Lakesh Singh thought it did.

He blinked at the monitor screen patched into the exterior sec spy-eye. The sensitive infrared filters had been overwhelmed by the lightning stroke, and the monitor showed nothing but shifting veils of gray and white. Not that it would have shown anything else anyway, he thought bleakly.

The weather in late fall at such a high altitude was always sudden and unpredictable, but it had become more so since the nuclear winter, the skydark of two centuries ago. A lightning storm combining sleet, snow and hail was like a return to those days, but at least it would abate in a few hours. It wouldn't last for weeks. Or Lakesh fervently hoped it wouldn't.

Sitting at the main ops station, he squinted through

the thick lenses of his eyeglasses to the environmental console in order to read the outside temperature. The thermometer showed minus thirty degrees Celsius. He winced when he added in the wind-chill factor. It was so cold, the blood would congeal in a human's veins and all the moisture in their bodies turn to frost. A person would die of hypothermia within minutes without state-of-the-art thermal garments.

Such garments were available in the Cerberus redoubt, but he had no inclination of testing them. La-kesh repressed a shiver at the very concept. He had been born in the tropical climate of Kashmir, India, and even after almost 250 years, his internal thermostat was still stuck there. Although he had spent a century and a half in a form of cryogenic suspension, and though it made no real scientific sense, he had been very susceptible to cold ever since.

Lakesh pushed himself back from the station, the casters on his chair squeaking. The noise seemed strangely loud in the high-ceilinged, vault-walled central control complex, like a plaintive wail for help. He repressed another shiver, but not from imagined cold. Sometimes the control complex, the very redoubt itself, seemed haunted.

He was alone in the softly lit center at 1900 hours. It was still fairly early for the big room to be so deserted, and so everything seemed strange. Inside the Cerberus installation, time was measured by the controlled dimming and brightening of lights to simulate sunrise and sunset, and even the hum of power units

and disk drives from all the computer stations carried an eerie note.

Lakesh caught a reflection of himself in a blank monitor screen, and not for the first time he experienced a faint jolt of dismayed surprise at his appearance. He looked as if he'd been given a ticket to his own funeral but had yet to attend. His short, ash-gray hair was disheveled, and the thick glasses with the hearing aid attached to the right earpiece lent him a resemblance to a startled bird. Nor was his appearance improved by the magnifying effect the lens had on his rheumy blue eyes.

For the first few years after his resurrection from cryonic stasis, he was always discomfited by the sight of blue eyes rather than brown staring out at him from his own face. The eye transplant was only the first

of many reconstructive surgeries he underwent, first in *the* Anthill, then in the Dulce installation. Although the transplanted eyes were free of disease, they had grown weak over the past fifty years.

For that matter, when any part of his body began to fail, it was either corrected or replaced. His malfunctioning heart was exchanged for a sound new one, his lungs changed out and calcified knee joints removed and traded with polyethylene.

Although the operations had definitely prolonged his life, they had not been performed out of Samaritan impulses. They were done to extend his usefulness to the baronial oligarchy, to serve the Program of Unification and, by proxy, the Archon Directorate.

From a technical, strictly moral point of view, La-

kesh had betrayed both, but he found no true sin in betraying betrayers or stealing from thieves. He could not think of the hybrid barons in any other way, despite their own preference for the term *new human*.

New perhaps they were, but whether they deserved the appellation of human was still open to debate. However, if their numbers continued to grow, his own personal definition of humanity would vanish and the self-proclaimed new humanity would take its place.

Swallowing a sigh, Lakesh switched the toggles to route the security vid signals through the main VGA monitor, a four-foot screen of ground glass. He transferred the vid network to the exterior cameras. Despite the night-vision system, it was very dark, appropriately enough since the redoubt was built into a Montana mountain range known colloquially as the Darks. Once, in the centuries before America became the Deathlands, they had been known as the Bitterroot Range. In the generations since the nukocaust, a sinister mythology had been ascribed to the mountains, with their mysteriously shadowed forests and hell-deep, dangerous ravines.

Cerberus was built in the mid-1990s, and no expense had been spared to make the installation a masterpiece of impenetrability. The trilevel, thirty-acre facility had come through the nukocaust in good condition. Its radiation shielding was still intact, and an elaborate system of heat-sensing warning devices, night-vision vid cameras and motion-trigger alarms surrounded the plateau that concealed it.

The road leading from Cerberus to the foothills was

little more than a cracked and twisted asphalt ribbon, skirting yawning chasms and cliffs. Acres of the surrounding mountainsides had collapsed during the nuke-triggered earthquakes nearly two centuries ago. It was almost impossible for anyone to reach the plateau by foot or by vehicle; therefore Lakesh had seen to it that the facility was listed as irretrievably unsalvageable on all ville records. The installation had been built as the seat of Project Cerberus, a subdivision of Overproject Whisper, which in turn had been a primary component of the Totality Concept. At its height, the Cerberus redoubt had housed well over a hundred people, from civilian scientists to military personnel. Now it was full of shadowed corridors and empty rooms, where most of the time silence ruled in absolute sovereignty.

Lakesh checked the immediate area around the closed sec doors, but saw nothing. The storm continued to dump soft, wet snow on the plateau, obscuring his view of where the flat-topped crag debouched into the higher slopes, and completely blanketed the grave sites of Cotta and Beth-Li Rouch.

He transferred the view to a camera just inside the main entrance. The massive sec door was closed, locked tight. Vanadium alloy gleamed dully beneath peeling paint. The multiton door opened like an

accordion, folding to one side, operated by a punched-in code and a lever control. Nothing short of an antitank shell could even dent it.

A large illustration of a three-headed, froth-mouthed black hound was rendered on the wall near

the control lever. Because the security cameras transmitted in black and white and shades of gray, he couldn't see the lurid colors of the large illustration on the wall. But he'd so memorized the crimson eyes and yellow fangs that his mind supplied the garish pigment the artist had used. Underneath the image, in an ornately overdone Gothic script, was written a single word: Cerberus.

The artist had been one of the enlisted men assigned to the redoubt toward the end of the twentieth century. Lakesh hadn't bothered to remove the illustration, inasmuch as the ferocious guardian of the gateway to Hades seemed an appropriate totem and code name for the project devoted to ripping open gates in the quantum field.

He transferred the view to the main corridors. No one walked the twenty-foot-wide passageways made of softly gleaming vanadium alloy. Great curving arches of metal and massive girders supported the high rock roof. There was no point in checking the redoubt's well-equipped armory or the two dozen self-contained apartments. He knew four of them were vacant, and had been for days now.

In the two weeks since the disappearance of Kane and Domi, and the twelve days since Grant and Brigid Baptiste left the installation in search of them, Lakesh had found precious little to keep his mind occupied. To his consternation, he realized he experienced a great deal of difficulty adjusting to the absence of the four people. Despite the fact Cerberus had functioned longer without them than with them, they had become

the focal points around which all events seemed to revolve. Of course, he reminded himself, the redoubt hadn't functioned as much more than a hideout, a bolt-hole for the various exiles from the baronies.

Only with the arrival of Kane, Grant, Brigid and Domi had the Cerberus resistance movement initiated action of any sort. There had been casualties since their recruitment—Adrian and Davis in Mongolia, Cotta in the Antarctic and Beth-Li Rouch right within the vanadium walls of the installation itself. All the deaths were unexpected, all sad, even Beth-Li's.

The prospect that Kane and Domi might be added to the casualty list was more than sad; it would be devastating. Lakesh felt too frightened by the possibility even to feel sad about it. If they were killed, if Grant and Brigid perished in the attempt to discover their fates, the work of Cerberus would end. He knew he wouldn't have the heart to recruit more people to compose—as Kane wryly put it—the enforcement arm of the operation.

And even if he had the heart, his access to qualified people was exceptionally limited now that he was an exile himself. His usual method of operation was to select likely candidates from the personnel records of all the villes, set them up, then frame them for crimes against their respective barons. He had used this ploy to recruit Brigid Baptiste, Reba DeFore, Donald Bry and Robert Wegmann, knowing all the while it was a cruel, heartless plan, with a barely acceptable risk factor. It was the only way to spirit them out of their villes, turn them against the barons and make them

feel indebted to him. This bit of explosive and potentially fatal knowledge had not been shared with the exiles other than Kane, Grant and Brigid, and they had occasionally held it over his head as both a means of persuasion and outright blackmail.

It wasn't as if Lakesh hadn't undertaken enormous risks himself in his covert war against the barons. Before, as a trusted member of the Cobaltville Trust, he'd straddled the fence between collaborator and conspirator. Unfortunately, the suspicions of Salvo, a fellow Trust member and Magistrate Division commander, had been aroused by his activities. He pulled Lakesh off the fence and onto the side of a conspirator, because he suspected him of not only being a Preservationist, but of assisting Kane, Brigid and Grant in their escape from the ville.

Part of his suspicion was true, but the other part was a deliberately constructed falsehood. Salvo had bought into a piece of mole data that Lakesh himself had sent burrowing through the nine-ville network some twenty years before. Salvo was convinced of the existence of an underground resistance movement called the Preservationists, a group that allegedly followed a set of idealistic precepts to free humanity from the bondage of the barons by revealing the hidden history of Earth.

The Preservationists were an utter fiction, a straw adversary crafted for the barons to fear and chase after while Lakesh's true insurrectionist work proceeded elsewhere. He had learned the techniques of mis- and

disinformation many, many years ago while working as Project Cerberus overseer for the Totality Concept.

Salvo believed him to be a Preservationist, and that he had recruited Kane into their traitorous rank and file. When Baron Cobalt had charged Salvo with the responsibility of apprehending Kane by any means necessary, the man mistakenly presumed those means included the abduction and torture of Lakesh, one of the baron's favorites.

Lakesh had been rescued and taken back to Cerberus, but the retrieval increased the odds the redoubt would be found. Although the installation was listed on all ville records as utterly inoperable, Lakesh extrapolated that Baron Cobalt would leave no redoubt unopened in his search for him.

Now something else was happening, and Lakesh sensed momentous events moving toward either a violent climax or a terrifying synthesis. Many times over the past couple of weeks, he had tried to work out a provisional hypothesis of its nature, but without hard data he could only guess.

Employing the communications link devised by Bry, he had patched into the Cobaltville wireless systems in order to find weak areas in ville defenses and baron-ordered operations in the Outlands that could be exploited. The process was far from perfect; the electronic eavesdropping could be adversely affected by anything from weather fronts to sunspots.

The last thing any of them expected to overhear was a plan to covertly dispatch Mags from Cobaltville into the territory of Baron Snakefish in California.

Such an act was not only unprecedented, but it was also strictly forbidden by the nonaggression terms established by the Program of Unification more than ninety years before.

When Kane, Brigid, Grant and Domi investigated the incursion, the trail led to the semimythical Area 51. Kane and Domi volunteered to conduct a recce, but had never returned.

Lakesh switched the view on the screen again. He didn't bother glancing in at the room that had served as Balam's holding facility for three years. Just like the apartments of Kane, Domi, Brigid and Grant, it was empty, his glass-walled cell dark and vacant. Balam, the sole representative of the so-called Archon Directorate, and therefore the masters of the baronial oligarchy and the entire hybrid dynasty, hadn't

escaped—he had been set free.

In the months since the entity's departure, Lakesh had toyed with the notion that Balam had chosen to remain a prisoner in Cerberus for more than three years until the resistance group was strong enough to actually make a difference in the war to cast off the harness of slavery.

Two centuries before, Lakesh was told that the entirety of human history was intertwined with the activities of the entities called Archons, though they had been referred to by many names over many centuries—angels, demons, extraterrestrials, and the ubiquitous gray aliens who figured so prominently in UFO abduction literature of the twentieth century.

Balam claimed that Archons was a code word first

applied to his people in the twentieth century, and referred to an ancient force that acted as a spiritual jailer, imprisoning the spark of the divine within human souls.

His folk's involvement with humanity stretched back to the dawn of history. In order to survive, Balam's people conspired with willing human pawns to control Man through political chaos, staged wars, famines, plagues and natural disasters.

But the tale of the Archons was all a ruse, bits of truth mixed in with outrageous fiction. The Archon Directorate did not exist except as a vast cover story, created two centuries ago, and grown larger with each succeeding generation. Only one so-called Archon lived on Earth, and that was Balam, the last of an extinct race.

Even more shocking was Balam's revelation that he and his folk were humans, not alien but alienated. Lakesh still didn't know how much to believe of that story. When he attempted to solve the mystery of the so-called Archon Directorate and its agenda the morass of complex and broad legends made him give up in despair. The little he had learned, supplemented by the intelligence Kane, Grant and Brigid had gathered, was still the most shallow, imperceptible scratch on the surface of a vast tapestry of secrecy.

Repressing a shudder, Lakesh switched the view to the dispensary. To his dismay, he saw Banks sitting on the edge of an examination bed with DeFore, the resident medic, timing his pulse. He couldn't hear what they were saying, so after a moment of watch-

ing, he decided to check it out himself. He wasn't particularly anxious to go anywhere, but he was tired of sitting and brooding in the ops center. It could be left unmanned for a little while, since the complex had five dedicated and eight shared subprocessors that continued standard operations automatically.

Lakesh walked down the wide corridor and turned left at the T junction. He heard the murmur of voices wafting from the open door of the infirmary. When he entered, he saw DeFore shining a penlight into Banks's right eye.

DeFore glanced his way when he came in, but said nothing. Buxom and stocky, she wore the one-piece white bodysuit common among the redoubt's personnel. Her ash-blond hair was tied in intricate braids at the back of her head, the color contrasting sharply with the deep bronze coloration of her skin.

"Are you all right, friend Banks?" Lakesh asked.

The slender young black man with the neatly trimmed beard jerked in reaction to Lakesh's voice. Lifting

his head to peer over DeFore's shoulder, he said, "I don't know. That's what I'm here to find out."

Unlike Bry, Wegmann and Farrell, Banks was not a tech-head. He was currently in training to serve as one, but computers and electronics were not his field of expertise. Lakesh had arranged for his exile from Samariumville for two reasons—one was his training in biochemistry. The second, and by far the most important, was the strong latent psionic talents that had shown up on his career placement tests. Both attri-

butes had proved invaluable during the three-plus

years he had served as the warder for Balam. His '

telepathic ability was strong enough to screen out !

Balam's attempts at psychic influence, except for the i

one instance when he was able to insinuate himself

into Banks's sleeping mind. i

But now that Balam was gone, Banks needed to be trained hi another area, several if possible. He was »

also under the tutelage of DeFore, learning the basics \

of medicine.

DeFore straightened, turning off the pen-flash. A I

slight frown tugged at the corners of her full lips. !

"He's been complaining of difficulty in sleeping and head pain." |

"For how long?" Lakesh inquired.

Banks lifted a shoulder in a negligent shrug as if the matter were of little importance. "A few days now." •

DeFore snorted. "More like a week. You told me j

it had been going on for a few days before you asked me for something to help you sleep."

Banks smiled abashedly and rubbed his forehead. j

"The headaches have only been going on for a few ;

days. Or nights, since they only happen at night when I'm trying to sleep."

Lakesh eyed Banks keenly, then DeFore. "You ;

can't find anything wrong with him?"

She shook her head. "His blood pressure is a little i

high, and so is his pulse rate. If he wasn't so generally f

laid back, my prognosis would be that he's suffering '

from anxiety."

"Anxiety about what?" Lakesh inquired.

"You might ask me," Banks interjected peevishly. "I'm the patient, remember?"

Even such a minor display of asperity was out of character for the normally easygoing young man. Lakesh nodded to him apologetically. "Sorry. Are you anxious about something in particular?"

"No more than usual."

"Then why are you having trouble sleeping?"

Banks's brow wrinkled in thought. "I don't know. I'm restless, as if I'm supposed to do something important, but I've forgotten it. I have insomnia most of the night. When I do manage to drop off, dreams wake me up."

"Are you prone to nightmares?" DeFore asked. "Night terrors?"

"I didn't say they were nightmares," Banks retorted a little defensively. "Just dreams...but strange ones, though. And they've been getting stranger."

Lakesh pursed his lips contemplatively. "Do you remember them?"

Banks made a feeble attempt to smile. "That's the problem. I can't forget them. They're always on my mind. That's why I've been wondering..."

His words trailed off, and he wet his lips nervously with the tip of his tongue.

"Wondering what?" DeFore pressed.

"Wondering if they're dreams at all. They're more like messages so strongly imparted in my mind, I can't forget them like an ordinary dream. But I can't make sense of them, either."

"What makes them so unforgettable?" Lakesh asked suspiciously.

Banks inhaled a deep breath, held it and exhaled noisily. "Because Balam is in them."

The short hairs on the back of Lakesh's neck tingled, even though he had half expected the response.

His eyes narrowed, DeFore declared matter-of-factly, "According to Brigid and Kane, Balam is thousands of miles away in Tibet."

Distractedly, Lakesh said, "Distance means nothing when telepathic communication is involved. Thought transmissions don't have range limitations like radio waves."

"That's what you think I'm experiencing?" Banks's voice held a note of apprehension.

Lakesh didn't immediately reply. Because of his long association with Balam and his latent psionic abilities, Banks had empathically melded with the entity to facilitate a verbal dialogue between warder and prisoner. It was possible, even probable, that the link i hadn't been as temporary or as one-way as they had initially believed.

"What's the nature of your dreams?" asked Lakesh.

Eyes growing preoccupied, his voice distant, Banks answered, "A lot of different kinds of imagery, different scenery and settings." (

"Give us an example," DeFore suggested, sound- •

ing interested in spite of herself. {

'Apocalyptic, primarily. Rivers running with water !

i

the color of blood, dead fish floating on the surface, deserts on fire, people dead of disease and famine."

The young man straightened his slouching posture. "Then, all those images go into reverse, like when you rewind a vid tape. Then everything is all cleaned up—the water is clear and blue, the deserts turn into forests, people are healthy and happy.

"Balam is always there, walking around like a tour guide, giving me the impression that I'm seeing the past and present, but not necessarily the future. But he imparts the message that it can be—if we allow it and work toward it."

"We?" DeFore echoed dubiously. "You mean the humanity his plans helped to obliterate?"

Lakesh was surprised when Banks shook his head. "No," the young man declared firmly. He gestured to Lakesh, to the infirmary, to the redoubt at large. "Those of us here, in Cerberus. And there's another thing—when I see Balam in my dreams, he always casts a shadow."

Both DeFore and Lakesh favored him with slightly perplexed looks. Lakesh ventured, "How is that significant?"

Banks shook his head in frustration. "It's hard to explain, but it seems an odd and small detail to always remember. In whatever scene I see him, Balam has a shadow right beside him, but it's not like a real shadow—it's more like someone else that I can't really see."

"As if someone is hiding from you?" DeFore inquired.

"No," Banks answered musingly. "More like I'm supposed to see him but not recognize him until the time is right."

"The time is right?" Lakesh demanded. "For what?"

"I don't know, I really don't. All I get is the feeling that Balam is becoming frustrated with me because I'm not reacting to his messages the way he thinks I should."

He forced a grin. "Good thing they're all just dreams, right?"

Lakesh tugged absently at his long nose. He exchanged a questioning look with DeFore. When she shrugged, he turned back to Banks. "Perhaps I can help clear up the confusion of whether you're dreaming or experiencing a communication. And if the latter is the case, we may end Balam's frustration and permit you to enjoy a restful night's sleep."

Banks shifted uncomfortably on the edge of the bed. "What have you got in mind?"

"Hypnosis." Seeing the fleeting glint of fear in the young man's eyes, he added reassuringly, "Don't worry. I'm fully accredited—not that a two-hundred-year-old certificate would mean much to you—and I've done it before to Kane. He recovered sound of mind."

"That's a matter of opinion," DeFore remarked with a dour smile.

"Once I place you in a suggestible state," continued Lakesh, "you will be able to describe in greater detail these dreams or messages."

"Do you really think it's that important?" Banks asked.

"You tell us," replied DeFore. "You're the one suffering from headaches and insomnia. I can't find an organic cause, and prescribing sleeping pills or anti-depressants treats only the symptoms."

"And," interjected Lakesh, "we definitely should determine if Balam is psionically contacting you. I don't think it's a coincidence that this began to happen shortly after two of our people disappeared into Area 51."

"Why not?" Banks asked.

"According to Brigid, Lord Strongbow of New London claimed he interrogated Balam in Area 51 in the year or two preceding the holocaust. He was a former intelligence officer, and there's no reason he shouldn't be taken at his word. There must be a connection."

Banks nodded unhappily. "I suppose you're right. When do you want to do this?"

Lakesh consulted his wrist chron. "I'd judge now is the best time."

Chapter 6

The white-red flash of the explosion washed all the shadows from the man-made canyon, turning it from dusk to high noon. A roaring wall of flame belled out from the dark throat of the building's lobby like a fireball flung from a catapult.

The C2VI rocked violently as the wall of concussive force struck it broadside like a wrecking ball. The

shock wave was so powerful, it sent the MCP veering up onto the layers of rubble on the left. Grant wrestled with the wheel, wincing at the eardrum-compressing gongs of debris raining onto the wag's heavy metal hull.

A black pattern of cracks spread swiftly over the building's foundation, huge flakes popping loose with loud snaps. Shards of flying stone fell all around, tons of masonry toppling only yards behind the wag. In the dim light, veiled by swirling clouds of dust, the building seemed to come apart in sections, tumbling and toppling and crashing down in a tempest of destruction. Flying fragments struck the C2VI, making a cacophony like a work gang pounding repeatedly on the armor with sledgehammers.

The tower swayed far out over the street. It tottered, seemed to suspend itself in midair for a long moment,

then toppled. With a thunderous roar, the entire top half of the building collapsed in a torrent of stone, brickwork and masonry. Great slabs of concrete crashed into the street. The ground quaked beneath the vehicle's treads, as a seething avalanche of bouncing rock slabs and dust cascaded down. Huge chunks of concrete, cornices and bricks collided in a grinding rumble and crash.

The entire war wag trembled with a prolonged tremor, causing loose objects in the cockpit to fall and clatter. Grant opened the throttle wide, trying to outdistance the thick, whirling dust cloud sweeping toward them. Within seconds, it engulfed the vehicle. The pilot's compartment became as dark as midnight, illuminated feebly by the indicator lights on the instrument panel. They disappeared as a layer of grit and powder coated them.

Grant squeezed his eyes half-shut against the stinging particles of pulverized rock forced through every crack, seam and open ob port. A brick splinter coming in through the side window nicked his hand, but he crouched over the wheel. He kept his foot firmly pressed on the accelerator as the earth heaved and trembled around the wag. Faintly, he heard Sky Dog shouting in alarm over the comm link in his ear, but he couldn't make out the words.

The ringing echoes of stone shards pelting the C2VI tapered off to intermittent bongs, and by degrees the billowing dust cloud thinned, allowing more light to peep into the cockpit. The shuddering crash of tumbling, falling stone slowly faded.

Grant kept the gas pedal floored until they were free of the gray vapor. Then he slowly eased back on the pressure and downshifted. He carefully applied the brake, and the hull shivered and trembled as the vehicle shuddered down to a clanking halt.

"What happened?" Brigid demanded, her voice hitting a high note of both fear and anger.

Grant coughed, fanning the air in front of his face. He spit out grit and snarled, "Demolition charge—a fucking booby trap and I rolled us right into it."

Before Brigid could respond, Grant stripped off the headset and stamped out of the compartment. He met Sky Dog at the starboard side hatch. "Any of your men hurt?"

The shaman shook his head. "A few bruises, but that's all."

Undogging the hatch, Grant flung it open and jumped down, stumbling a bit on the debris-strewn ground. He looked back the way they had come. Settling stone and masonry continued to grate and grind. Peering through the thick pall of shifting dust and smoke, he saw a vast high wall of broken

concrete, masonry and bricks completely blocking the Strip. When the building fell, it crushed a number of other structures on the opposite side of the boulevard. A vista of destruction lay before him, overhung by a rising umbrella of dust and smoke.

Brigid, who had followed Grant out of the wag, said matter-of-factly, "A whole building wasn't boobyed just to take out a single vehicle."

"No," Grant said flatly, "it was rigged with the

idea of making Vegas impassable. A scout wag would trigger the explosive, and either flatten or block a convoy."

Sky Dog stared at the vista of destruction, overhung by a rising pall of dust and smoke. "You mean someone expected a convoy of wags to come down this road?"

Grant nodded curtly. "And took measures to make the road impassable, and to cut off one part of a convoy from another."

"Divide and conquer," murmured Brigid. "The standard baronial philosophy." She cast a glance toward Grant. "And only a baron would have access to the materiel to make a booby trap like this."

"Bulk explosives," he said reflectively. "Probably Astralight mixed with RDX. It's a safe bet no Roamer could get his hands on a photoelectric cell and a storage battery."

"And even if one managed to," Brigid agreed, "it's even more unlikely they'd have the know-how to put it all together, and know where to place the demolition charges to bring the whole building down."

She sneezed, clearing her nasal passages of grit and added, "I think we can safely assume it's a baron taking measures against other barons."

"Which barons?" asked Sky Dog.

"Baron Cobalt for one," Grant replied. He turned away, back toward the wag. "If he's claimed Area 51, he may have a way to know if the trap was

sprung. I want to be well away from here before anyone is sent to check it out."

They performed a quick inspection of the grit-filmed exterior of the wag, and except for a couple of small dings, it was undamaged. By the time they were back aboard and rolling again, the sun had all but vanished. What little light shimmered above the horizon was blurred by the shifting haze of settling dust.

Grant guided the machine along the Strip, reaching an area with few buildings more than a couple of stories high. Their worry about tripping another demolition charge became less acute. What didn't fade was Brigid's mounting fear about the fate of Kane.

As she gazed through the front ob port, at the ruins of Las Vegas, she realized the closer they came to their objective, the sharper her fear became. It was as if every mile they clocked had an exponential correlation with her dread about Kane and Domi.

She ran an impatient hand through her heavy mounds of tangled, unwashed hair, and tugged at her grimy clothes. She was an orderly, dedicated, brilliant, almost compulsively tidy woman, and going for the past

five days without bathing made her feel more than dirty; it made her feel out of control. Even the bath she had taken at the last stream had been little more than splashing water on her face and limbs.

For some reason, she associated her own feeling of being trapped in events over which she had no direct control with Kane's disappearance. As long as she'd known him, she could never predict what Kane would say or do. He had the tension, speed and power of a

stalking wolf. But unlike a stalking wolf, he had almost no patience at all. More than once he had displayed a reckless disregard for not just common sense, but his own safety, particularly when her Me was threatened.

But that recklessness wasn't just within his exclusive purview. During their nightmarish mission in the Black Gobi, she had risked her own life to save his, acting on purely instinctive, almost primal impulses. She had been tortured, incapacitated, in a state of shock. Yet, when she saw the Tushe Gun's saber at Kane's throat, only one emotion predominated in her, and motivated her—she would not watch him die again.

The vision she had experienced during the mat-trans jump to Russia, then again in the subterranean chamber beneath Kharo-Khoto, floated through her mind, but it was more than a vision; it was a memory.

She was lashed to the stirrup of a saddle, lying in the muddy track of a road. Men in chain-mail armor laughed and jeered above her, and long black tongues of whips licked out with hisses and cracks. Callused hands fondled her breasts, forced themselves between her legs.

Then she saw a man rushing from a hedgerow lining the road. He was thin and hollow cheeked, perhaps nineteen or twenty years old. His gray-blue eyes burned with rage. She knew him, called out to him, shouting for him to go back. He knocked men aside to reach her, and a spiked mace rose above his head,

poised there for a breathless second, then dropped straight down—

She knew the young man had been Kane, she knew it on a level so visceral and soul deep that the intellectual prowess she prided herself upon could never touch it.

As the former overseer of Project Cerberus, Lakesh presumably was familiar with all the side effects of mat-trans jumping. Brigid had never told him about her vision of a past life. She feared what he would tell her, not only about herself, but about Kane.

Brigid knew she had seen Kane die that day, even if he bore a different name, but she couldn't believe this Kane, the one she knew and quarreled with, was dead. The mat-trans jump he and Domi made felt like so many other gateway transits, she just assumed he'd be back in a while and they'd resume their argument of the day.

When it wasn't resumed, and Brigid finally accepted the possibility it might never be, she felt more alone than she had in her entire life, even on that day fourteen years ago when her mother vanished from her life. She felt so alone, even in the company of Grant, Sky Dog and his warriors, that she really didn't want to go back to the redoubt and mingle with the people there. Cerberus and the war against the barons seemed to have less and less to do with her life, with anybody's life. For her part, if she learned Kane was dead, she would just as soon walk around the Out-lands alone until Roamers or muties jumped her.

It wasn't as if she even missed Kane all that much,

but she did feel resentment that if he was dead she would have to clean up the mess he left behind. Over the past few months, Brigid's resentment over the redoubt's reliance on Kane had become more difficult to keep in check.

After Lakesh abdicated his position of ultimate authority, most of the Cerberus personnel looked to Kane as the decision maker and arbiter of policy. Because he was perceived as the leader, she sometimes felt she had been forced into the role of Kane's sidekick, his yes-person, incapable of deciding her own course of action.

True enough, Kane was decisive, but his choices weren't always right. Not only had she suffered, but she had also watched people die due to his swift decisions. Making split-second, life-and-death choices was part of his training, as deeply ingrained in his identity as his wry sense of humor. And when he was wrong, he was usually very, very wrong. She feared he had wrongly assessed a threat in Area 51 and both he and Domi died because of it.

But frequently, at night, she dreamed of Kane and she woke up to hear his voice, so real she looked around expecting to see him standing off to one side, smoking one of his noxious-smelling cigars and getting ready to engage her in one of their eternal disagreements. In those half-lucid moments, she realized with a heart-stopping terror that if Kane was dead, she would lose her own sense of purpose. She would go on living from sheer habit and momentum.

But she did not let Grant or any of her traveling

companions see how easily the visions of Kane and her terrors invaded her thoughts. She masked it, not allowing them to know how her old sense of being analytical and logical had left her so completely that she wondered what contribution her intellect and font of knowledge had made to anyone.

Brigid was so preoccupied battling despair she didn't hear Grant speaking to her until he repeated her name, harshly and sharply. She swung her head toward him and saw him regarding her with stern eyes, the glow from the instrument casting eerie highlights on his dark, fierce face.

"Sorry," she said. "I was distracted."

"That's the last thing we need," he bit out.

Brigid managed to keep the profane retort from leaving her lips, but she asked coldly, "What were you saying?"

"I asked you about the route."

Brigid flipped through the card file of her eidetic memory. "We stay on 1-15 for about twenty more miles, then turn left onto U.S. Highway 93."

"And then what?"

"We follow that for about eighty-five miles."

Grant hissed out a slow, frustrated breath between his teeth. "Shit. Too risky to make it an all-nighter."

We'll have to make camp and get rolling again at daybreak."

He turned on the wire-encased, hooded headlights. Twin funnels of yellow-white washed the roadbed with a ghostly illumination. On both sides of the highway stretched extensive tumbles of gray rubble.

Looking to the left and the right, he said, "I'll find us a defensible place in this mess."

Brigid nodded. "If there is such a thing here. But according to the *Wyeth Codex*, it was inhabited over the past hundred years."

The *Codex* was a journal of sorts written by Mildred Winona Wyeth, one of the enduring legends of the Deathlands. Born in the twentieth century, Wyeth had slept through the nukocaust and skydark in cry-onic suspension. She was revived after nearly a hundred years by another semimythical figure of the Deathlands, Ryan Cawdor. Wyeth joined Cawdor's band of survivalists who journeyed the length and breadth of postholocaust America.

At some point in her journeys, she found a working computer and recorded many of their experiences and adventures. In many ways, the *Wyeth Codex* began the sequence of events that led to Brigid's exile from Cobaltville.

"Yeah?" Grant inquired. "What'd she have to say about it?"

"Not too much, really," admitted Brigid. "The convention center was used for gladiatorial games by a group of self-styled barons. This was long before the Program of Unification and the oligarchy."

Grant grunted softly. Brigid knew that as far as he was concerned, Cawdor, Wyeth and others were just names from the wild old days before the united baronies were established. She glanced out the ob port at the lowering curtain of twilight, then stiffened as a

flicker of orange caught her attention in the darkening sky. She leaned forward, her eyes narrowing.

Grant glanced toward her questioningly. "What?"

"Kill the lights," she said curtly.

Grant's brow furrowed but he did as she said, at the same time relaxing his foot's pressure on the gas pedal. Brigid reached beneath her seat and brought out the binoculars. Putting them to her eyes and propping her elbows on the dashboard, she peered through the dust-streaked polymer glaze of the ob port. She tried to focus on the flecks of tiny lights drifting across the westward sky, but the wag's vibration confused the image.

"Stop us," she said.

Grant braked carefully to a halt, and she managed to track and center the lights. She saw the distinctive waspish configuration of a Deathbird, riding the air in an oblique course toward Las Vegas. The fore and aft running lights of the black chopper glowed like embers against the indigo backdrop of the sky.

"A Deathbird," she said. "About six miles away and it's coming fast."

Wordlessly, Grant engaged the gears and turned the wheel of the C2VI sharply to the right. The wag left the road, bouncing over an embankment. Putting on the headset, he announced the situation to Sky Dog,

so that he could alert his warriors.

Grant moved the machine into the mounds of silted-over rubble, slabs of tip-tilted concrete and thick copses of scraggly, thorny underbrush. Slowly the war wag lumbered through the ruins. The old

structures, once homes, restaurants and movie theaters, were toppled and smashed with only a few sheared-off support posts and pylons lifting toward the sky. All around stood a maze of crumbling walls made of wind-scoured brick and concrete block. Bri-gid felt as if they traveled through the skeleton of a long-dead giant, rolling past huge, fossilized bones.

Grant expertly maneuvered the vehicle as close as he could to one of the walls, and slid the gears into neutral. The engine continued to idle. Brigid peered through the binoculars, trying to get a fix on the chopper's position. The helicopter skimmed into view, and she felt a chill touch the base of her spine.

Painted a matte, nonreflective black, the chopper's sleek, streamlined contours were interrupted by only the two ventral stub wings. Each wing carried a pod of sixteen 57 mm missiles. The foreport of the black chopper was tinted a smoky hue. She knew the Death-birds were equipped with FLIR instruments—forward looking infrared—and if they were on, they could track people by the warmth of their footprints.

"Won't they pick up the heat signature of the engine?" Brigid asked.

"They'll pick it up whether the engine is running or not." Grant's tone was quiet and uninflected. "If they spot us, I don't want to risk an emergency restart and mebbe stalling us out."

Brigid nodded, squinting through the eyepieces of the binoculars. The Deathbird was closer, but swinging in a great circle at least two hundred yards away, maintaining an altitude of about a thousand feet. Only

faintly could she hear the drone of the T700-701 tur-boshaft engines, and the swish of the steel vanes slicing through the air.

Body tense, breath coming with difficulty, Brigid kept expecting the chopper to dive toward their position, loosing missile after missile. After less than a minute, the chopper rotated and flew off back to the west. It gathered speed, and soon its running lights were swallowed by the deepening gloom.

Grant gusted out a sigh and ran a hand over his unshaved jaw. Softly, Brigid asked, "Where did it come from? Why didn't the crew spot us?"

He uttered a thoughtful grunt. "A lot of reasons. Mebbe their heat scanners weren't working. Mebbe they didn't get close enough to detect our signatures."

Grant didn't sound as if he believed his own words, so Brigid said, "The nearest barony is Snakefish, which is in northern California. A Deathbird's internal fuel range is what, around three hundred miles?"

"Give or take ten or so."

"There's no way it could have come from Snake-fish unless there's a fuel depot nearby."

Grant swiveled his head toward her. "Couldn't it just as easily come from Area 51, to check out the explosion?"

She shook her head. "Not unless it was already in the air and halfway here. Area 51 is approximately ninety miles away."

Impatiently, Grant demanded, "What's your point?"

"My point," she answered tersely, "is there may be a garrison of soldiers, maybe even Magistrates, between here and where we're going."

"Are you saying we shouldn't stick around here?"

She nibbled her underlip nervously. "I find it hard to believe that Bird crew didn't spot us."

Grant's hands clenched around the steering wheel. He heaved a deep weary sigh before saying, "Me, too."

He engaged the clutch and the gears, pressing on the accelerator. "I'll find us another campsite."

The wag's treads crushed a portion of fallen wall to powder, then there was a streak of flame from the shadows on their left. A few yards ahead of the vehicle's bow, the night lit up with a hot orange flash, a fireball ballooning upward and outward. Stone shards and chunks of soil rattled against the hull.

"Son of a bitch!" Grant snarled, jerking on the wheel, sending the front end of the war wag through a wall. It cleaved through it like the prow of a ship through an ocean wave, sailing across the fields of rubble.

Between a split in a section of wall, Brigid glimpsed the bobbing of multiple headlights and silhouetted man-shapes flitting to and fro. A crumping detonation hammered at their ears, and a tall pillar cracked at the base amid a spray of rock chips and debris. It folded over like a jackknife, toppling directly in front of them. It landed with such an impact that they could feel the ground quake even in the MCP. Dust mushroomed in a heavy blanket.

Grant wrenched the wheel violently, and the wag inscribed a swerving, zigzagging course. Brigid fell against the bulkhead, banging the back of her head painfully on the metal wall. Pushing herself upright, blinking the pain haze from her eyes, she looked frantically to the left and right, trying to spot the origin of the fire. Even as she twisted in her seat, she glimpsed the fiery, sparking contrail of a projectile arrowing on a direct course with their starboard side.

Chapter 7

The first few times after a session, Kane felt terribly exposed and vulnerable as Gifford led him out of the chamber. He thought all eyes were upon him, on his nakedness, gauging the depth of his humiliation as he was paraded down a corridor. But then he realized no one wanted to see him, particularly the few hybrid males he passed. He figured he reminded them of how an inferior old human, one of the apekin, could accomplish things they couldn't.

So despite his weariness, Kane forced his head up, stiffened his spine and put a spring into his step. The hybrids looked away from him as he walked by, but he made it a point to wink at them and smile in cold superiority.

Near the monorail platform, Kane and his guard stopped at a cubicle where he donned a fresh coverall—or the same one, just recently laundered—and his rubber-soled slip-on shoes. Then Gifford shackled his wrists, and they returned to section 47-12a. By the time they reached it, Kane was already shivering from the aftereffects of the gel.

As Gifford escorted him down the corridor to his cell, the man asked, "How many does this make so far, Kane?"

With a distant quiver of surprise, Kane realized he couldn't remember. He no longer counted either the number of sessions, or the females involved in them. He tried to cover a shiver with a dismissive shrug. "I don't know. Four this time, I think."

Gifford snickered. "Keep at it, boy. You're bound to get it right one of these days."

"Very whimsical," Kane countered in mock approval. "You can make a funny. I'm impressed. Maybe I've misjudged you."

Gifford dropped back a pace, allowing Kane to move ahead of him, then he jabbed him hard in the small of the back with the Shockstick. Streaks of fke lanced up and down Kane's spine. He felt his lungs seize as he fell to all fours. It took every iota of his focused willpower to keep from curling up in a fetal position.

Gifford loomed over him, swishing the humming tip of the baton over his head. "I'm sick of your mouth, Kane, sick of nursemaiding your turncoat ass, sick of seeing you still alive when you should have been executed for treason."

Kane forced himself to one knee, gulping air. "You're more than welcome to take my place, Gifford."

The man's face flushed beet-red, and his eyes glinted with jealous malevolence. "I wouldn't be in your place for a baron's ransom, boy. Having to stick it in those half-human bitches—"

His shoulders heaved in an elaborate shudder. Kane knew his revulsion was feigned. Slowly, stiffly, he rose to his feet and said, "I know some of you full-blooded men have done more than stick it hi the half-human bitches, Gifford. A guy named Hank comes to mind."

Gifford's lips writhed as if he were about to spit in his face. His hand clenched on the molded grip of the Shockstick, the knuckles standing out whitely.

"Secondarily," Kane continued hi a monotone, "the baron decreed you don't have the right stuff to take my place. That's why you're my nursemaid and why you can't work me over."

With his bound hands, Kane gestured first to the Shockstick and then to the spy-eye cam on the ceiling. "You get spotted using that on me just because you feel like it, adversely affecting my sperm production, and your ass will be the one executed, not mine."

Making a growling sound deep in his throat, Gifford took a threatening half step forward. Kane held his ground, his gray-blue eyes boring unblinkingly into the guard's flushed face. "Think about it, Gifford," he advised quietly.

Some of the angry tension left the man's posture, but he still glared balefully. He gestured impatiently with

the baton. "Go."

As they started walking again, Gifford asked, "You think I'm jealous of what you're getting, with what I have?"

"And what's that?" Kane inquired with a studied indifference.

"The finest little piece of albino ass that ever pulled a train."

It required all of Kane's willpower to keep himself from rocking to a halt and spinning. Instead, he forced himself to keep walking.

Gifford chuckled, an ugly, slobbery sound. "We use that fuck jelly on her, and she turns into a little white screwing machine. There's been some nights when she's taken the whole squad, and she still begged for more."

Kane clenched his teeth so hard he heard them squeak and grind. His heart began to pound in fury and a building horror.

"Stop," Gifford ordered.

Kane halted in front of the door to his cell, his stomach muscles spasming. The guard swiped his key card through the electronic lock, and the cell door swung open smoothly and silently.

"Hands."

Kane turned, extending his cuffed wrists. As Gifford unshackled him, he said in a conspiratorial whisper, "Just thought you'd like to know what happened to her. Damn shame you lost her, ain't it?"

"No," Kane replied in a similar soft whisper. "This is the damn shame."

With his hands still extended, he snatched a double fistful of Gifford's coverall and yanked him forward, at the same time butting him in the face with the crown of his head.

The man's nose flattened with a mushy crunch of cartilage, and both nostrils spewed twin scarlet streams as if they were the nozzles of hoses. As Gifford reeled across the width of the corridor, arms

windmilling, Kane swiftly stepped back into his cell and the door closed automatically.

On the other side of the door he heard nasal, liquid snufflings and bursts of obscenities. Kane waited, assuming a combat posture just in case Gifford was so maddened he would charge in alone for some payback. Kane seriously doubted he would, now that he was unfettered. The guard might eventually incapacitate him with the Shockstick, but not before receiving injuries far more serious than a broken nose.

After a minute, the faint cursing died away, and Kane relaxed, then hugged himself as a shudder shook his frame. His knees felt weak and wobbly, and he dropped down on the edge of the bunk, reaching for his blanket. As he drew it around him, he tried to convince himself Gifford's sneering description of Domi was a cheap intimidation ploy. It didn't seem reasonable that if Domi had been apprehended at the same time as he was the guards wouldn't have apprised him of it.

Bleakly, he realized her capture very well might have been withheld from Baron Cobalt. The baron would not have allowed a subbreed Outlander to live, much less give the permission for her to be used as a sex toy.

Kane squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to think about it. His only spark of hope—and a small, dim one at that—had been planted on the possibility of Domi's escape from the installation.

He lay down, huddling in a fetal position, waiting for the waves of sleep to overwhelm him. Although he felt weak and weary, slumber did not come. Drowsily, he mentally replayed Quavell's cryptic comments, trying to reason out their meaning now that his mind wasn't clouded by the aphrodisiac gel.

Things are not what they seem. We need your help.

Even if it were true that she had applied only a diluted mixture of the gel, and that others like her opposed Baron Cobalt's plan for him, he certainly didn't take her words at face value.

We will help you. You'll know when.

Presumably the hybrids, like the humans who lived in the villes, were conditioned to obey the barons without question, indoctrinated from birth to uphold the principles of unification. Even if Quavell felt Baron Cobalt threatened that unity, Kane couldn't accept the concept that she and other hybrids would turn against him.

He toyed with the notion that Quavell had fallen in love with him during their couplings, but he almost instantly dismissed it. Not so long ago he'd thought exploiting the attraction the Amazon Ambika had for him would make her willing to cater to his every whim. An hour later she'd tried to castrate him with a sword, so he reassessed his effect on women, even hybrid ones.

Also, visceral emotions did not seem to play a large part in the psychologies of the so-called new humans. Even the bursts of passion Kane had seen displayed by Barons Cobalt and Sharpe had been of the most rudimentary kind. Lakesh had theorized that although the tissue of their hybridized brains was

of the same organic matter as the human brain, the millions of neurons operated a bit differently in the processing of information. Therefore, their thought processes were very structured, extremely linear. When they experienced emotions, they only did so in moments of stress, and then so intensely they were almost consumed by them. Kane had witnessed firsthand infantile temper tantrums staged by both Sharpe and Cobalt.

His stomach growled and a hunger pang accompanied it. He hitched around on his bunk, looking toward the wall, half-hoping his meal would be early. It wasn't, and he closed his eyes, drifting off into slumber.

Almost immediately it seemed, he awoke. For a few seconds he wasn't certain what had awakened him. Then he realized it wasn't a noise, but rather the fact that the overhead neon strips had flickered and gone out, leaving him in complete darkness. The disappearance of the sound had penetrated his sleeping mind and prodded his point man's sense into raising an alarm. His time sense told him he had been asleep only a few minutes. With a faint shock he realized he was no longer cold and his lassitude had left him. The diluted gel had also diluted the somatic side effects.

He continued to lie on the bunk motionless, casting his eyes toward the corner where the spy-cam was

bolted. When he didn't see the green glow of the tiny power-indicator light, a surge of desperate energy galvanized him into rolling off the bunk.

For a moment, he crouched in the impenetrable

blackness, listening and looking. He heard nothing but the rapid beat of his excited heart and saw nothing, not even the faintest hint of light shining under his cell door. Instantly he knew there was no power to this section of the installation and his door couldn't be unlocked by a key card.

We will help you. You'll know when.

Unconsciously holding his breath, Kane crept across the cell to the wall next to the door, his fingers swiftly exploring it near the wall. For a few seconds he felt nothing but the cool, smooth expanse of sharply cut stone and the recessed seams.

He groped blindly for what felt like an interlocking chain of eternities, expecting at any second the lights to flash on and the door to open and Gifford to come in, laughing cruelly at how he had been tricked. Anger burned within him, and he snarled wordlessly, clawing at the wall, fingernails scraping over its surface.

When he touched a narrow slot, he almost laughed wildly with elation. He tugged at the square panel, swinging it open wide on tiny hinges. He felt a catch lock on the inside. Falling prone, he ran his hands around the opening, judging its dimensions by feel alone. The fit would be tight—Kane carried most of his muscle mass in his shoulders and upper body like a wolf, but he was positive he'd shed some pounds during his captivity.

Extending his arms as far as he could into the opening, Kane felt a square shaft dropping straight down vertically. His fingertips slipped over smooth metal

sheeting. He figured his food was brought up to his cell by a dumbwaiter type of contrivance, probably operating automatically. The elevator had to be equipped with some kind of device to both unlock the wall panel and push the tray into his cell. He felt no mechanism, no winch or cables above the opening.

He struggled to control his almost frantic need to leap headfirst into the shaft, heedless of what lay at the bottom. He checked the impulses, angry at himself for allowing his captors to turn him into an animal, charging madly toward even the most unreliable avenue of escape.

Reversing position, Kane lay on his back and put his feet into the aperture and scooted forward. His flesh tingled at the prospect of climbing down into the yawning throat of blackness, but he half crawled, half slid into the duct. There was only darkness below him.

Kane placed both hands flat against the walls of the shaft and wriggled entirely in. The duct was about three inches wider than his shoulders, which helped him squirm down it. Expanding his shoulders until they pressed against the smooth metal, he jammed the sides of his feet tightly against the walls, for the first time glad for the rubber-soled shoes. They helped him achieve a degree of traction. By pushing with his feet and shoulders in unison, he gained the leverage he needed to keep from sliding uncontrollably down the chute.

Kane moved only a few inches at a time. At first he tried to estimate how many feet per minute he

descended, but the muscle-straining process of contracting his shoulders, expanding them, and bracing

with his feet required all of his concentration. After a few minutes, a cramping pain began to flow through his shoulder sockets and the arches of his feet. Because there were no welds or seams where the ductwork's sections joined together, he slipped a time or two. Once he slid for at least a dozen yards before he braked himself, hands and shoulders scalding with the friction.

Perspiration pebbled on his face and trickled beneath his clothes, but Kane maintained the steady downward progress, over and over with hands, shoulders and feet. He lost all track of how long he did it, or how far he descended. The ache in his shoulders became a bone-deep, boring pain. The confined space of the shaft threw back the echoes of his harsh, labored respiration until it filled his ears and he could hear nothing else, even if there were other sounds.

The sweat ran in runnels down his arms and onto the palms of his hands, causing them to slip. He expanded his shoulders, holding his body in place with them and the edges of his shoe soles to wipe his hands dry on his coverall. The movement dislodged him and he slipped from his position.

Kane tried to spread his shoulders wide and slap the flats of his hands against the shaft walls to slow himself, but the braking effect was negligible. He couldn't secure a grip, and his body plummeted straight down, the wet skin on the palms of his hands

making a protracted squeal as he plunged into a sepia sea.

He didn't fall long or particularly far. Kane landed flat-footed, the double impacts jacking both knees into his lower belly and sending streaks of agony scorching through his ankles and into the Achilles tendons. Over the explosion of air violently expelled from his lungs, he heard the faint ring of metal and a noisy, cracking clatter beneath his shoes.

He was only dimly aware of falling on his right side against a hard surface. Kane didn't lose consciousness, but he hovered at its brink for what seemed like a long time. He opened his eyes in utter darkness. His head whirled, and there was dull throbbing in his belly and sharp pains in his ankles. Dragging air into his straining lungs, he forced himself to his hands and knees, his limbs trembling.

Reaching out, he groped around in the blackness. His hands touched the walls of the shaft, the floor, then nothing but air. He felt rather than heard an insistent mechanical throb, overlaid with the faintest of electronic hums. He ran his fingers around him and realized he was kneeling on a square platform raised less than a foot from the floor. The platform was the elevator, probably propelled up the shaft by a telescoping, pneumatic piston like the lift disks in the Cobaltville Administrative Monolith.

A warm, semisolid substance squished beneath his knees, and he caught the whiff of porridge. He had landed on his tray of food, crushing the container of milk, spilling the oatmeal and breaking the tray. Ap-

parently, the elevator was about to deliver his meal when the power went out.

He edged off the platform, sweeping his arms back and forth just above the floor. He felt as if he had been rendered blind as he crawled through the Stygian darkness, and imagined that cold, mocking eyes watched him fumbling along. Kane's breath came in harsh, ragged bursts as he struggled to control his mounting anxiety. Even if the little elevator operated by an automatic setting, someone had to have placed the tray there and he, she or they might still be in close proximity.

Kane's fingers brushed an object lying in his path, and he tentatively picked it up and examined it. He felt stiff fabric, a pair of slender, flexible, bulb-tipped rods about six inches in length and two large circular shapes that felt like glass. He recognized it as a night-vision headset he had seen worn by Dreamland sec

forces when they pursued him in the warehouse section.

Swiftly, Kane slipped the skullcap over the top of his head. It didn't fit snugly, and he had to adjust it so it wouldn't slide askew. He figured it had been designed for a hybrid's oversize cranium. Running his fingertips along the rims of the goggles, he found tiny switches. He flicked them and heard a nearly inaudible whine of the batteries powering up. The two infrared projectors attached to the skullcap came to life. The room viewed through the lenses seemed eerie, but he couldn't suppress a sigh of relief that a form of vision had been restored to him.

The thermal-imaging goggles caught the heat radiating from a pair of horizontally mounted steel tanks in a far corner. They exuded a wavering, molten glow as if they were covered in white-hot lava. Kane climbed gingerly to his feet, grimacing as he put his weight on them. Despite the pain, he didn't think his ankles were broken or even sprained. Still, he walked slowly and carefully, as if he were treading on eggshells.

A network of pipes stretched out from the ends of the tanks with glass meters and valves attached to them at regular intervals. The pipes fed into a metal-walled upright disk, about six feet in diameter and three feet thick. As he drew closer, he saw the words *Danger! High Voltage* stenciled in red on its dull surface. Kane scanned the walls and ceiling for concealed spy-eyes and found none. He could only assume that he was in a maintenance room, probably a secondary power-generating station. However, the power it produced wasn't being fed to the lighting system.

Away from the heat shed by generators, the room acquired a strange, flat, unshadowed appearance, as if he were walking through a two-dimensional stage setting. He found an open doorway and eased out into a corridor, hugging the right-hand wall. The tiled floor acted as a heat damper, so despite the headset, much of the hallway was too dim to see beyond a few feet. Shadows took on various shades of gray and green.

Kane felt his way forward, step by step. The only sounds he heard were those of his own breathing and the faint scuff of his shoe soles on the floor. He had no idea where in the enormous base he was, or where he was supposed to go. Obviously, Quavell had arranged for both the blackout and the night-vision goggles, but he had no inclination to skulk from one stretch of empty corridor to another until he found someone—or someone found him.

He saw a right turn up ahead and as he approached it, he heard the steady squeaking of rubber footwear coming from around the corner. A rod of what appeared to be solid white incandescence pierced the gloom. Kane came to a halt, pressing his back against the wall. He stood stock-still, not even breathing. The light wavered, so bright Kane squinted against it as if it were a beam of condensed and compressed sunshine.

A stocky man strode rapidly around the corner, holding a flashlight in his right hand. He was sallow skinned with a dark blond crew cut. Judging by the fixed expression on his face, his concentration was totally occupied by reaching a destination or fulfilling a task.

He was so preoccupied he nearly stepped on Kane's toes before he glimpsed him. He did a violent double take, stumbling to a halt, voicing a gargling cry of shock when he saw the bug-headed figure looming in the shadows. His expression of open-mouthed astonishment was so comical, Kane nearly laughed. When he saw the man grab the trans-comm unit at his belt, all the amusement value vanished.

Kane stabbed him with a left-handed thumb-and-

forefinger thrust to the larynx, crushing the man's windpipe and driving whatever alarm he was about to raise back into his throat.

He dropped the flashlight, and as it rolled it splashed the corridor with an unearthly, unreal illumination. Clutching at his neck, his eyes bugging out, the man dropped to his knees. A little spurt of blood spilled from his lips as he crumpled to the floor. He wheezed and gasped, and Kane quickly patted him down. He found no weapons, not even a Shockstick, but he relieved him of the trans-comm and a key card. By the time he had put both items in the pockets of his jumpsuit, the man was dead.

Kane felt a pang of pity for him, but it was distant, almost perfunctory. Grunts usually died unmourned and sometimes even unacknowledged. He knew that from spending most of his life as a grunt himself. Retrieving the flashlight, he thumbed it off and moved swiftly down the corridor, figuring the man had to have come from somewhere.

He found a door within the next ten yards and he approached it warily, risking the flashlight to locate the electronic lock. Pressing his ear against the door, he listened for sounds on the other side. There either was none or the material was simply too dense to allow any to leak through.

Standing to one side, he swiped the card through the lock's slit, but as he expected, nothing happened. The lock didn't have an internal power source. He tried the handle and wasn't surprised when it didn't budge.

Kane looked up and down the corridor. Not wanting to backtrack, he started walking farther into the gray-green gloom. He didn't use the flashlight for fear of alerting anyone who might be coming toward him. He passed several doors, but he didn't try the key card on any of them.

Because the features of the passageway didn't change, and he walked slowly, with one hand on the wall, he felt as if he were on a treadmill, not getting anywhere. Turning a corner, he began to wonder if there was any end to the stretch of hallway. Then he saw a faint glimmer of light piercing the darkness. It was small, irregularly shaped and it appeared to be a long way off. The headset showed it as a molten puddle, so the light put out a little heat at least.

Kane started forward quickly, almost breaking into a run. Then, to his astonishment, he found he'd reached the light after taking only a few long strides. Lying at the base of a door on the left-hand wall was a Nighthawk microlight, a standard piece of equipment he and Domi had carried with them from Cerberus. Though the Nighthawk emitted a powerful, concentrated beam, it was small enough to be fastened the wrist by a Velcro strap.

Kane picked it up and affixed it around his left wrist, unconsciously keeping his right hand, his gun hand, free. He missed the comforting weight of the Sin Eater. The 9 mm handblaster was the chief badge of office of the Magistrates. Normally, it was bolstered to his right forearm where it could be drawn by tensing his wrist tendons.

He shone the microlight over the door, examined the electronic lock and then the handle. He decided not to bother using the card and gripped the handle, pushing it down. When a lock solenoid clicked aside, he felt the short hairs on his nape tingle.

Although the Nighthawk lying in front of the door was an obvious sign of the route he was supposed to take, his point man's sixth sense went on high, suspicious alert. Kane's senses were uncannily acute when something nasty lurked around a corner, and tension built in him like subtle electricity. Carefully, he

eased the door open. Bent in a half crouch, he stepped cautiously over the threshold. The interior was just as dark as the corridor.

Kane walked stealthily, heel-to-toe as he always did in a potential killzone. After a dozen yards, he reached a short flight of stairs, and he walked up them on the balls of his feet. He experienced a bad second when a riser creaked beneath his weight. Keeping close to the handrail, he edged along to the next floor. From the little his headset showed, it appeared to be an exact duplicate of the one below, and he squashed a rise of angry impatience.

From up ahead he heard a murmur of male voices speaking in an angry garble, and he came to halt near the throat of the stairwell. When he turned off the Nighthawk, his heart jumped in an uncharacteristic spasm of fear. The prospect of being recaptured suddenly seemed far worse than dying. The voices of two men carried to him hollowly.

"How the fuck do I know how this place can have a power failure?"

"Blown fuses? I haven't seen a fuse box since I've been here. Have you?"

"No, but I haven't looked for one, either. Besides, the blackout is just in this section."

"What about emergency generators?"

"They're out, too."

From around a corner, the glare of a flashlight blinded Kane, the goggles magnifying the glow to dazzling brilliance. He threw himself back toward the stairwell, but he misjudged the distance. Grabbing the handrail, he stumbled and the headset slammed against the wall. One of the infrared projectors snapped off like the stem of a dried flower, and he was in the dark.

The two men saw him, and they apparently decided if he ran from them, he had no business in the base. Subscribers to the shoot-first-ask-questions-later school of internal security, they triggered handblasters in his general direction. Smears of orange flame stabbed out of the darkness. The sound of the shots were flat, almost lackluster cracks, and Kane guessed the calibers to be no greater than .38s, but he still wasn't going to expose himself to the fusillade.

Bullets smacked the wall over Kane's head, sprinkling him with plaster dust. The rounds ricocheted with whistling whines. Two more shots, coming so fast they sounded like a single report, shook the air. There was nothing lackluster about the reports. They were booming thunderclaps.

Then there was silence. Kane heard the echoes of the last two shots rolling down the corridor, like the crash of a distant surf. The sharp smell of cordite cut into his nostrils. He stayed where he was, crouched on the state, one hand on the rail. It wasn't heroic, but he figured it was certainly prudent. He stripped off the headset and peered around the corner.

The bright beam of the fallen flashlight danced over the corpses sprawled facedown on the floor. Pools of blood, black in the dim light, spread thickly around their bodies. Both men looked to have suffered head shots inflicted from behind.

Faint footsteps sounded from down the passageway and a funnel of light bisected the murk. Kane ducked back, listening to the footsteps grow louder with every passing second. The light shone full in his face, and he tensed to jump and fight and die.

Domi's childlike voice piped angrily, "Bout time you got here!"

Chapter 8

The C2VI rocked back and forth like a ship caught in the embrace of typhoon-torn seas. The springs and shocks squealed a perpetual protest as Grant wrenched the machine on a lumbering, tangential course away from the streaking rocket. He doubted the warhead packed sufficient power to penetrate the armored hull, but the kinetic impact of the explosion could play hell with the onboard electrical systems.

The missile skimmed just beneath the war wag's chassis through the space between two track assemblies. It passed entirely beneath the vehicle, struck a metal flange a glancing blow and went spiraling on a crazy trajectory, its smoking contrail weaving a corkscrew pattern in the air. It exploded against a heap of rubble, the crump of the detonation only slightly muted by the wag's armor. A squall of gravel rattled against the undercarriage like hail.

"Whoever they are," Grant half shouted to Brigid, "they're trying to take out the tracks to disable us!"

The trip-hammer roar of the turret-mounted RPK filled the MCP with an eardrum-slammng stutter. A brass rain of empty cartridge cases tinkled down into the passageway, and the astringent stink of cordite cut into their nostrils.

"Cease-fire!" Grant roared into the transceiver. "We don't have targets! Cease-fire!"

Faintly over the din, they heard Sky Dog repeating Grant's order in Lakota. Another rocket scorched a path across the wag's prow, detonating on impact against a concrete pylon. The column exploded in a ball of fire and fist-sized chunks of stone. They struck .gonging chimes on the hull, bouncing away from the double-glazed polymer of the ob port.

"Can you see anybody?" Grant demanded loudly.

The wag hit a deep rut in the ground, and only Brigid's safety harness kept her in her seat. "No," she replied breathlessly.

Despite the noise of the explosions, Grant was aware that all the fire seemed to be herding them, driving them in a certain direction. He also noticed a distinct lack of small-arms fire being directed at them, so their attackers knew nothing less than high-caliber AP rounds could hope to do more than nick the heavy metal planking.

He glimpsed a small object arcing out of the sky, and a few seconds later a red-yellow bouquet of flame bloomed nearly beneath the wag. The deck shuddered, and the dulled thunder of the detonation made both Brigid and him wince.

"Now the bastards are using grens!" Grant snapped. But the grenade did nothing to impede the massive vehicle's progress.

The wag's prow sideswiped a support post. Grant lurched violently in his seat, his chest slamming into the steering wheel with breath-robbing force, but he

kept his foot on the gas pedal. Grant turned the wheel back and forth, causing the vehicle to yaw and careen and make an exceptionally difficult target. The treads scoured the ground, hurling sprays of gravel and pulverized dirt in arching plumes. The streams of dust and grit hung in the air, making a smoke screen of sorts.

Grant spun the wheel hard to the left. The C2VI rocketed through a wide break in a wall, shearing off jagged edges with nerve-scratching screeches. They found themselves in a wide courtyard, surrounded on all four sides by the crumbling remains of walls. None of them appeared too much over fifteen feet tall. Judging by the number of verdigris-eaten brass handrails scattered around, he figured they were in what was left of a casino's gaming room.

Cutting the wheel sharply to the right, he stomped hard on the brakes at the same time. The resulting skid wasn't controlled, so the rear end slewed around in a wide arc. A wave of gravelly soil crested from beneath it. The wag clanked to a halt facing the breach in the wall by which they had entered.

Grant felt the pressure of Brigid's eyes on him, and he curtly answered her unasked question. "This place is halfway defensible. Gives the roof blaster a 360 field of fire. Only one way in by foot." He nodded toward the split in the wall. "It's not wide enough to let more than three men in at a time."

To his mild surprise, Brigid said approvingly, "We'll make them come to us rather than cooperate with the way they wanted us to go, right?"

Grant gave her a wry, half smile. "Right. We'll make a Mag of you yet."

Her return smile was jittery and sour. "Not in this lifetime."

Grant gave orders over the comm link for the warriors to stand by their stations. They weren't to fire until they acquired definite targets and then they were to be circumspect with their ammo. He kept his attention focused on the breach in the wall, expecting a rocket or a gren to come through. Brigid watched the rift and the tops of the walls around them. With muscles tensed and pulses racing, they waited, but nothing happened.

Sky Dog appeared in the compartment, bending between the seats, peering through the ob port. "Red Quill in the turret has spotted movement all around on the other side of the walls. We're being surrounded. They may think we're boxed in."

Grant nodded brusquely. "What about wags?"

Sky Dog's reply was grim. "Three, maybe four on the outer perimeter. Red Quill is pretty sure they're Sandcats."

Grant released his breath in a profanity-seasoned sigh. "So am I. Only Mags have this kind of firepower."

"Mags from where, though?" Brigid asked.

"I don't think it matters where they hang their helmets," Sky Dog retorted bleakly. "They're all the same—butchering coldhearts."

When Grant swiveled his head to regard him with

a challenging stare, the shaman added hastily, "Present company excluded, of course."

Grant acknowledged the comment with a wry smile. "Thanks. Well, Titano can take the Cats if it comes down to a head-to-head. But the Mags are armed with LAWs and probably gren launchers. A lucky shot could knock us off our tracks."

Brigid opened her mouth to speak when, with a rattling roar, the RPK in the roof turret opened up. On the rim of a wall a little to their left they saw pulverized concrete explode, flinging up fountains of grit. She caught only the briefest glimpse of a dark figure falling back out of sight. The autoblaster fell silent.

"Good," Grant grunted. "He didn't have to be reminded not to hose ammo around like it was water."

"We're fast learners," Sky Dog remarked dryly. "We've had to be."

They waited in silence again. Because of the steady, full-throated throb of the engine, they could hear nothing from the outside.

After a few minutes, Brigid asked, "Do you think they'll wait us out, hope we'll run out of fuel?"

Grant considered the possibility for a thoughtful moment, then shook his head. "I doubt that's their strategy. As far as they know, we have a full tank. For them to camp out and wait for that to happen requires a hell of a lot more patience than Mags are trained to have." His big hands clenched and unclenched around the steering. "No, they'll make a move before very long. More than likely, they'll start with a gren barrage. While we're distracted by that, an assault force will—"

He broke off, leaning forward, gazing intently out the port. His "What the fuck?" was a hoarse whisper of incredulity.

Following his stare, Brigid and Sky Dog both uttered wordless murmurs of surprise. On the other side of the wall breach, a strip of white cloth waved up and down, back and forth. All three people gazed at the white flag, astonished into speechlessness.

Brigid was the first to recover her voice. "Are they calling a truce? Or are they surrendering?" Her tone was heavy with suspicion.

"They want to parley," Sky Dog interjected. "Only Wankan Tankan, the Great Spirit, knows about what."

Grant knuckled his chin contemplatively, staring with narrowed eyes at the flapping, makeshift flag. He sat completely still for a long, stretched-out tick of time. Then he unbuckled the seat harness and arose, saying in a deliberate tone, "Let's find out."

Although Brigid protested his leaving the safety of the war wag, Grant pointed out that Magistrates as a general rule didn't employ subterfuge to achieve an objective. If they wanted to chill him, they wouldn't try to lure him out in the open to do it in full view of the unknown opposition aboard the vehicle.

"Besides," he argued, "with all the weapons trained on the wall, they'll know whatever happens to me will happen to them."

Grant walked the length of the vehicle toward the

rear hatch, pausing only long enough to strap his bolstered Sin Eater to his forearm. The big-bore hand-blaster was less than fourteen inches in length. The magazine carried twenty 9 mm rounds, and the stock folded down when it was bolstered along his arm. Actuators attached to the weapon popped the Sin Eater down into Grant's waiting hand when he flexed his tendons in the right sequence, putting it there in an eyeblink. There was no trigger guard, and when the firing stud came in contact with his finger, it would fire immediately.

At Brigid's urging, he attached a trans-comm to a shoulder epaulet on his shirt and opened the frequency so she could overhear what was said outside. He walked along the side of the C2VI and took up position directly in front of the vehicle, making sure he stood between the forward mounted missile pods.

Arms folded across his broad chest, he kept his face a neutral, expressionless ebony mask. Women sometimes confused him, mutants and hybrids disturbed him, but he knew how to deal with Magistrates. If they saw even a glimmer of fear in his eyes, so much as a twitch of apprehension on his face, the Mags would react like predators scenting fresh-spilled blood.

A black silhouette appeared in the breach, arms held wide, the white flag gripped in the left hand. An uninfected male voice called, "I'd like to come in."

Like Grant's expression, the man's tone was of carefully calculated neutrality.

"Who's stopping you?" Grant called back.

The figure shifted between the edges of the split and then stepped into the courtyard. Illuminated by the C2VI's headlights, he resembled a statue sculpted from obsidian, somehow given life and movement. The light struck dim highlights on the molded chest piece and shoulder pad. His face was concealed by a black helmet except for his mouth and chin. A red-tinted visor masked his eyes. His tread was measured, deliberate and menacing.

Grant appeared to be unmoved by the man's appearance, but he felt a slight chill. Part of the effect of a Magistrate's polycarbonate body armor was psychological, to instill fear in not just the criminal but in everyone. Glinting dully on the molded left pectoral was the red duty badge, a stylized scales of justice, superimposed over a nine-spoked wheel. The badge symbolized the Magistrate oath of keeping the wheels of justice turning in the nine baronies. As Grant knew, more often than not the wheels ground over the innocent and the guilty alike.

The electrochemical polymer of the helmet's visor was connected to a passive night sight that intensified ambient light to permit one-color night vision. The tiny image enhancer sensor mounted on the forehead did not emit detectable rays, though its range was only twenty-five feet, even on a fairly clear night with strong moonlight.

Looking at the man, Grant realized again how the design of the Magistrate armor was more than functional; it was symbolic. The figure approaching him,

though smaller than him, looked somehow strong, fierce and implacable.

When a man concealed his face and body beneath the Magistrate black, he became a fearsome figure, the anonymity adding to the mystique. There was another reason behind the helmet, the armor, and it was a reason all Magistrates knew but never spoke of openly. When a man put on the armor, he was symbolically surrendering his identity in order to serve a cause of greater import than a mere individual life.

Grant's father had chosen to smother his identity, as had his father before him. For that matter, all current Magistrates, the third generation, had exchanged personal hopes, dreams and desires for a life of service, in order to bring a degree of order to the anarchic madness of postnuclear America.

The Mag marched fearlessly up to Grant and halted ten feet away. He spread his arms, and even though a Sin Eater was snugged in its holster, the gesture let Grant know he had no intention of unleashing it. The two men faced each other in silent surmise for a long moment. Finally, the black-armored man asked, "Mind if I take off this fucking helmet? I've been wearing it for the last three hours, and I'm sweating like a swampie slut in heat."

Grant hadn't heard the vulgar simile in a long time, not since his own early days in Cobaltville's Mag Division. He tried but was unable to completely repress a smile. "Go ahead," he said. "I used to get heat rash behind my ears myself."

Moving with slow deliberation, the man undid the

underjaw lock catch and tugged the helmet up and off his head. Grant felt a faint twinge of surprise. The Mag was much younger than he'd expected, probably less than twenty-five years old. His smooth, boyish face was clean-shaved and bore no scars. His short, crisp black hair was of regulation length, and was neatly parted on the right. His brown eyes didn't possess the gimlet hard glint of a man who had seen and participated in so much violence he couldn't conceive of solving a problem without a blaster or bludgeon.

"I'm Ramirez," the man stated matter-of-factly. "Commander of this unit."

"Unit from where?" asked Grant.

"We're a combined force, from Snakefish and Sharpeville. I'm from Snakefish."

Grant eyed him skeptically. "Sharpeville is way the hell and gone across the country, up around Delaware. What are Mags from Sharpeville doing in Nevada?"

In lieu of a shrug, Ramirez revolved his helmet between his black-gloved hands. "The same thing as you, I imagine—penetration of Area 51."

GRANT'S MIND WHEELED with conjecture, skepticism and a thick layer of outright suspicion. Ramirez seemed to know the kind of thoughts spinning through Grant's head and he said nothing more, as if allowing the big man time to process it all.

Grant gave the younger man a slit-eyed stare, and Ramirez met it unblinkingly. After a few moments of trying to stare each other down, the Mag said blandly, "Your turn."

"My turn for what?"

"To either confirm what I just said or waste my time denying it."

Grant crooked an eyebrow at him. "You're pretty sure of yourself, letting your mission slip to a stranger you just met in the Outlands."

A smile tugged at the corners of Ramirez's lips. "We've never met, but I know who you are, Grant. I've heard about you. Hell, every Mag in every division in every ville has heard about you and seen your pix."

He ran a finger over his upper lip. "Of course, the mustache is a new addition. I guess you decided to buck the personal-appearance code on top of turning renegade."

Grant's stomach muscles fluttered in barely leashed anger. Forcing a note of nonchalance into his voice, he replied, "You know, after hearing that term applied to me and my friends a time or two, I finally looked it up. A renegade is someone who betrays a cause or a faith or a group of people who trusted him. I don't figure that's me."

"Really?" Ramirez inquired, striving to imitate Grant's casual tone. "Then who would it be?"

"Off the top of my head, I guess it would be the barons."

Ramirez nodded as if he weren't at all surprised by the answer. "I didn't call this truce so we could hammer out our political differences. Especially not when our respective goals are so similar."

"I'm listening, son."

Ramirez finally displayed a flicker of emotion other than detached superiority. Anger glittered in his eyes at Grant's patronizing attitude and use of the word *son*. He said sternly, "I don't have the time to waste in a firefight with you. And to be honest, it looks like it would take more ordnance than we can spare to stop that juggernaut of yours. And even if we could spare it, we'd probably suffer casualties."

"No 'probably' about it," Grant interjected.

"All right," Ramirez snapped. "I don't know why you're going to Area 51, but I'm told that's your destination. You don't know why we're going there. So instead of us standing around trying to piss on each other's feet, let's talk some truth."

Grant made a studied show of pondering the young man's proposal. In reality, he was consumed with curiosity, and if Ramirez had shown any reluctance to come clean with him, Grant would have taken him prisoner and beaten the whys and wherefores out of him. But he didn't want to appear too eager.

"You said you were told Area 51 was our destination?" he inquired.

Ramirez nodded. "Yeah, that's right."

"Who told you?"

A lazy smile played over the young man's lips. "Let's talk about it."

"Then do it."

"Not here." Ramirez gestured toward the wall. "Out there."

Faintly, even over the steady rumble of the MCP's engine, Grant heard Brigid's voice raised in protest filter over the trans-comm. He didn't need to hear her objections; he had plenty of them himself. Grant snorted in derision and demanded, "When you heard I was going to Area 51, did you also hear I was

stupe?"

Ramirez frowned. 'If the object was to simply chill you, it would've been done by now. I don't have all the answers to the questions you're likely to ask. I'm just the messenger.'

"Who has the answers?"

Wordlessly, Ramirez again waved toward the split in the wall and arched his eyebrows quizzically. Grant met his gaze and said into the trans-comm, "If you want to be part of this, come on out and join us."

Ramirez's eyes darted up toward the ob port of the C2VI, but the cockpit was darkened, and he couldn't see who might be there. Grant asked, "You don't mind if I bring someone else to evaluate your idea of truth, do you?"

"Hey, invite anybody you want. Your whole crew even. How many is that now?"

Grant smiled dourly. "You'll understand if I decline to answer."

Ramirez nodded hi a mocking imitation of a gracious bow. In spite of himself, Grant felt a growing admiration for the young man. His easygoing, insouciant manner and ready wit was in marked contrast

to most hard-contact Mag personalities. In some ways, Ramirez reminded him of Kane, especially when his friend was about the same age.

Within a minute Brigid came walking up with her characteristic mannish stride. A mini-Uzi hung from a strap on her right shoulder, and an Iver Johnson automatic handblaster was snugged in a cross-draw holster above her left hip. When she stood beside Grant, Ramirez's eyes flicked up and down her form appreciatively. "Are there any more like you inside?" he asked with a grin. "If so, I just may consider turning renegade myself."

Brigid regarded him dispassionately, her emerald eyes cold. "My name is Baptiste."

"Brigid Baptiste, isn't it? Former archivist in the Cobaltville Historical Division and presently a condemned criminal." Ramirez gestured grandly toward the wall. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Brigid. Now, if we may move this along..."

Grant imitated his gesture with an exaggerated sweep of his left arm. "After you...son."

Ramirez didn't appear to be offended. If anything, his grin widened. He sauntered casually toward the breach. Brigid murmured disdainfully, "He thinks he's quite the charmer, doesn't he?"

"Compared to most Mags," Grant side-mouthed in response, "he is."

As they followed the young man, Grant undipped the trans-comm from his shut. "You there, Sky Dog?"

"Here."

"You might as well shut down the engine. I think we're here for the night."

The shaman's reply was tense. "And how long are we supposed to wait for you, buttoned up in here?"

"If you don't hear from us in one hour," Grant said, "then get Titano moving and flatten anybody in your path."

"My sentiments exactly," retorted Sky Dog. Imitating Brigid's comment and cadence of speech of less than an hour before, he added in a sarcastic drawl, "Viva Las Vegas."

Not bothering to ask the meaning of the cryptic sign-off, Grant thumbed the plastic cover closed and slipped the comm unit into a pants pocket. He followed Ramirez through the rift in the wall, Brigid walking closely behind him. On the other side, arrayed in a semicircle, were four Sandcats and at least two dozen men in Magistrate black.

Less than half the size of the C2VI, the Sandcats had originally been built to serve as FAVs, Fast Attack Vehicles, rather than as a means of long-distance ground transportation. A pair of flat, retractable tracks supported the vehicle's low-slung, blunt-lined chassis. An armored topside gun turret concealed a pair of USMG-73 heavy machine guns. The Cat's armor was composed of a ceramic-armaglass bond, shielded against both intense and ambient radiation. It was therefore lighter in weight and mass than the C2VTs armor but did not offer the same degree of penetration protection. However, the lesser weight made the Cat faster and far more maneuverable than the war wag.

Ramirez strode past the Magistrates, saying, "Stand down, stand down."

Brigid and Grant affected to ignore the men in the black exoskeletons although their flesh prickled with tension. Grant closed the gap between himself and Ramirez. "You said you were told Area 51 was our destination?"

"That's what I was told," the man responded curtly.

"Who told you that?"

Ramirez didn't answer until he reached the rear end of a Cat. The hatch hung open, and bowing deferentially toward the interior, he said, "He did."

Brigid and Grant squinted toward the two figures within. One was lounging across a couple of the folded-down jump seats, head propped up on a hand. He had close-cropped blond hair, broad shoulders and chilling milky blue eyes the color of mountain melt-water. His eyes were very large, shadowed by the sweeping supraorbital ridges characteristic of hybrids. His cheekbones and chin were very prominent, his pursed mouth little more than a slit.

His hair possessed a feathery, duck-down texture. His cranium was very high and smooth, his ears small and set very low on his head. Despite the bulky camouflage jacket and pants he wore, the man's body was excessively slender, and he didn't look to be more than five and a half feet tall. A bright blue scarf was wound around his slim neck.

The figure on the deck stirred, lifted his shaved head from a satin pillow and gazed at them specula-

lively with dark eyes. He wore a leather harness and velvet loincloth. The harness displayed his exceptionally well developed upper body. His torso looked to be all muscle from the neck down to his hips.

Whereas the harness showed off his bulging biceps and platter-sized pectorals, the loincloth did nothing to disguise his shriveled, atrophied legs. They stretched out behind him like flaccid, flesh-colored

stockings half-filled with mud.

In a musical contralto voice, the blond man said, "Mr. Grant, Miss Baptiste, I'm very happy to meet you. This is my high councillor, Crawler. I am Baron Sharpe. You may call me 'my lord.'"

Chapter 9

Banks lay on an examination bed, hands clasped over his stomach, his respiration steady and regular. The overhead lights in the infirmary had been dimmed to a comforting, intimate dusk.

"Just try to relax, friend Banks," Lakesh said, reaching into a pouch on his bodysuit and removing a silver fountain pen. He pitched his voice to a low, soothing level.

"I've never been sold on the concept of telepathic communication," DeFore said skeptically from her place near the foot of the bed.

"It's happened to us before," Lakesh retorted testily, annoyed by the interruption. "Balam used Banks as a channel of communication on two previous occasions. Kane received a psionic summons and a plea for help from Fand halfway across the world."

"So he told us," the medic replied with an edge in her voice. "But it was a purely subjective interpretation, like the time you hypnotized Kane to recall details of a parallel world. What did you call them— casements?"

"Actually," Lakesh corrected her, "Balam called them casements. As for Fand's contact with Kane, Grant pretty much corroborated what he reported."

DeFore's full lips pursed as if she tasted something exceptionally sour. "I don't see how you can put any stock in information derived from hypnotic regression."

"It's all information, isn't it?" Lakesh challenged. "Objective, subjective, secondhand, even third-party rumors floating in the subconscious. It's up to us to distill it all down and make some sense of it."

"You're making my point for me," DeFore shot back. "You're filtering all that information through individual perceptions. What you're left with is a diluted and contaminated subjective viewpoint."

"Contaminated?" Banks repeated in puzzlement, raising his head from the pillow.

DeFore nodded. "Exactly. You were in such close proximity with Balam for so long it's only natural your unconscious would provide dream imagery of him."

"But why now?" Banks demanded. "And why so many dreams?"

"You may have been dreaming about him for a long time. They just never penetrated your conscious mind. Once they did, it's only logical you'd experience serial dreams with him as the central character."

Banks frowned uncertainly. "You could be right. But what if they aren't dreams of Balam, but really him trying to tell me something? If I'm put in a trance, he might possess my mind again."

Lakesh smiled down at him encouragingly. "Para-psychologists did find that subjects tended to score

higher on ESP tests when they were hypnotized, so

if Balam is trying to communicate with you, you'll be more susceptible after I induce a hypnagogic state."

"Somehow," Banks said dryly, "that doesn't make me feel a whole lot better."

"You never feared Balam when you believed he was an extraterrestrial, did you?" asked Lakesh. "Now that you know he's as much of a native Terran as you—if sprouted by a different branch on the evolutionary tree—you should feel even less trepidation."

Banks had served as Balam's warder and keeper for more than three years. Over the course of the creature's captivity, the young man had developed a bond, even a fondness for him. All of them had been surprised to learn that not only had Balam understood Banks's feelings, but he also actually appreciated his kindnesses.

The initial reaction of almost everyone else in the redoubt who came in close contact with the entity was a primal, mindless urge to kill him. Lakesh had claimed at the time that the xenophobic response was quite natural and human, but Banks had always been secretly offended by that statement. He felt he was as human as anyone else in Cerberus, and he didn't experience those murderous impulses. He found Balam far more interesting than frightening, despite the creature's great psi powers.

Putting his head on the pillow, Banks said calmly, "I'm not really afraid. Just a little nervous, that's all."

Lakesh nodded. "Completely understandable. But hypnosis—or to be precise, heterohypnosis—is nothing to be afraid of. The common belief that in heterohypnosis the subject falls under the control of the hypnotist is completely unfounded. I'll only be acting as your guide."

The old man held the pen by thumb and forefinger, moving it back and forth before Banks's face. "Now please follow the pen with your eyes and listen to the sound of my voice."

Lakesh slowly waved the pen as if it were the needle of a metronome. Banks flicked his eyes slowly from right to left.

"Concentrate on the pen," Lakesh said, his reedy voice softened to a whisper.

The dim light glinted off the pen, causing it to sparkle with silver highlights.

"You're relaxing, sinking into a pleasant state of mind. Listen to the sound of my voice. Don't think about anything else."

Slowly, Banks's eyelids fluttered, then closed.

"That's it, friend Banks. Relax and we'll learn what secrets your memory has been hiding from your conscious mind. We will make manifest what has been hidden."

Banks's breathing deepened, his chest rising and falling slowly.

"Be at ease," Lakesh whispered. "Remember, my friend."

The young man's face became slack and his lips parted slightly.

DeFore eyed him curiously. "Is he under?"

"He's under." Lakesh stepped back from Banks and put the pen back in his pocket.

"That seemed awfully fast," DeFore observed dubiously.

Lakesh shrugged. "He's susceptible. I expected that."

The old man leaned over the head of the bed and said, "Friend Banks, I want you tell me about your dreams...tell me what you see in them, what you hear, what you feel."

Banks's lips stirred and he murmured fitfully. "Dreams..."

"Yes, your dreams...those in which you see Balam."

In a hoarse, scratchy whisper, Banks said, "Dreams they not. Speak try him while sleep. Dreams not they."

Lakesh listened, feeling the short hairs on his nape tingle and lift. He straightened, his heart pounding hard in his chest, his throat constricting.

'What's wrong?' DeFore demanded. 'Why is he talking like that?'

Banks's voice grew stronger, louder. "Not dreams they not are. Are not. They are not dreams."

He spoke slowly, as if he were groping his way around verbal communication, trying to understand the rules of grammar and syntax. Lakesh had witnessed the phenomenon before. Trying to control the frightened fascination rising in him, Lakesh said, "I

don't believe we're hearing Banks. I think Balam is trying to speak through him."

DeFore elbowed Lakesh aside, teaching for Banks's hands. The young man did not react; the neutral expression on his face remained unaltered.

Lakesh said in an urgent whisper, "Friend Banks, allow Balam to come through. Let him speak."

Banks shivered uncontrollably, his hands clenching into fists. His legs jerked as if they had been subjected to a jolt of electrical current. His breath tore raggedly through his throat.

"Make yourself receptive," Lakesh crooned. "Welcome him."

Banks's lips compressed and his forehead acquired deep vertical creases. He uttered a faint groaning sound.

"You're pushing him too hard," DeFore protested.

"Perhaps so," Lakesh replied. "But if Balam is attempting to impart some information to us, it must be exceptionally important."

DeFore grimaced, obviously displeased.

"Friend Banks," continued Lakesh, "don't be afraid. Let Balam in, share your perceptions with him, your language resources."

A prolonged shudder shook the young man's body. A dew of perspiration filmed his forehead, and he uttered a faint, aspirated cry. Tendons stood out in sharp relief on his neck. His arms flailed, his feet kicked.

"He's having a seizure!" DeFore exclaimed.

Lakesh didn't reply. He watched as the medic

struggled to restrain the convulsing Banks, to hold him down on the bed. She cast a half fearful, half angry glance Lakesh's way. "Help me, goddammit!"

Lakesh didn't move. DeFore grabbed Banks by his chin, trying to prise his jaws apart. "Get me a towel," she snapped breathlessly. "Roll it up tight or he may swallow his tongue."

Clearing his throat, striving to sound calm and clinical, Lakesh said, "Dr. DeFore, your ministrations are unnecessary. This will pass."

Eyes bright with worry, she demanded impatiently, "How the hell do you know?"

"I've seen this before. It's not a new experience to friend Banks, either."

Banks's body abruptly went slack under DeFore's hands, all of the tension leaving his muscles at once. He sank back down on the bed, a heavy sigh issuing from between his lips.

Grasping his wrist, DeFore timed his pulse, then placed a forefinger at the base of his throat. "His heart rate is slowing, regulating," she said. Lines of stress deepening around her nose and mouth, DeFore released Banks and stepped away from him. "I don't know much about hypnosis, but I do know you're the only one who can bring him out of the state or trance or whatever he's in."

Lakesh leaned close to Banks. "Can you hear me? Can you understand me?"

The young man's hands made aimless, jerking motions. His eyes opened, wide and staring. His normally soft brown eyes now glittered with hard, almost

inner light. He swept Lakesh with a dispassionate gaze.

"Mohandas Lakesh Singh," he said in a formal voice. "I have been attempting to reach you for some time now."

LAKESH MET those dark eyes and felt his flesh prickle despite having witnessed the phenomenon before. Banks sat up stiffly, stretching his arms out and then over his head. He examined his hands, wiggling the fingers as if his limbs were new and unfamiliar.

"Balam?" Lakesh finally managed to husk out

Banks nodded, a single jerk of the head. Lakesh fancied he could glimpse Balam's huge, slanted black eyes superimposed over those of Banks.

In a mild tone, Banks-Balam said. "When you placed this man in a receptive mental state, I was finally able to achieve a clear channel of communication. Reaching out to his mind when he slept was not particularly efficient and much time was lost. I would have preferred to send emissaries rather than use this man in such a fashion."

Lakesh couldn't respond for a long moment, overwhelmed once again by the knowledge that with Balam almost anything was possible—even speaking to him through the lips of Banks and seeing him through his eyes. DeFore had drawn away from both men, staring in dumbfounded silence.

Nervously, Lakesh asked, "Are you in Tibet? Is that why you couldn't send someone?"

"No," replied Banks-Balam flatly. "The reason is

much more prosaic than that. I could not dispatch emissaries because of the way you have encrypted the quantum interphase inducer autosequence codes."

Long ago Lakesh altered the modulations of the Cerberus mat-trans gateway so the transmissions were untraceable back to their point of origin. He had taken a further security precaution by adjusting the unit's matter-stream harmonics so they would be slightly out of phase with other gateways in other places. The admission that some things were beyond even Balam's abilities made Lakesh feel better.

DeFore coughed and ventured apprehensively, "So, wherever you are you have access to a gateway?"

Banks-Balam gave her an expressionless, over-the-shoulder glance. "That is contraindicated by my first statement."

He returned his attention to Lakesh. "This form of communication places a strain both on myself and this vessel, so I must by necessity be brief. Mohandas Lakesh Singh, your aid is required to complete a task that will change the destiny of humanity. To this end, you must join me."

"Join you where? In Tibet?"

"You will learn where if you agree. You must provide me with your gateway's destination lock code so I may send emissaries. They will explain."

Lakesh felt his eyebrows crawl toward his hairline, even above the rims of his spectacles. "What you ask cannot be lightly done."

"Neither is the task I have set for myself, Mohan-

das Lakesh Singh. If you mean to honor your vow of atoning for your sins, to devote what remains of your life to freeing your kind from the yoke of baronial slavery, then you will do as I bid. Otherwise—"

Banks's body suddenly bent hi the middle as if he were suffering from a stomach cramp. Sweat rivered down his face. "The link is weakening, and it must break soon or I will risk damaging this vessel."

His voice became hoarse and husky. "I was content to remain a prisoner here for more than three years. I waited until events I had extrapolated finally occurred. Then I left your custody and was free to put my own plans into motion...plans to benefit not just humanity but the hybrids of my blood and yours."

Lakesh heard the sense of urgency and conviction behind the words. "What is it you want me to do?" he

demanded.

Banks-Balam blinked and wiped at the perspiration on his face with a trembling hand. "Agree to help me."

"How do we know this isn't a trick?" DeFore asked sharply. "A trap? You've lied to us before. Your kind lied to the entire human race for thousands of years!" The last was an accusation, full of bitter anger.

"What you interpreted as falsehoods we saw as learning tools, tests of perception and intelligence." Banks-Balam's breath came in short, labored rasps. "But I am not here to debate my folk's interaction with yours. I must have your answer, Mohandas La-

kesh Singh. Otherwise, events will proceed without you, and you will have forfeited your right to effect changes for the sake of humankind.

"Once you said, 'As history clearly shows, if you do not create your own reality, someone else is going to create it for you. I allowed that to happen, and I do not like the reality I got. Now, as the end of my life approaches, all I want is to enter the house of my deity justified.'"

Lakesh bit back a startled, profane remark. He had indeed spoken those words but not to anyone in the infirmary. He had addressed them to Brigid, Kane, Domi and Grant on the day of their arrival at the redoubt over a year before. They were in his private office at the time.

"Here now is your opportunity, Mohandas Lakesh Singh." Banks-Balam spoke in a barely audible, strained whisper. "Perhaps your final opportunity to create a new reality and to justify yourself to your deity."

Lakesh swallowed hard, knotted his fists, unknotted them and studiously avoided looking in DeFore's direction. He took a deep breath and blurted, "Six-eight-eight-two.'"

"Lakesh!" DeFore shrieked in a near panic.

Banks's body slumped, a harsh gasp tearing from his throat. He shook violently, then fell onto his side on the bed. DeFore went to him, putting a hand under the back of his head. His sweat-damp face glistened in the dim light, and his eyes stared around unfo-cusedly. His first word was a pained croak. "Water."

While DeFore helped Banks sit up, Lakesh went to the sink and filled a glass from the faucet. His extreme thirst did not come as a surprise to Lakesh, since it was a hallmark side effect of channeling or medium-ship. Nor was he particularly surprised that Banks had come out of the hypnotic state on his own. Balam had wrested control of the session away from him from afar, and that dismayed him profoundly.

Lakesh handed the glass to Banks, who brought it to his lips, tilting his head back. He swallowed mouthful after mouthful, gulping noisily. DeFore glared at Lakesh, not only in reproach but outright fury. "You've compromised the security of Cerberus by what you did. An army of hybrids can jump in here every time the gateway's transit lines are open."

Banks lowered the glass, shaking his head. "I didn't sense any deceit on Balam's part." Wincing, he touched the left side of his head.

"Would you have been able to sense it?" DeFore challenged. "You've just been possessed. How you

can be sure of anything?"

"I wasn't possessed," Banks said defensively. "Balam asked for my permission to speak through me and I gave it, just like the last time."

"The last time he was right here in the redoubt," DeFore argued, her voice rising, hitting a high pitch of anger. "God only knows where he is now or what he has planned!"

She fixed her dark gaze on Lakesh. "I used to think Kane was the untrustworthy one because of all the risks he took. You've done far more than put us at risk. You've betrayed us!"

Sudden rage fountained up in Lakesh, but he tried not to let it register either on his face or in his voice when he declared, "I'm taking action."

Before he could say anything else, Dry's agitated voice blared over the wall trans-comm. "Incoming jumper! There's no origin-point signature!"

The comm was voice activated, so Lakesh called, "Keep calm. I'll be right there."

As he turned to leave the infirmary, DeFore demanded, "What about a security detail?"

Lakesh waved her question away. "If all Balam said was subterfuge, part of a master plan to occupy Cerberus, then a handful of us standing around the jump chamber with blasters won't make much difference—not with the resources he can throw against us."

He went down the main corridor and into the ops center. From the main control console, Bry swung his copper-curled head in his direction. "It's cycling through a materialization."

Lakesh strode toward the anteroom that held the mat-trans chamber. He murmured, "Didn't take the emissaries long to be sent on their way."

He knew his comment was essentially irrelevant. Mat-trans jumping occasionally resulted in minor temporal anomalies like arriving at a destination three seconds before the origin jump-initiator had actually engaged. Since the nature of time could not be measured or accurately perceived in the quantum stream,

£ the brief temporal dilation was the primary reason

£ Overproject Whisper's Operation Chronos had used

| reconfigured gateway units in their time-traveling ex-

periments.

Lakesh stood in the doorway to the anteroom, gazing at the six-sided jump chamber. It exuded a sound like a fierce rushing wind that grew louder and louder. Bright lights flashed behind the eight-foot-tall slabs of brown-hued armaglass, swelling hi intensity and in tandem with the hurricane noise. Within seconds, both the light and sound faded.

Lakesh waited, listening to the muffled whining of the interphase transition coils cycling down. Within

moments, he heard the clicking of solenoids, and the heavy chamber door swung open on its counterbalanced hinges. Mist swirled within the chamber, so thick he could see nothing. The vapor was a by-product of the process, a plasma wave form that only resembled fog. Thread-thin static-electricity discharges arced within the billowing mass.

Then two figures appeared in the open doorway, and Lakesh felt his neck muscles tighten and his eyes widen. He hadn't really imagined what Balam had meant by emissaries, but he had not expected the two people who stepped gracefully from the chamber. One was a small figure, about the size of a half-grown child. Since it was swathed in a hooded, satiny robe from toe to head, Lakesh couldn't be sure of the gender or even the species.

He experienced no such confusion about the second figure. The woman was tall and beautiful, with a flaw-

less complexion the hue of fine honey. Her long, straight hair, swept back from a high forehead and pronounced widow's peak, tumbled artlessly about her shoulders. It was so black as to be blue when the light caught it. The large, feline-slanted eyes above high, regal cheekbones looked almost the same color, but glints of violet swam in them. The mark of an aristocrat showed in her delicate features, with the arch of brows and her thin-bridged nose. Her face looked vaguely familiar to Lakesh, but he couldn't place in his memory where he might have seen it before.

A graceful swanlike neck led to a slender body encased in a strange uniform—high black boots, jodhpurs of a shiny black fabric, with an ebony satin tunic tailored to conform to the thrust of her full breasts. Emblazoned on the left sleeve was a familiar symbol. A thick-walled pyramid was worked in red thread, enclosing and partially bisected by three elongated but reversed triangles. Small disks topped each one, lending them a resemblance to round-hilted daggers. Once it had served as the unifying insignia of the Archon Directorate, and then was adopted by Over-project Excalibur, the Totality Concept's division devoted to genetic engineering.

In a mild, melodious, beautiful voice that stroked his nerve endings and sent shivers down his spine and then up again, the woman said, "Dr. Singh, it's good to see you again."

Lakesh was barely able to muster enough presence

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of mind to stammer, "A-again? We've met? I'm sure I'd remember you."

She smiled at him wanly. "The last time you saw me was at least twelve years ago, and then only from afar during a council of the nine barons at Front Royal. I was in a wheelchair."

Lakesh inhaled a sharp startled breath, dredging his memory and finally coming up with the only possible answer. The council the woman referred to was the only one he had ever attended, and other than Baron Beausoleil, he recalled only one other female there. Despising the tremor in his voice he asked, "Sloan? Not Dr. Erica van Sloan?"

The woman nodded. "One and the same. Before that meeting, we occasionally crossed paths hi the Anthill...nearly two hundred years ago."

Lakesh didn't reel or gasp, but he was glad he leaned against the door frame. The most ambitious Continuity of Government facility was codenamed the Anthill, so named because of its similarity in layout to an ant colony. He and the majority of Totality Concept scientists had been taken there days before the nuclear war. Many of them had spent the following century or so in cryogenic stasis.

He barely remembered Erica van Sloan from the Anthill, but that wasn't unusual. There were many people there and all of them seemed to have their own concerns. He recalled she had been attached not just to Operation Chronos but to the project overseer, Dr. Torrence Silas Burr.

Like Lakesh, she had been revived when the Pro-

gram of Unification had reached a certain stage. She was only one of several preholocaust humans, known as "freezies" in current vernacular, resurrected to serve the baronies. He tried but failed to reconcile the memory of the withered old hag hunched over in a wheelchair with the tall, vibrant, superbly built beauty who regarded him from the doorway.

Lakesh opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He made another attempt and finally managed to stammer, "How can this be?"

Erica van Sloan's sensual lips widened in a prideful smile. Gently, she pulled the small, hooded figure forward and tugged down the cowl. "This is my son."

Lakesh started. "Your son?"

The boy looked to be about ten years of age with a smooth, alabaster complexion. His thick hair was pure warm silver, framing his full-cheeked face like the edges of a summertime cloud. His big, long-lashed eyes seemed to shift with all colors and they were old eyes, at once wise and sad. In a soft voice he said, "Hello. My name is Sam. I'm happy to meet you, Dr. Singh. I've heard all about you, of course."

Erica van Sloan bent and whispered something in his ear. The boy nodded and declared, "My mother says for me to tell you it's an honor. I truly hope you'll join with us in charting a fresh course for the evolution of both the new and old human races."

The sound of the boy's voice touched off sweet vibrations somewhere deep inside of Lakesh. He was hungry to hear more of it. When Sam stepped forward

purposely and thrust out his right hand, Lakesh took it eagerly. He was so enthralled he didn't pay attention to the distinctly unchildlike strength in the clasp or the faint pattern of scales between his fingers.

Chapter 10

Rarely had Kane been surprised into speechlessness or paralyzed by shock. But his relief at hearing Domi's voice was so absolute, so overwhelming he couldn't move a muscle or utter a syllable. He remained in a crouch as Domi removed the flashlight beam from him and cast it on her face.

"It's me," she said simply.

Despite the eerie shadows cast by the light, there was no mistaking Domi's angular, hollow-cheeked face framed by a ragged mop of close-cut white hair. Her eyes gleamed like polished rubies on either side of

her thin-bridged nose. Her skin was the color of porcelain. She wore a gray coverall like his, but it bagged on her diminutive figure. The light glinted dully from the blued barrel of the Detonics Combat Master in her small right fist.

Kane rose to his full height, towering nearly a foot over the top of her head. "About time I got here?" he demanded, trying sound offended instead of relieved. "I should be telling you that. Where the hell have you been?"

Domi's full lips pursed in a sullen pout, then widened in a grin. "That's what I'm going to show you. C'mon, we don't have a lot of time."

She turned away, but Kane bent over the bodies of the guards, noting how the .45-caliber rounds had punched them both in the occipital areas of their heads. He plucked their blasters from lifeless fingers, swiftly examining them. The weapons were a matched pair of nickel-plated Mustang .380s. They were pocket guns and weren't designed to take very hot loads, but they were better than Shocksticks.

As he checked the magazines, Domi said impatiently, "You don't need those. Let's go."

Kane slipped one of the blasters into a pocket and turned to face her. The first giddy surge of relief that Domi was alive and apparently well was replaced by a rising tide of suspicion. "I'll be the judge of that, DomL. And you'd know that if you're the same Domi I know."

Her eyes slitted, veiled by snow-white lashes. "Huh?"

Coldly he replied, "For the last time, I don't know how many days I've been drugged, used, abused and manipulated. The only thing I heard about you was that you were in custody. For all I know you've been brainwashed and reconditioned, sent out as a stalking horse as part of some sick psych-war game to break me."

Domi regarded him silently, gravely for a long moment. Then she opened her mouth and allowed a torrent of raging, obscene invective to pour out. She called him a stupe bastard, she compared his brain with scalie fecal matter, she shrilly reminded him of the time he nearly killed them all with a crazy stunt

in New Mexico. Essentially she told him that if he expected her to prove herself to him, he'd have a long wait, especially with one of the .380s crammed sideways up his ass.

By the time she reached that stage in her tirade, Kane was convinced she was the Domi he knew. Stepping forward, he clapped a hand over her mouth, saying into her ear, "I stand corrected. I apologize."

Domi continued with her profane diatribe. Her lips writhed against the palm of his hand, and for a second he feared she might sink her teeth into the flesh. Instead she straggled to wrest away from his grasp. Kane held her tightly. "I'm sorry I doubted you, all right?"

The muffled rant stopped, and Kane carefully removed his hand. She glared up at him, crimson eyes seething. In a sibilant whisper, she spit, "I'm the one who should worry about you. I didn't spend the last two weeks fucking my brains out."

"That's not what I heard," he retorted. Before she could demand a clarification he said, "Two weeks? That's how long we've been here?"

She nodded stiffly, heeling around. "Talk as we go. I'm not waiting for you, so move fast, stud-boy."

Kane clenched his teeth at the term but fell into step beside her. They jogged down the corridor, the flashlight in Domi's hand illuminating their way. Her sensitive eyes were more efficient than Kane's in the gloom. She spoke as they ran, reverting to the abbreviated Outlands form of speech.

"Power in this place is comp controlled," she said

in a breathless whisper. "Shut down the circuit feed to this section but only for an hour. Lights come back on real soon."

Domi had never displayed any aptitude for technology more complicated than an on-off switch. "You arranged that?" Kane asked doubtfully.

She shook her head. "Friends did. They hid me, kept me safe."

Kane opened his mouth to voice another question, but Domi shushed him into silence. They came to a halt, and she cocked her head in an attitude of listening. Far down the black throat of the corridor came the murmur of voices, and a second later the bobbing, glowing dots of flashlights appeared.

"Shit!" Domi hissed, flicking off the flashlight. She took Kane's hand and broke into a run. "Hurry!"

Kane hated being rendered blind again. Skin crawling, he kept one hand on the wall as the girl dragged him through the impenetrable blackness. He had no idea how she knew where she was going, but she sprinted directly toward the lights. Kane counted four of them, shining like distant moons.

The fear of recapture rose in him again, and he started to slow, tugging on her hand. Domi halted so suddenly he nearly trod on her heels. "Here."

Cupping his hand over the Nighthawk microlight around his wrist, Kane turned it on and glimpsed the metal frame of an open ventilation grille about four feet over his head.

"You first," she whispered. "Be quiet."

He turned the light off, fixed the vent's position in

his mind and backed off a few feet. He ran forward on the balls of his feet and jumped. His outstretched hands caught the lip, and his fingers tried to secure a hold on the slick sheet-metal sheathing. He drew himself upward, inch by inch, his arms trembling. Silently he cursed the weakness his two weeks of captivity had inflicted on him.

Domi made a stirrup with her linked hands and boosted him up by his feet. He managed *to* squirm his way into the opening. The ductwork was larger than the lift shaft, but not by much. At least it was on the horizontal plane. After he crawled forward a yard or two, Domi leaped up and, with *the* effortless agility of a monkey, hauled her small body into the opening. Grant had commented once or twice on how nimble Domi could be, and Kane couldn't help but wonder about the variations to which she might have put her acrobatic prowess to use.

Groping behind her, Domi pulled the grille closed and they lay silently in the shaft, waiting for the people in the corridor to pass by. Inside of a minute, slits of light shone through the grille and they heard the padding of rubber-soled shoes.

"I swore I heard shots," a man's tense voice said.

The response was a mumble, and the men passed out of Kane's range of hearing. He started to crawl forward, but Domi laid a warning hand on his ankle. He didn't move for a count of thirty, then the girl whispered, "Let me take the lead."

Kane lay flat as Domi wriggled and crawled over his prone body, her head bumping the roof of the shaft once or twice. He repressed a bleak grin. Under other circumstances, he would have enjoyed her ophidian motions.

When she slid into the shaft ahead of him, she turned on the flashlight and said, "Follow me."

She pulled herself along on her elbows, and Kane followed suit. Within ten feet the access shaft angled straight up. Domi crawled up, bracing her back against the side with her elbows extended in front of her, shoving her way up with her feet. Taking a deep breath, Kane mimicked her movements. It didn't take long before his overworked muscles screamed with pain. His heart pounded and he was drenched in a sudden sweat. He found himself wishing the power would come back on so the air-conditioning system could kick in.

Domi's impatient voice floated down from above him. "Can't you climb any faster?"

Kane didn't have the breath to either answer her or swear at her, so he tried to divorce himself from the pain of kicking and elbowing his way up the ductwork, taking advantage of the adrenaline speeding through his system.

The shaft bent again twenty feet up, stretching out horizontally. It also narrowed and was barely passable even by Domi. Kane, with a panting curse, wormed his way up, kicked with both feet and jackknifed up into the opening. He collapsed facedown, his breath steaming against the metal.

Domi nudged him with a foot. "Rest later. Almost there."

Kane lifted his head, and by the glow of Domi's flashlight saw a mesh screen about six feet ahead. "We'd fucking well better be," he croaked.

Squirming forward, Domi pushed against the screen and it swung open on tiny hinges. Kane caught glimpses of hands reaching up to help her out of the shaft. He slithered after her, wheezing and panting, half blinded by the perspiration flowing into his eyes. He felt strong hands close around his wrists and forearms and tug him out of the ductwork, steadying him as they lowered him to the floor.

Clearing his vision with a swipe of his hand, he saw tables and chairs scattered around the room, and the looming bulk of old vending machines. He guessed he was in a galley. He smelled a tantalizing odor like bean-and-bacon soup, and his belly rumbled in reaction. At the same time, he became aware of a number of presences in the gloom, but because of the poor illumination, he could barely make them out.

"The revolution has officially started," a man's voice said quietly.

Kane turned, and by the glow of a flashlight saw Maddock standing behind him, beneath the vent. Then the lights came on, after a fashion.

THERE WAS NO NEED to squint or shade his eyes. The light strips in the ceiling shed a shadowed, diffuse light, as if he wore a cap with a long bill pulled down over his forehead. The illumination was barely brighter than that provided by the flashlights, and once his vision adjusted, Kane saw why.

He was aware of small, pale, graceful shapes shifting soundlessly in the shadows, and Kane caught glimpses of their overlarge craniums. The optic nerves of hybrids' eyes possessed a natural sensitivity to high light levels, and so their vision functioned more efficiently in a semigloom.

He experienced a brief, shuddery flashback to the hybrid horde he, Brigid and Grant had fought off more than a year ago inside the Archuleta Mesa installation. It was difficult in the uncertain light to assess the number and gender of hybrids, but he estimated there were about seven females and three males. A number of human men were in the room, too, but including Maddock he counted only four.

Kane turned to Domi. "These are your friends?" he asked tonelessly.

She nodded. "They saved me from capture, mebbe kept me from being chilled."

"We kept her from being more than chilled," declared a black man of medium height. "We kept her from being dissected."

A hybrid male said hi the soft, lilting tones of his kind, "We tried to capture her hi the warehouse section. We had no choice but to incapacitate her with a wand."

Kane had faced the deadly infrasound wands a number of times in the past. Miniaturized masers converted electric current to directional ultrasonic waves and turned innocuous silver rods into weapons that could kill or cripple.

"That must have been a case of the cure being almost as bad as the disease," Kane said to Domi.

She nodded, lips compressing. "No shit"

She unzipped the front of her coverall. Even hi the poor light, Kane saw, outlined in blue and red against the bone whiteness of her skin, a spiderweb pattern of broken blood vessels and ruptured capillaries extending across her upper chest to between her breasts. "And this is after two weeks. Shoulda seen me after the first couple of days. Make a stickie puke. Still sore."

The hybrid intoned, "You killed the one who rendered you tractable. I would judge you still came out ahead."

Domi zipped up her jumpsuit and said angrily, "Told you I was sorry."

Kane shook his head in confusion, curiosity warring with hunger within him. Lifting his hands palm outward, he announced, "Somebody better give me the brief on what this is all about. While you're at it, is there anything to eat in here other than that goddamn oatmeal?"

Domi took him by the elbow and pulled him forward, parting the semicircle of humans and hybrids. She led him to a table where a steaming bowl of soup and a half loaf of freshly baked bread awaited him. "Figured you'd be hungry," she said.

"Somebody was thinking ahead." Kane sat, and without much surprise saw Quavell -sitting across from him.

"That was me," she said. "I knew you would miss your evening meal."

As Kane spooned up a mouthful of the thick broth, he asked, "I suppose you're the ringleader?"

She surprised him by smiling, though it was hard to tell in the murk. She might have been grimacing at the way he slurped at the soup.

"Only temporarily," she replied. "I will abdicate that position to someone else."

"Who?"

"You." She inclined her head toward Domi. "And her. She has already proved herself an able instigator and strategist."

Kane's memory flew back several months to the night the Archuleta Mesa installation was destroyed. It was also his and Domi's first brief encounter with Quavell, and he easily recalled how Brigid had kept her from shooting the female hybrid. He decided not to raise the issue. The entire situation was surreal and bewildering enough already.

Tearing off a chunk of bread with his teeth, Kane demanded, "Just tell me what the hell is going on. You said not all of you here serve Baron Cobalt, and that he brings war to your people?"

"He breaks unity," Quavell stated with an almost serene detachment. "He has violated the articles of unification, and the baronies are in turmoil. Barons Sharpe and Snakefish have made a pact, and even now combined forces from their villes make their way here."

Kane stopped chewing, staring wide-eyed at Qua-

veil. He cut his eyes over to Domi, and she nodded in confirmation. He swallowed the bread and asked, "Why just Sharpe and Snakefish? What about all the others?"

QuaveU's smooth, masklike countenance finally registered an emotion. "As you know, Ragnarville has no baron. Due to you, I have heard."

Kane didn't bother correcting that misconception. A computer-generated hologram had actually killed Baron Ragnar, but the story was too convoluted to tell at the moment.

"And the others," she continued, "are waiting to learn what action the imperator undertakes to restore order and unity."

Kane felt his eyebrows knit at the bridge of his nose. "The imperator? Did I hear you right? The imperator?"

Quavell nodded, linking her inhumanly long, delicate fingers beneath her pointed chin. "Yes."

"What and who the hell is an imperator?"

Patronizingly, Quavell said, "I see you know very little about your own race's history."

"True," Kane replied, an edge slipping into his voice. "Thanks to your race."

If Quavell was offended by the comment she showed no sign of it. Kane assumed she was aware how the educational systems of the villes were deliberately limited. It was one way the barons used to control the herd.

She said, "The ancient Roman Empire was governed by a senate, but ruled by an emperor, sometimes known as an imperator. This person served as the final arbiter in matters pertaining to government. The villes act independently, unified in name only. A proposal was put forth to establish a central ruling consortium. In effect, the barons would become viceroys, plenipotentiaries in their own territories."

"Who made this proposal?" asked Kane.

"Baron Cobalt"

"Who else?" Kane muttered. "And so you're waiting around to see what he does next?"

She shook her head. "Baron Cobalt's proposal was adopted by another."

"Another what? Another baron?"

"No. In truth I know little of the identity of the one who has claimed the title of imperator."

Kane shrugged and returned his attention to the soup. "Well, for nearly a hundred years the barons believed they were the viceroys of the Archon Directorate, so I can't see how this setup is much different. Except the imperator isn't a myth, a control mechanism like the directorate was."

"Perhaps," Quavell said quietly. "But from what I understand, neither is the directorate."

Kane's spoon froze midway to his mouth. "It might be the apekin knows a little more about the so-called Archon Directorate than you. It doesn't exist"

"Perhaps," the woman repeated. "But one Archon does. Balam by name, and it is he who has installed the imperator as the ruler of the nine villes."

For the second time in one day, Kane was too stupefied by shock to move or speak.

Chapter 11

Brigid Baptiste's response to Baron Sharpe's pronouncement was not typical of her. Perhaps it was impatience, the anger at being confronted with baronial arrogance, that caused her to forgo her usual cautious approach. Ordinarily, from a position of weakness, she would have kept silent, keenly observing the nature of a potential adversary before deciding on a confrontation. This time, she did none of those things.

Brigid uttered a derisive laugh and sneered. "You'll have a long wait before either of us calls you 'my lord,' Sharpe. You're not the lord of anything unless it's a lunatic asylum."

It was nearly impossible for Baron Sharpe's eyes to widen, but his prim little mouth gaped open. It was with difficulty Grant kept his own jaw from dropping. Although he knew the baronial oligarchy was not

semidivine, he had never been in the presence of a baron before, and it made him feel exceptionally nervous. Brigid's uncharacteristic disrespect, and the insult flung at the anointed god-king, didn't exactly relax him, either. Intellectually, Grant understood the barons were born of science, of bioengineering, not mysticism, but his ville breeding still caused him to

hold them in superstitious regard. He managed to maintain Ms usual scowl, but he tensed his muscles, waiting for the reaction invoked by Brigid's disrespectful words and tone.

Baron Sharpe's big, slanted eyes glittered momentarily in anger, and he cast a glance toward the crippled creature he had introduced as Crawler. "What should I do with her?" he asked.

Crawler's lips stretched in a smile. "Reward her, perhaps. She certainly has you pegged correctly."

Sharpe sat up and laughed, a high-pitched musical titter that sounded like the stuttering chirp of a flock of birds. He fixed his gaze on Grant. "Do you have a tongue?"

The sudden question took Grant aback. "I have one, yes."

"Then I suggest you use it instead of trying to intimidate me with scowls and silence."

He turned toward the crippled man. "Tell me more about them, Crawler."

Brow furrowing, Crawler stared intently at Grant with shadow-pooled eyes. Grant sensed a wispy touch against his mind, and his heart began to pound. The crippled man was a psionic, a doom seer, a doomie, possessed of mutant telepathic and precognitive abilities.

Most of the mutie strains spawned after the nuke-caust were extinct, either dying because of their mutations, or hunted and exterminated during the early years of the unification program. Stickies, scabies, scabbies and almost every other breed exhibiting

warped genetics had all but vanished, except in isolated pockets. Grant had assumed even the muties who looked otherwise normal except for their psychic powers had pretty much died off, as well.

"A doomie," Grant said, trying to sound as if he were interested only to be polite. "Couldn't have been easy locating one in this day and age."

"Easier than you may think," Sharpe responded smoothly. "Part of my legacy from my greatgrandfather, the first Baron Sharpe, was a small private zoo of creatures that had once scuttled all over the Deathlands. One of his last acquisitions was Crawler here."

"Nice name," Grant observed snidely. "A lot better than Bill or Philip."

"It was more of a title than a name," Sharpe replied. "My great-grandfather bestowed it upon him after his leg tendons had been severed. He kept escaping from the compound, see, employing his mental talents to find the most opportune time and means to do so."

Grant decided to let the matter drop. If Crawler had been around in the preunification days, then he was very old, probably on the order of 120 years. But he had heard some muties possessed remarkable longevity.

The cobwebby touch disappeared from his mind as Crawler focused his eyes on Brigid. She stiffened,

drawing in her breath sharply. After a moment, the doomie spoke in a flat, matter-of-fact voice. "My initial percepts were sound, Lord Baron. Our destination

coincides with theirs, but our purposes are not the same. They seek missing friends while we seek enemies."

"Missing friends?" Sharpe repeated quizzically. "Who?"

Crawler chuckled. "We have met one of them. He made quite an impression on us both, you in particular. His name is Kane."

Baron Sharpe bobbed his head and uttered a long "Ahhh" as if finally solving a puzzle. "Kane the traitor. Kane the killer. Kane the baron blaster."

With icy irony, Brigid said, "I understand he certainly blasted you."

Sharpe laughed and undid the top buttons of his camo jacket, and the shirt beneath. Pulling them aside, he revealed the pale flesh beneath. An angry red stellate scar surrounded a raised, puckered ring in his upper chest. "He did indeed. Here is his signature."

Although neither Brigid nor Grant had witnessed Kane's brief encounter with Baron Sharpe and Crawler in Redoubt Papa, he had told them about it. Apparently, Crawler had duped Sharpe into accompanying a squad of Magistrates to the installation near Washington Hole. Sensing Kane's presence there, the doomie conceived a plan whereby Sharpe would be assassinated and thus avenge himself for the wrongs done to him by his great-grandfather.

When Kane refused to cooperate and be used as a pawn, Sharpe attempted to kill Crawler. Kane shot the baron, assuming he had dealt him a mortal wound.

Apparently, his assumption was in error, but not La-kesh's description of the baron's mental state. Brigid clearly recalled him saying Baron Sharpe was mad "like Emperor Caligula was mad."

As he buttoned his shirt and jacket, a smirk twisted Sharpe's thin lips. "Your friend didn't believe me when I told him I cannot die. I guess I showed him."

Neither Grant nor Brigid could think of anything to say in response, so they opted to remain silent. Sharpe craned his neck, peering past the two people. "Ramirez, is the area secure?"

"It is, Lord Baron," the Mag answered.

"Then find proper seating for our guests and myself. I'm tired of being cooped up in here."

Within a few minutes, Ramirez found three canvas-backed camp chairs and set them up near the Sandcat. While he was doing so, the Deathbird landed nearby, the skids settling gently on the ground, the vanes agitating the dust into swirling eddies.

Sharpe, Brigid and Grant sat in a semicircle. Crawler dragged himself over to the baron's feet by arms callused an inch thick on the elbows. His sickeningly diminished legs trailed behind him. By the light of an electric lantern, Grant saw the raised weals of ancient scars on the backs of his knees.

Crawler looked up into Grant's face as if intercepting his thoughts. "Yes," he said. "It was terribly painful."

I nearly bled to death."

"My great-grandfather performed the actual surgery himself," Sharpe offered helpfully. "Crawler held a grudge for the longest time."

"At least a century, my lord."

"But," Brigid said with a wry smile, "you worked out your differences?"

The doomie nodded. "I finally came to realize our destinies were intertwined. Especially after your friend nearly killed him."

Sharpe smiled down at him fondly and ran his fingers lightly over his shaven skull. "It's a great comfort."

Brigid and Grant gazed stolidly at the pair, not saying anything. Both were aware of Ramirez hovering behind them, just beyond their peripheral vision.

"Now," announced Baron Sharpe with a decisive handclap, "let's get down to it. We can be of great help to each other. My goal is to breach the Dreamland installation by tomorrow morning and to displace the occupying forces."

"Why?" asked Brigid.

Sharpe glanced questioningly at Crawler. "Should I?"

Crawler nodded. "You should. They are allies and should be treated as such, not as pawns. Besides, they are very clever and resourceful. If you try to manipulate them, it will be to your sorrow."

Sharpe grinned, "I thought as much."

Brigid asked, "Why are you staging an attack on Area 51? Who are your enemies there?"

"Only one enemy as far as I am aware," answered Sharpe. "One you are intimately familiar with. Baron Cobalt."

Grant grunted in surprise. "Why is he there?"

Crawler stated, "My lord, they may not have known your brother baron was there, but they suspected the reasons why. You should offer them confirmation."

Baron Sharpe beamed, his perfect little teeth gleaming in a grin. "Very well, then. The installation in New Mexico where my kind was first birthed, the installation upon which my kind relied to maintain our health and vitality, was destroyed. Obliterated, essentially. I should know—I toured it a short while ago and saw the extent of damage for myself."

The smile disappeared from the high planes of Sharpe's face as if it had been wiped away with a cloth. "I also saw quite possibly the last generation of my folk—diseased and dying infants, their immune systems failing, their blood turning toxic. So I don't blame brother Cobalt for taking action to save our race."

Brigid angled an eyebrow at him. "Then what do you blame him for?"

Little spots of color burned on the baron's cheeks. "For being so arrogant as to presume he can dole out the means of our survival as he sees fit. He vexed the barons with an ultimatum, you see—to place him in a position of final authority as the imperator or die."

Sharpe fluttered his hand in the general direction behind him. "Within the complex once known as Dreamland, brother Cobalt found the medical technology necessary to save us. His forces have occupied it. We intend to take it away from him."

"And open it up so the other barons can receive their treatments again?" asked Brigid.

Baron Sharpe hesitated a second before saying, "More or less. We have our own people inside, transferred there from Dulce. They've been supplying us with information about the place for the past few weeks."

"What kind of information?" Grant demanded.

"The strategic kind." Ramirez spoke for the first time since fetching them to the baron. "Didn't you wonder how we got through the city without touching off the demo charge in the building? We were warned in advance."

"What other things were you warned about in advance?" inquired Brigid.

A lazy smile played over the high planes of Baron Sharpe's face. With an inhumanly long thumb and forefinger, he pinched the air. "Before we tell you, there is a tiny codicil that you must agree to observe first."

"Which is?" Grant asked darkly.

"That you will not oppose me or my forces occupying Area 51. I am working in the best interests of the oligarchy and the imperator."

Both Grant and Brigid eyed the blond, slender man with equal measures of irritation and confusion. "You told us Baron Cobalt wanted to be invested with that title," Brigid pointed out.

Sharpe retorted dryly, "Oh, he did indeed. He was running quite the game on us...dangling the means of our survival before us like bait, not revealing to us

its nature or the location of the installation he had found. He almost got away with it. Then the game was raided, the tables overturned and the cards scattered to the four winds."

"Talk sense," Grant growled in frustration.

Baron Sharpe smiled beatifically, rolling his eyes heavenward. In a hushed reverent tone he said, "We were permitted to witness a historic event—the return of the Archons."

A LONG PERIOD OF SILENCE followed the baron's pronouncement. It required all of Brigid's and Grant's self-control to keep from leaping from the camp chairs in shock. Incredulity and fear warred for dominance in their minds. Her throat tight, Brigid had to make two attempts before she managed to husk out, "The Archons...you actually saw them?"

Sharpe nodded vehemently. "Oh, yes, yes..." Then he frowned and shook his head, just as vehemently.

"No, no..."

"Which is it?" snapped Grant.

"We saw one of them. Balam, by name. He brought us a savior."

Grant swallowed hard and glanced at Brigid. She shook her head slightly, warning him not to put into words the thoughts careening through his mind. She was fairly certain the same thoughts whirled in her own head.

Months ago, during the mission to Ireland, she had been told that the race they knew as Archons were hybrids themselves. According to what had been im-

parted to her in the Priory of Awen's citadel, a reptilian race of beings known in ancient Sumerian texts as the Annunaki arrived on Earth. They inhabited much of the landmasses, exploiting the natural resources and even tinkering with the indigenous hom-inid life-forms to create a labor force, which eventually and perhaps mistakenly became Homo sapiens.

Over the span of millennia, the Annunaki gradually reduced their involvement in mining colonies on Earth, and triggered the global cataclysm known in all cultures as the Great Flood. After an absence of a thousand years or more, an expeditionary force of Annunaki returned and found another advanced race had established a foothold, the humanoid but not human Tuatha de Danaan.

The two races warred for centuries, the conflict extending even to the outer planets of the solar system. Finally, with both the Danaan and the Annunaki at the brink of extinction, they struck a pact whereby not only their cultures would mingle, but their genetic stock and bloodlines would mingle, as well.

From this union was born the progenitors of the race that would eventually be called the Archons. What was left of the Annunaki and the Danaan withdrew from Earth, leaving behind a wellspring of confusing myths about wars in heaven, serpent kings, demons and angels. But the root race, as Balam referred to them, left their knowledge behind, in the care of their offspring.

Balam's folk initially did not hide from humanity;

they coexisted with them as advisers to mighty princes, friends and high counselors of kings.

But a catastrophe rocked the world, most likely a pole shift that may have caused the sinking of Atlantis, and the blotting out of entire nations, whole civilizations.

Humanity was hurled back into a state of savagery and Balam's people fared little better, not escaping the common ruin that shattered the face of the Earth. Only his people's knowledge of hyperdimensional physics saved them from complete extinction.

Later Brigid had learned that Balam himself had provided the raw genetic material for the creation of the hybrids. His race's DNA was infinitely adaptable, its segments achieving a near seamless sequencing pattern with whatever biological material was spliced into it. It could be tinkered with to create endless variations, adjusted and fine-tuned.

Brigid recollected what Kane had learned about Balam's race during his telepathic communication with him. After the global catastrophe, in order to survive, his race's knowledge of genetics helped them adapt to the new environment. Muscle tissue became less dense, motor reflexes sharpened, optic

capacities broadened. A new range of abilities emerged, which just barely allowed them to survive on a planet whose magnetic fields had changed, whose weather was now drastically unpredictable.

With effort, she brought her attention back to the present. "Who was this savior?"

Baron Sharpe's high, smooth forehead creased nor-

izontally in consternation. "A human child...at least physically. His name is Sam."

"Sam?" echoed Grant in disbelief.

Sharpe nodded.

"A human child?" Brigid demanded. "Balam brought you a human child?"

Again Sharpe nodded. "We saw him perform an act of healing little short of miraculous. Perhaps it was miraculous. I have no standard by which to judge. He also told us about Area 51. However, only brother Snakefish and I decided to verify Yarn's story."

Brigid shifted in her chair. "What was the miracle?"

His soft, awed light shining in Baron Sharpe's eyes suddenly became hard and cunning. "Why should I tell you anything more? You've yet to speak in detail of your own reasons."

Grant inclined his head toward Crawler. "Can't you get all the information you need from him?"

"I receive only impressions," Crawler declared blandly. "Emotions and intentions. I see colors that denote feelings."

"What colors do you see now?" Grant challenged.

The doomie narrowed his eyes. "Yellow for fear. You fear for the safety of your friends, yet I sense you *fear* far more than that. Your purpose here is far larger than simply a rescue."

Crawler gazed unblinkingly into Grant's face. He tried to think of nothing. "Blue," Crawler blurted. "Ocean blue. But it's associated with black. Black

for death. Black for armor. Red for blood, red for badges. Blue for the sea, for a port. For a place called Morninglight."

Sharpe screwed up his face in irritated bewilderment. "Morninglight? You mean something happened at sunrise, or something will happen?"

Ramirez declared, "My lord, I believe your councillor refers to Port Morninglight, a seaside settlement within Snakefish jurisdiction."

Grant hitched around in his chair as the Mag intoned, "It was attacked a couple of weeks ago. Almost every one was killed."

"Attacked by whom?" Baron Sharpe wanted to know.

"Magistrates, my lord. We found a large number of them dead, most of them killed by bladed weapons. Several of them carried ville scrip. Baron Snakefish is certain they were dispatched from Cobaltville."

Sharpe fingered his chin contemplatively. "Yes, I recollect brother Snakefish levying an accusation against brother Cobalt during the council. He charged him with invading his territory to harvest Outlanders for his own use."

Grant and Brigid knew the term "harvest" was a euphemism. It was standard baronial practice to seek out raw genetic material in the Outlands, kill the donors, harvest their organs and tissues and return with them to the Archuleta Mesa installation to be processed.

"Yes," Ramirez agreed. "But the question of who slaughtered twenty Magistrates wasn't answered."

The man slid his gaze to Grant, staring at him hard. "Until a few days ago, that is."

Grant met his stare unblinkingly, not allowing the cold fear stealing through him to show on his face.

Ramirez continued, "One of the survivors of Port Morninglight named the responsible party."

"And?" prompted Baron Sharpe.

"Oddly, he claimed two men in Mag armor and two women—one an albino and one with red hair—were involved."

Sharpe scoffed. "Only four people? I can't accept that."

"Nobody else could either. So the questioning became a bit more...persuasive. Finally, he said those four were in league with another larger group. And he named them." Ramirez paused as if he were savoring the taste and texture of the words he was about to speak next. Slowly and deliberately, he said, "The Tigers of Heaven. I'm really interested in learning more about them."

Chapter 12

Kane really had no idea why the mention of Balam rendered him dumb and numb. On reflection there was no sound reason for him to believe that the last time he saw Balam would in fact be the last time. Even after leaving the entity in Agartha, the age-old subterranean refuge of his people, Kane had often suspected that Balam had orchestrated his own freedom. Certainly, he was well-versed in practicing the artful deception his people had directed against the human race for thousands of years. Some nights Kane couldn't even sleep, wondering if Balam was scheming and plotting anew, safe in his underground sanctuary, half a world away in Tibet.

He didn't need Brigid's eidetic memory to recall with crystal clarity, not only the place, but the final words they had exchanged with Balam. He told them their vigil had begun, as well as their search to find a way for their people to survive as his had done. When Brigid pointed out the only way was to displace the barons, Balam hadn't argued.

Kane asked him if he was betraying the barons, blood of his blood, and Balam's reply had chilled him to the bone: "They are blood of your blood, too, Kane. I no more betray them than you do."

'A state of war will exist between our two cultures again,' Brigid pointed out "Rivers of that mixed

blood will be spilled."

Balam's reply was characteristically cryptic. "If that is the road chosen, then that is the road chosen. Blood is like a river. It flows through tributaries, channels, streams, refreshing and purifying itself during its journey. But sometimes it freezes and no longer flows. A glacier forms, containing detritus, impurities. The glacier must be dislodged to allow the purifying journey to begin anew."

Kane had presumed Balam would involve himself no longer in the affairs of humankind and hybrid. That didn't seem to be the case, and anger built in him, not at Balam, but at himself for believing what the entity said. It was just another example of how Balam and those of his kind tricked and lied to their human allies—or pawns—throughout history.

Kane dry-scrubbed his hair in frustration. "Are you sure of this? Balam is back?"

Quavell replied, "That is what we were told by Baron Cobalt. He claimed that Balam was betraying his own kind. He vowed to oppose the emperor even if it meant warring with his brother barons." She paused, and the tip of her tongue touched her pale lips nervously. "That apparently is happening. This installation will be under full assault by dawn, and we need to know where you stand."

Kane's appetite, if not his hunger, disappeared. Pushing away the bowl of half-eaten soup, he said, "I stand where I always stand. Against your kind. If

the baronies are factionalizing, it's best for the rest of us—humanity—to sit back and let you fight it out"

She shook her head. "That will not do this time, Kane. You must choose a side in this war, a war your actions have brought about." Anger edged her tone as she added, "In that, at least, I am in complete agreement with Baron Cobalt."

Kane suppressed a profane comeback. "I didn't create the barons or the villes, Quavell."

Maddock stepped forward, stating impatiently, "It doesn't matter who created who or started what. We've got a war brewing, and those of us here have already chosen the side they will fight on. And so will you."

"Against Baron Cobalt? That's a given."

"No," Maddock shot back. "Not against, but for."

Kane eyed him challengingly. "Explain."

Quavell sighed softly. "You destroyed the installation beneath the Archuleta Mesa, Kane."

"So I've heard. I was there, remember?" He didn't try to blunt the pointed sarcasm.

She ignored the gibe. "The mesa was more than just a medical treatment center for the barons. It was the centerpiece of our culture, our community. The hybrid heart, so to speak."

Kane knew the six-level facility in New Mexico had originally been constructed to house two main divisions of the Totality Concept—Overproject Whisper and Overproject Excalibur. The former one dealt with finding new pathways across space and time, while the latter was exclusively involved in creating

new forms of life. According to Lakesh, after the institution of the unification program, only Excalibur's biological section was revived.

"When the mesa was destroyed," Quavell continued, "so was our community. It became clear to those of us who survived the disaster that an ongoing conflict with humanity would avail both races nothing. Only mutual genocide lay in our futures. After the remnants of our community relocated here, we decided the old rules and old protocols were not productive or survival oriented. A new paradigm had to be implemented."

"Like what?" Kane asked, his tone heavy with suspicion.

As if in reply, Maddock walked around the table and took one of Quavell's slender, fragile hands in his own. "A new, redefined Program of Unification," he declared. "One where we share what's left of the planet's resources with each other, instead of dividing it up between the conquered and the conquerors."

Kane's belly turned a cold flip-flop. Although he had been forced to copulate with any number of hybrid females over the past two weeks, Quavell among them, seeing an overt display of affection between human and the so-called new human filled him with revulsion.

"Are you fused out?" he demanded, his eyes boring into Maddock's. Rising to his feet in such a rush that his chair fell over backward, he surveyed the people in the room, human and hybrid alike. "Are you people fucking insane?"

His voice thickening with fury, he savagely gestured to Quavell and then to the nearest male hybrid. "These inhuman bastards have been trying to make us extinct for the past century. They believe they're superior to us, they've been bred to inherit Earth as part of a genetic-engineering program that began before the nukocaust. They're players in a conspiracy against the human race itself, and you're throwing in with them?"

Clenching his fists, trying to keep from losing all control, he stated matter-of-factly, "Their goal is to unify the world under their control. All humans are to be reduced to an expendable minority, to be exploited as slave labor and as providers of genetic material. That's thek idea of unity."

There was a heavy, awkward silence, then the black man coughed self-consciously. "We know all about the hybridization program. The stuff we learned did fuse some of us out. But none of it makes any difference when it comes down to the bare bones of survival. The barons are the enemies, not the people in this room."

Kane uttered a scornful, derisive laugh of incredulity. "People?" Reaching out, he snatched a fistful of coverall of the nearest male hybrid, and jerked him forward, nearly pulling him off his feet altogether. He spun him as if he weighed no more than a straw-filled dummy, shoving him first toward the black man, then in Maddock's direction. "Look at him. Look at him! Is this a person?"

The hybrid didn't struggle. His body went limp as

he allowed Kane to manhandle him. Planting his hand **on** the man's chin, he forced the head back so Mad-dock could see the inhumanly large eyes, the too smooth skin, the high forehead, the small ears set too low on the head.

In a voice so thick with barely restrained rage it sounded like an animal's guttural growl, he said, "As far

as his kind is concerned, the humanity we know is dead. The new humanity is taking its place. They believe it's all a matter of natural selection. Nature taking its course."

Kane's hand moved to the short, slender column of the hybrid's throat. His thumb and forefinger nearly encircled it. "And you turncoat bastards want to co-operate with their idea of natural selection?" - Domi stood, laying a restraining hand on his arm.

"That's enough, Kane. Stop it."

Quavell said calmly, "Because we don't fit your standard of true humanity, that makes us enemies until the death? Are you trying to convince yourself of that, to justify what your murderous actions wrought in Dulce?"

Kane released the hybrid, wheeling to face Quavell, his eyes blazing. His voice rose to a hoarse roar of fury. "That's supposed to make me question myself, make me feel guilty? You sanctimonious parasite! You can't live without feeding off of us. You think I give a damn that I cut off your supply of victims?"

He whirled on Domi. "How can you mix with them? Not too long ago you nearly popped a cap in Quavell's head."

Domi's ruby eyes glimmered with an emotion he had never seen her display before. It took him a moment to recognize it, and when he did he could scarcely believe. It was pity and compassion. In a low, measured voice she intoned, "I want to overthrow the barons. If the people in here can do that, that's good enough for me. And it should be good enough for you, too."

Kane gaped at her in astonishment, his mouth working as he tried to dredge up a response. Quavell arose from the table and beckoned to him. "I want to show you something, Kane, the same thing we showed your friend."

"Show me what?" he snapped.

"A vision of the future if a new form of unity isn't forged."

Kane hesitated. Domi pushed him toward Quavell. "Go with her, Kane. It may change things for you. It did for me."

"And if it doesn't?" he rasped.

The outlander girl shrugged. "Then it doesn't"

Kane swept his furious gaze over the humans in the room and then stepped toward Quavell, following her across the room, out a door and into a hallway. It was lit just as feebly as the commissary. "Where are we going?"

"You've earned a look at the future," Quavell replied. "Afterward you can decide if you prefer to live in the past."

Kane only grunted. The corridor was little more

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than a low-ceilinged accessway and so narrow he had to trail behind Quavell, not walk at her shoulder.

"Humans at the heels of hybrids," he said bitterly. "That's your idea of unification."

She cast a cold glance over her shoulder. "You and I have enjoyed our own form of unity through action, though, haven't we?"

Kane ground his teeth in frustration at the reminder, but he didn't respond. It had never occurred to him hybrids might possess a sense of humor, much less one with a cruel but clever cutting edge.

Nearly a century before, Unity Through Action was the rallying cry of the early Program of Unification. It awakened the long-forgotten trust in a central government by offering a solution to the constant states of hardship and fear—join the unification program and never know want or fear again. Of course, any concept of liberty had to be forgotten in the exchange.

One of the basic tenets of the unification program was taking responsibility. Since humanity was responsible for the arrival of Judgment Day, it had to accept the blame before a truly Utopian age could be ushered in. All humankind had to do to earn this utopia was to follow the rules, and be obedient to be fed and clothed—and accept the new order without question.

For most of the men and women who lived in the villes and the surrounding territories, this was enough, more than enough. Long sought-after dreams of peace and safety had at last been transformed into reality. Of course, fleeting dreams of personal freedom were

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completely crashed, but such abstract aspirations were nothing but childish illusions.

In fact, almost every tradition of the predark world that survived the nukocaust, skydark and the anarchy of the Deathlands was dismissed as an illusion. Even the ancient social patterns that connected mother, father and child were broken. That break was a crucial one in order for the Program of Unification to succeed. The existence of the family as a unit of procreation and therefore as a social unit had to be eliminated.

The passage dead-ended, opening into a square room nearly twenty-by-twenty yards across. Because the overhead lighting was as dim as the hallway and the commissary, Kane at first wasn't sure what he was looking at. The room seemed to be filled with rows of little plastic boxes, transparent cubes with no tops to them. Quavell gestured for him to walk farther into the room.

Reluctantly he did so, peering into the boxes. What he saw caused his breath to seize in his lungs, adrenaline to flood his system and raised the short hairs on his nape. None of his previous missions, not even the most rad-drenched pits of horror, had prepared him for what he saw. In the cages were hybrid infants, ranging in age from four-month-olds to one year, and he knew they were dying.

All of them lay listlessly on stained foam pads. Most of them were connected to IV drips. Kane said nothing, but nausea leaped and rolled in his belly, and bile slid up his throat in an acidic column. For a mo-

ment he feared he would lose the soup in his stomach. Some of the children raised their huge dark eyes to him as he passed by, but the majority paid him no attention whatsoever. They were obviously too weak to move. Their little chests rose and fell fitfully.

"Twenty-three out of two thousand." Quavell spoke with no particular inflection or emphasis.

Kane placed a hand on one of the box edges to steady himself. He glanced toward her. "What?"

"Twenty-three are all that remain out of the two thousand in the incubation chambers of Dulce. No, they didn't perish all at once in the explosion of the Aurora and the generator. Over a thousand of them did, however. Without access to the medical technology and treatments, the rest have sickened and died in the intervening months. These few are in the last stages of malnutrition and suffering from a variety of infections."

Something touched Kane's hand. He looked down to see a hybrid infant who seemed all ribs and swollen belly, blindly groping for him with its tiny, spindly fingers. Its hand found and closed around his thumb. The touch was no more substantial than gossamer, than a cobweb.

As he gazed at its bald, overlarge and scabrous head, a pressure built in Kane's chest, then spread to this throat. He could not speak. He could barely breathe. He had witnessed and occasionally been forced to participate in many acts of cruelty as a Mag and after, but he had never felt so stricken with guilt.

"We will not be able to install the processing

equipment in time to save them," Quavell continued. "And even if we could, what little raw organic material in storage here is reserved exclusively for Baron Cobalt...and any other baron who might be swayed to join his cause. Therefore, what you see here is the last generation of your loathsome new human."

Kane said nothing.

"Here lies your despised enemies, Kane. Will it make you feel better if I concede defeat on the part of the hybrids? You have beaten us. We surrender. You won that victory not in battle, not with cleverness and not with the old-fashioned human ingenuity you value so much. You won by the simple dint of striking at our most vulnerable resources...our babies."

Kane squeezed his eyes shut, his temples pounding. He husked out, "Human babies die every day, Quavell. In the Tartarus Pits, in the Outlands, in the hell-zones. Why should your race's children be spared the torments and mine damned to suffer them?"

"Who orchestrates that suffering?" she asked softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "These babies here? Or the ville governments that you once so faithfully served?"

Kane had known that the hybrids, the new humans, were the physical manifestations of Balam's last-ditch effort to save his folk's seed from extinction. He knew they could not be held personally responsible for the tyranny of the barons. And if they could be blamed, then he, who had spent most of his life supporting the baron's despotism, was just as guilty.

Even more so, since he had inflicted terror and death on his own kind.

Opening his eyes, Kane said faintly, "The barons aren't going to relinquish their power even if all the new and old humans turn against them."

Quavell nodded. "We realize that. But if they're divided, if they're torn between swearing allegiance to the emperor and maintaining the sovereignty of their individual territories, then the chain of unity is broken."

"And they'll be vulnerable." Kane cut his eyes toward her. "But without the treatments to reverse their physical deterioration, won't they just die off?"

"And the human subordinates will step into the power vacuum as has happened in Ragnarville since the death of the baron there. The dictatorship will continue as it has for the past ninety years—a small ruling majority wielding the power of life and death over the enslaved majority. Does it make any difference if the tyrants are old humans or new humans?"

Gently, carefully, Kane disengaged his thumb from the clasp of the infant. Its heavy lids closed over its glazed eyes. Kane faced Quavell, straightening his spine with effort. "So what are you—an underground revolutionary movement here in the underground? What the predarkers called a fifth column?"

She shook her head. "We're not numerous or well-armed enough to meet that criteria. Obviously, many of my kind here support Baron Cobalt, probably as many as your kind does."

"How many is that exactly?"

"Fifty-one consisting of thirty-eight men, nine hybrid males and fourteen females." She waved a hand in the general direction of the commissary. "You have already met the resistance movement."

Kane grimaced in exasperation. "You're barely a gang, Quavell."

"Quite true," she retorted, unperturbed. "However, this installation is far too vast to be adequately guarded by our opposition. And we have an advantage they do not—we know a large, well-equipped assault force is on route to displace Baron Cobalt."

"How do you know that?"

"Allies of ours have infiltrated the baronies of Sharpeville and Snakefish. They apprised us of the joint mission by an encrypted telemetric signal."

Although Kane was a little dubious, he wasn't disbelieving. After all, Ambika, the self-styled Lioness of the Isles, had told him she had spies placed in Cobaltville. He couldn't help it. He laughed.

Quavell cocked her head at him quizzically in a manner that reminded him of Balam.

"Something amuses you?"

"I always wondered if there were agents provocateur in the villes, secretly working against the barons, even if for their own ends. I never figured they'd be working with hybrids."

"There is probably much you never figured." Her tone was chiding.

Kane didn't dispute her. Taking a deep breath and then releasing it, he said, "So when the assault force arrives, you'll help them penetrate this place."

"That's the plan, yes. If nothing else, in the confusion, we will be able to access the organic materials in storage and begin the treatments to reverse the deterioration of the children."

Kane narrowed his eyes. "What about you? Won't you need the same treatments?"

Quavell gestured to the plastic cube-cribs. "They are hi far more need than the adults here." She added, "I suppose the concept of self-sacrifice is something else you never figured about us."

"That's true," he replied earnestly. "I presume you have some idea where they'll make the attempt."

"We'll give them the idea of the most efficacious area of egress."

"Good. We'll need weapons. And I'll need my armor."

"We already have it, as well as all the weapons you and Domi brought with you."

"It's not much, but it might be enough to open a back door." He strode purposefully toward the door. "I'll need a layout of the zone you plan to open up."

This time Quavell followed him down the narrow hallway. Before they reached the commissary, Kane paused, turned and asked in a low voice, "Is Baron Cobalt's plan for me to impregnate the females here biologically possible?"

"It is. We are chromosomally compatible."

"So..." He trailed off, but Quavell knew what he was going to ask. "It's too soon to know, Kane. Although a couple of the men engaged in coitus with females before you were captured, keep in mind such

acts were unprecedented. Once you arrived, the baron ordered that we were permitted to have intercourse only with you. As it is, this procedure is still experimental."

Quavell suddenly smiled at him in a way he could only interpret as coquettish. One of her long fingers traced the faint scar on his left cheek. Dropping her voice to a croon, she said, "But some of us here—me, at least—find the process of trial and error very enjoyable."

Chapter 13

It was the kind of dawn seen only in the Outlahds. The sky looked like a rising curtain of blues and grays, smeared with angry flame-red streaks. Mineral deposits in the rugged Timpahute mountain range glittered dully with the reflected radiance of the sun. The jagged peaks, much eroded by the ages, resembled the points of diamonds.

All around was basically flatland, with not even sproutings of desert scrub to relieve the monotony of the terrain. The lifeless and sere lake basin spread out like a vast bowl of desolation. Brigid stood at the mouth of a pass twisting between ridges of barren rock, and surveyed the dry sunken bed of Groom Lake. There was nothing left of the lake, not even a few ponds. It looked as though an impossibly huge animal had stomped a hoofprint into the center of the basin, sulking it well below the foothills of the mountain range.

Raising the microbinoculars, she squinted into the eyepieces, adjusting the focus to accommodate her own slightly astigmatic vision. The rectangular-lensed spectacles that had more or less been her badge of office as an archivist were tucked in her shut pocket. The glasses weren't for appearance only. After years

of sifting through nearly illegible predark documents, books and computer files, her vision had weakened. She refused to put them on, ignoring the ache that spread from her eye sockets up into her skull.

Brigid had only recently recovered from a serious head injury, and it seemed her vision had been further impaired by the wound that had laid her scalp open to the bone and put her in a coma for several days. The only sign of it was a faintly red horizontal line on her right temple that disappeared into the roots of her hair. Although her recovery time had been little short of phenomenal, she had noticed she needed her glasses more and more in the weeks following her release from the infirmary.

Slowly, Brigid scanned the bowl-shaped dead lake bottom. Groom Lake was surrounded on all sides by looming mountain chains, making it the ideal location for the predark military to conduct its experiments in secrecy. About five miles away, a scattered collection of structures, control and guard towers rose from the ground, reminding her of the broken-off stumps of teeth. She guessed it was at least a mile's worth of rums, all laid out against the pale gray strip of what was allegedly the longest runway in the world. It stretched nearly the entire breadth of the lakebed.

The line of structures was completely dwarfed by a building so tremendous in size, it was easily seen without the aid of the binoculars. Lakesh had said the largest aircraft hangar of predark days was built in Area 51, but "large" didn't even begin to cover it. Brigid estimated it was more than three-quarters of a

mile long, a quarter mile wide and at the very least a hundred feet tall. The cavernous hangar was probably gigantic enough to comfortably house the entire Cerberus redoubt, with room left over for Cobaltville's Tartarus Pits. The region exuded an atmosphere of abandonment, of not having seen a living soul in many, many years.

At the sound of stealthy footfalls behind her, she whirled swiftly, her right hand making a reflexive grab for the Iver Johnson automatic pistol bolstered at her hip. She blew out a half relieved, half exasperated breath when she saw Sky Dog approaching. He affected not to notice her startled reaction. She realized he had deliberately made more noise than he usually did while walking.

"You're wanted back at Titano," the shaman said without preamble. "They're about ready to roll out."

" "They"?" she echoed a shade sardonically.

Sky Dog shrugged. "It's the baron's decision, he and that Mag Ramirez. Grant's too, I suppose. My warriors and I weren't consulted about strategy, since we're along only to help Kane. I suppose that doesn't give us any voting power."

Brigid nodded, not replying. Everything came down to the price of power, she thought bleakly. Those who sought it, those who possessed it and those who suffered under it. For the scattered survivors of the nukocaust and their descendants, the price of power was tragically high. Many of them were forced to live beyond any concept of law or morality. Many more willingly chose that path.

Rather than rebuilding a civilization around which a new, wiser human society could rally, it was far easier to lead the lives of scavengers and nomads, digging around in the ruins of the prenuke world. A fortunate few managed to build power bases on what was salvaged. Still, the true measure of power was measured in human blood—those who shed it and those who were more than willing to spill it.

When the Program of Unification was established, the anarchy and barbarism that had ruled the

Death-lands for more than a century was curtailed, and power was no longer measured in human blood, but the human spirit, the seat of the soul. The nine barons knew—or they were taught—if the soul could be controlled, then humanity could be bound in heavy harness.

Power existed for its own sake, not to accrue wealth or luxury or long life or happiness, but only to gain more power. Everything else—love, honor, compassion—was irrelevant. Those who controlled its price controlled not just the world, but every human being who lived in it and was born into it. The atomic megaeull made the planet the property of someone else, and humans like herself were exiles on the world of their birth.

Even Sky Dog's Amerindians, their lives deeply entwined with the Earth and its energies, were viewed as parasites by the forces of the villes.

Brigid followed Sky Dog up the pass. Once, two hundred years or more ago, it had been a two-lane blacktop road lined on either side by motion sensors

and a high, chain-link fence. Nothing remained of the sensors, and only a few rust-stained metal poles showed where the fencing had stood.

The road pitched down over the top of the ridge. At its base, arranged in a single-column arrow formation, were the wags, with the C2VI as the arrowhead. Mags and Sky Dog's warriors milled around and between the vehicles, performing last-minute checks. The Deathbird sent by Baron Snakefish rested on its skids a few hundred feet down the road. It hadn't made a flyover over the site in case a radar tracking system might be in use.

Grant stood at the rear of the MGP, donning his Magistrate armor. He had already pulled on the Kev-lar one-piece undergarment that covered him from ankles to wrists to neck. He struggled with the molded breast and back plates. When he saw Brigid, he said gruffly, "Help me with this damn thing."

Brigid hesitated, then stepped forward, closing the two pieces around his torso. She sealed the side locks, snapping shut all the seams. She always felt a chill finger stroke her spine whenever she saw Kane or Grant armor up. Even as well as she knew them, despite owing both men her life, when they concealed themselves beneath the polycarbonate exoskeltons, she always feared the black carapace would encase their souls, too.

Brigid knew her fear was a carryover from being ville bred. But whenever she saw the Magistrates in Cobaltville, she was always reminded of stalking tigers on loose leashes.

Grant put on the arm sheathings, locking them into place magnetically. He tugged on the leggings, then the long gauntlets. After he had secured the arm and shin guards, he pounded his shoulders and legs, testing the seals. Then he popped the Sin Eater into his hand and slid it back into the spring- and electric-powered holster.

Ramirez sauntered over to him, the visor of his helmet masking his gaze. "You look almost like a real Mag in that rig, Grant."

"Thanks," Grant intoned. "So do you."

Ramirez acted as if he hadn't heard the comeback. "We're about ready to roll. You take the point."

"Why?" Brigid asked.

"Minesweeper," he replied curtly. "Titano packs the heaviest armor, so it makes sense we go out ahead. We already discussed it."

"When?" she demanded.

"While you were making your recce."

Brigid eyed him reproachfully. "What makes you think we'll come across mines?"

"Stands to reason if whoever in the installation has the material and ability to plant a demo charge to bring down a building, they can sow a minefield."

Brigid cast a glance toward Sky Dog. "Did they ask you about this? I mean, the wag is your property."

Sky Dog smiled thinly. "No, they didn't. But I'm not going to stand on the rules of courtesy at this late date."

Ramirez suddenly tilted his head to one side, then

said into the transceiver grid on his helmet's jaw guard, "At once, my lord."

Addressing Grant, he declared, "The baron is getting antsy for some mayhem."

Grant turned toward the open hatch. "Let's try not to disappoint him."

He climbed aboard, striding fast down the narrow passageway. Brigid and Sky Dog followed him, and Grant announced, "Get your men to their stations, Sky Dog."

Brigid was more than a little annoyed by Grant's terse orders, but she attributed much of his rudeness to weariness. The convoy of four Sandcats and one MCP had traveled all night to reach the outer perimeter of Area 51 in the ghostly hours preceding daybreak. She knew Grant hadn't gotten any sleep, but she doubted Sky Dog had, either. Although she had managed to catch a nap, she did not feel rested. AI-5 lying themselves with Baron Sharpe and a force of

Mags didn't make for restful slumber, even if it did make sound tactical sense.

s

• / The night before, when Ramirez pointedly men-

Is tioned the Tigers of Heaven and keenly observed their

?j reactions, neither Grant's scowl nor Brigid's poker

,.jjj face had faltered. Still and all, she and Grant were

W deeply relieved when Baron Sharpe showed a distinct

. ! disinclination to discuss the Tigers of Heaven. Since

the Port Morninglight incident had occurred in the territory claimed by Baron Snakefish, it might as well have happened on the moon as far as the capricious Sharpe was concerned.

He wanted only to complete the mission, and focused on persuading Grant and Brigid to enter an alliance of convenience. Not having much choice, they agreed to do so, but not without regret and suspicion, particularly of Ramirez. He was clever and ambitious, but wisely he hadn't pressed the subject of the Tigers of Heaven with Baron Sharpe, sparing Brigid and Grant the effort of offering up denials.

The Tigers of Heaven were samurai, the military arm of Lord Takaun, the daimyo of the House of Mashashige. If not for the aid rendered by Captain Kiyomasa and Shizuka, his female lieutenant, Brigid, Kane, Grant and Domi would have been overwhelmed by a horde of crazed snake worshipers out in the California badlands.

If the sudden appearance of the samurai wasn't astonishing enough, the story told by Kiyomasa was even more startling. Because of internecine struggles in Japan, Lord Takaun had no choice but to flee his homeland and go into exile. Taking with him as many family members, retainers, advisers and samurai as a small fleet of ships could hold, they set sail into the Cific. Their destination was the island chain once known as the Hawaiians, where in predark days the Japanese had established a foothold.

A storm drove the little fleet far off course, and they had no choice but to make landfall on the first halfway habitable piece of dry ground they came across.

This turned out to be a richly forested isle, the tip of a larger landmass that had been submerged during the nukocaust. Evidently, it had slowly risen from the f waters over the past two centuries and supported a wide variety of animal and vegetable life. The exiles from Nippon claimed it as their own and named it New Edo, after the imperial city of feudal Japan. | New Edo was on one of the Western Islands, a region in the Cific Ocean of old and new landmasses. The tectonic shifts triggered by the nukocaust dropped most of California south of the San Andreas Fault into the sea. During the intervening two centuries, undersea quakes raised new volcanic islands. Because the soil was scraped up from the seabed, most of the is-I lands became fertile very quickly, except for the

Blight Belt—lands that were originally part of California but were still irradiated.

In the eight years since the establishment of the colony, New Edo made exploratory voyages to other islands and to the mainland. As Grant and Brigid had reason to know, many of the chain of islands were claimed by pirates and self-styled warlords. New Edo gave these a wide berth, keeping their existence a secret. They revealed themselves only to the coastal community of Port Morninglight, whose residents traded regularly with them and kept their word not to speak of the location of New Edo.

When Port Morninglight was virtually annihilated by a contingent of Cobaltville Mags and the survivors captured in order to provide raw genetic material for medical treatments, a squad of Tigers set out in pursuit. Their paths intersected with those of the people

from Cerberus, and together they wiped out the Mags and set free the prisoners.

Kiyomasa had provided Brigid with the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates of their island colony, and Shizuka had provided Grant with something else—a fierce attraction for the dignified warrior-woman who bore the name of a Japanese heroine.

Grant took his place in the pilot's chair, hanging his helmet from a hook on the bulkhead. Brigid sat beside him and buckled the safety harness around her. Putting on the headset, Grant barked, "Burton her up!"

The interior of the C2VI echoed with the clangor of hatches slamming shut and the clatter of locking levers. Brigid swiveled the gimballed chair, looking down the passageway. She saw Red Quill climbing up into the MG blister. Off the passageway, other warriors took their positions at the weapon ports and missile emplacements.

Keying the engine to rumbling life, Grant shifted through the gears and sent the machine rolling up the incline. The crew braced itself as the metal leviathan laboriously lumbered up the grade to the top of the ridge, then down. The machine jounced roughly between and over rock formations, then emerged from the pass onto the dry lakebed.

The sun hung a handbreadth over the mountain peaks, flooding the basin with lambent, variegated streamers of color. If Brigid hadn't been so tense, she might have been able to appreciate the raw beauty.

Grant kept both of his gloved hands on the wheel,
his foot applying a steady pressure on the accelerator.

The MCP rolled forward with a clatter of treads and
a squeal of return rollers at a steady thirty miles per
hour. Brigid glanced into the side rearview mirror.

Through the plumes of dust churned up by the wag's
I* tracks, she glimpsed the four Sandcats trailing in the
C2VTs wake like nervous children. About twenty feet
separated each vehicle from the other. She assumed

' * Baron Sharpe rode in the Cat last in line.

Grant's harsh voice commanded her attention. "Eyes front, Brigid."

She hitched around, facing the windscreen. "Why?"

"I need you to be my lookout...watch for anything unusual in the ground ahead." "Like what?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied impatiently, gruffly. "Anything unusual, like turned-over dirt or tracks. Whatever might be a minefield."

T" She leaned forward, lifting the binoculars to her

eyes. Since she was farsighted, her glasses wouldn't do any good. "What kind of mines would be laid out

!U here?"

Tightly, Grant replied, "There's no way to tell

§ Claymores, mebbe, detonated by remote control.

They could be bar mines, laid down by plow. Those are the worst." "Why?"

"For one thing, a bar mine is all plastic, making it tough to detect. It's like a six-foot-long piece of timber, but it's sculpted out of C-4. There's a pressure

plate on top, and if one of our tracks rolls over it, the explosion will sure as hell cut the tread in two. At the very least, we'll throw a track shoe."

Brigid said sourly, "There's got be a better way to get across a minefield than how we're doing it."

"There is," he told her, "but it takes more time and equipment than we've got. The standard way to clear a minefield is to fit a Cat without front rollers to open a path—providing, of course, the mines aren't fitted with fuses that detonate only when touched twice. Personally, I prefer plows to push the mines aside, but even that's not a perfect solution. There are some mines equipped with secondary igniters, built to detonate with any attempt to dislodge them."

Wryly, she commented, "Sounds like quite the area of study."

Grant forced a stitched-on smile to his lips. "It can be."

"How many minefields have you crossed?"

"Just one," he admitted. "Twelve years or so ago. But the mines were homemade pieces of black-powder shit, put together by Reamers. It was in the Great Sand Dunes hellzone—"

Brigid was loath to cut off Grant's reminiscences, since he was behaving halfway civilly for the first time in days, but she said sharply, "Wait!"

He reflexively eased his foot's pressure on the accelerator. "What?"

She didn't reply for a moment, peering intently through the binoculars, her body tensed like a bowstring, propping her elbows on the instrument panel.

Near the monstrous looming bulk of the hangar, she

I caught a flicker of both movement and light. A mag-

nesium-and-thermite flare smoked through the air, ascending higher and higher until it exploded in a flash of bright yellow above the hangar roof. It hung there

! in the dawn sky, shining with a brilliant glow.

By this time, Grant had seen the flare, as well. "A signal flare...but is it meant for us?"

"Who else?" Brigid answered, suppressing a note

j - of hope in her voice.

f "Who fired it?"

- "Kane maybe. Domi even."

* "Mebbe," Grant replied dubiously. Into the microphone, he said, "Follow my lead."

He turned the wheel, aiming the MCP on a direct ; course with the distant hangar. He tapped the earpiece

j I of the headset and said, "Acknowledged."

To Brigid he commented, "Ramirez sees it, too. He doesn't sound too surprised."

Brigid's reply was lost in the roar of sound from beneath the war wag. Tongues of flame whipped up around the prow of the MCP, sending a geyser of sand spraying in the air, covering the windscreen and blinding them both.

Chapter 14

All the weapons that Quavell's little group of insurgents could lay their hands on were brought to the commissary. The four handblasters were of different calibers and though in good condition, the ammo was restricted to one clip apiece. Kane decided to keep the Mustang .380 for use as a hideout blaster.

None of the hybrids had any experience with firearms, so Kane and Domi distributed a few of the grems they had brought with them to the installation in a kit bag. Kane kept one high-ex V-60 mini and a flash-bang for himself. Domi claimed a CS and an incend, and the rest went to the hybrids. The blasters were given to Maddock and three other men—Bro-deur, Fuller and Tavares. All of them had been conscripted into the Dulce security garrison from Mag Divisions in various villes, though none of them had Kane's years of experience.

Brodeur, the black man, explained the Dreamland installation did indeed possess an armory, but only the watch commander of the different shifts had access to it. A chain of command had to be climbed in order to even meet with the watch commanders. Besides, the armory was a three-mile monorail ride from their present position. He added the mat-trans unit

was even farther away than that, and heavily guarded, so the gateway wasn't an option. Kane didn't voice his pessimism about their chances of pulling off a successful inside insurrection. He was too happy to be free of his cell and back in armor again. Once he strapped his fully loaded Sin Eater on his forearm, his spirits soared.

Domi, though once more attired in the padded bulletproof vest and black coveralls, seemed pensive. She patted the coverall's pouches, bulging with extra magazines for her Combat Master. The big blaster was strapped to her thigh. Normally, the prospect of combat keyed her up, made her bright-eyed and chirpy. But this time she broodily examined the long knife, thumbing the serrated blade over and over. The knife was her one memento from the six months she had spent in Cobaltville as Guana Teague's sex slave. She had used it to slit Teague's throat when the Cobaltville Pit boss was strangling the life out of

Grant.

Quavell left to attend to the infants in the nursery, and Fuller brought out several cross-section blueprints of the installation sandwiched between layers of transparent Lucite. "This place is so damn big," he complained, "there isn't one comprehensive map of the layout. It's divided by sections and if you don't know your starting point, you can get lost real fast."

Kane squinted through the semigloom at the confusing network of vertical and horizontal lines and colored geometric forms. Brodeur tapped a tiny green square from which two horizontal lines sprouted. "This is where we are."

With a forefinger he traced one of the lines to the far edge of the map, then slid another one over it. The line fed into a large red square. "This is the hangar on the surface. The only way to reach it is by a cargo elevator, and the only way to reach the elevator is first by the monorail system to platform 32, and then by a passenger elevator to level ten. Once there, you'll take some stairs up to section Z-9." He extended two fingers. "There are two sets of stairways. Either one will get you to the elevator...eventually."

Kane shook his head in frustration. "I hope there are signs posted."

"Sorry," Maddock said with a half grin. "But me and Brodeur will meet you there and try to run interference to the cargo elevator."

"And the elevator is nonstop to the surface?"

Fuller shook his head. "No. It makes automatic stops on levels eight, seven and six. There's nothing we can do about it."

"I think I'd rather take the stairs all the way," Domi said softly.

Quaice retorted stiffly, "That method would require a minimum of six hours and forty-five minutes to reach the hangar area. And that's assuming all the stairwell doors are unlocked."

Maddock ignored the hybrid's observation and tapped the square symbolizing the hangar. "The attack will center on that."

"How can you be so sure?" Kane wanted to know.

"Simple," Maddock replied. He gestured to the

hybrid. "Quaice will be up there by dawn with a flare gun. He'll draw the assault force's attention."

"What kind of outer defenses does the base have?"

Fuller shrugged. "We've heard rumors of a minefield in the lakebed, but since we're not upper-echelon members of the garrison, we don't know for sure. I haven't been topside since I was transferred here from Dulce."

Kane murmured wordlessly in irritation. "Is there anything about this damn place you do know for sure?"

Quaice said waspishly, "There is a fleet of wheeled vehicles in the hangar outfitted with automatic weapons."

"How many?"

Quaice gestured diffidently. Kane had seen Balam perform the same motion as the equivalent of a shrug. "I have only seen six, but that doesn't preclude more in storage."

Crooking an eyebrow, Kane glanced toward Maddock. "There's nothing like a hover-tank in storage, is there?"

A fleeting smile crossed Maddock's face. "I doubt it."

Kane referred to the armored, fan-powered patrol vehicle he had hijacked during the penetration of the Archuleta Mesa site. Maddock had been a member of 9 its crew.

"From what I was told," the young man continued, "the tank is still out there in the desert where you left it." J

Tavares spoke up. "According to the last coded message we received, the force reached Las Vegas about eight hours ago. They intend to wait until 2200 hours before making the push to Dreamland. If everything goes according to plan, they should reach the Groom Lake perimeter a little before daybreak."

"How are you receiving and sending these messages undetected?" Kane asked.

Tavares, a dark-haired man of about Kane's age, tapped his chest. "I'm the comm man here. No one else knows shit about the equipment. I realigned it to receive and send digitally compressed messages on a hopping frequency sequence."

"Nobody here can decipher mem?" Kane's tone was studiously skeptical. "Nobody notices when the signals come in?"

Tavares grinned proudly. "Hey, if I say the signals are caused by sunspots, nobody knows enough to know they don't know enough. They take my word for it."

"Remember," said Maddock, "Baron Cobalt only reactivated this place about three months ago. The staff here are all survivors from the Dulce garrison, and most of them are grunts, not techs."

"After the mesa was blown, why weren't you recalled back to your respective villes?"

Fuller shrugged. "At first our orders were to stay at Dulce to salvage what we could and dispose of the dead. We were just a glorified cleanup detail. When Baron Cobalt's orders came through to relocate our-

selves and everything we could to here, do you think anybody wanted to question him?"

Fuller's explanation made sense, at least to sufficiently quell Kane's suspicions, if not completely lay them to rest.

Maddock announced, "We have to get back to our posts. You and Domi can stay here and try to get some sleep." He unpocketed a trans-comm unit and held it up. "At 0500 hours, I'll signal you on this. When you leave here, take the first right and go to monorail station 20. At 0530, you'll call sec central so they'll power it up. Identify yourself as Phillipson. The code words are—"

"—Jimmy six January," Kane interposed smoothly. "Who's Phillipson?"

"The guy you killed. He's assigned to this section of the base and you have his comm, so you should be able to pull it off."

"He won't be missed between now and then?"

"The base is already on a second-degree alert," Brodeur said gloomily. "They're probably looking for you, but we've already hidden the bodies of the men you and Domi chilled. So sec central won't know you're armed."

"But they're assuming I'm loose and trying to reach the surface?" Kane inquired.

"Wouldn't you?" Maddock responded. "But they'll figure you've gone to ground somewhere. Besides, if I know Gifford he'll want to hunt you down personally."

A humorless smile creased Kane's face. "That's

nice to know. I'd hate to leave without saying goodbye."

Human and hybrid alike filed out of the commissary, leaving Kane and Domi alone in the dim room. He was far too keyed up to sleep, so he examined all of his equipment. He strapped the motion detector around his left wrist. It was a small device made of molded black plastic and stamped metal. A liquid crystal display window exuded a faint glow. He turned it off and on, sweeping it back and forth experimentally.

The silence between him and Domi became awkward. She seemed disinclined to talk, to do much of anything except sit at the dining table with her head propped up by her hands.

After several minutes, Kane asked, "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah." Her voice was dull and listless. "Just fine. You?"

"Grand,"

Another period of silence settled over the room. "When we move out," he said, "we should probably split up and head for the hangar by different directions. That'll minimize the chances of both of us being recaptured."

"Or chilled," she interjected.

"Or chilled," he agreed. "Do you want to look at the layout, choose an alternate route?"

Domi pulled the blueprints toward her and scanned them slowly, without apparent interest. Kane waited for her to say more, but she didn't. Usually, Domi

was forthright, forthcoming and very verbal. He had been on a number of missions with her, and she'd earned his trust and respect. However, her behavior had changed prior to and during the op to penetrate Area 51. She was taciturn, even insulting, particularly toward Grant. The short fuse of her temper seemed to have shrunk to little more than a wick. It took only a tiny spark to trigger an explosion of

homicidal anger.

Right before he and Domi had jumped from Cerberus, Grant confided in him that he was the reason for Domi's confrontational attitude. For more than a year she'd claimed she loved Grant, but he was always reluctant to return that emotion for reasons even he couldn't articulate.

Kane guessed Domi represented a kind of innocence to Grant, and he didn't want to taint it with sex—despite the fact she was no stranger to it before being smuggled into Cobaltville to serve as Guana Teague's sex slave. He also figured Grant didn't want to do anything that might diminish the memory of Olivia, the only woman who'd ever truly claimed his heart.

So Grant always drew the line at physical intimacy with Domi, sometimes citing the age difference between them as the reason, even though not even Domi knew how old she was. Kane never thought that argument defensible. Waiflike in appearance she might be, but Domi had proved time and again she was anything but a child.

She hadn't reacted like a child when she came

across Grant and Shizuka, the female samurai, locked in a sweaty embrace. That Grant had even informed him of the incident was a matter of some surprise to Kane. Although they were friends, partners for more than a dozen years, the two men observed an unspoken agreement not to speak of personal matters unless specifically invited. Very rarely had Grant extended a specific invitation. Therefore, when he told Kane about Domi seeing him with Shizuka after the battle with the Mags who had abducted the citizens of Port Morninglight, his first reaction was to be amused. The amusement didn't last long.

Kane sat on the edge of the dining table, consciously assuming a higher posture than the seated Domi. It was a cheap psychological ploy, but he needed to get past the girl's uncharacteristic reticence, and he wasn't above gentle intimidation. Matter-of-factly he said, "I have to admit I'm surprised by you. I thought you hated hybrids with all your heart. You didn't consider them human."

Gazing at the layouts, Domi kept her reply studiously dismissive. "I can change my mind, can't I?"

Kane nodded. "Sure you can. But I'd like to know why you did—and so radically."

She cast him an angry stare, her eyes gleaming like drops of freshly spilt blood. "You don't trust me?"

"I didn't say that. But you can't deny the reversal in your attitude is pretty goddamn dramatic. Pretty much of a one-eighty from what it was. As you recall, you accused me, Grant, Lakesh and Brigid of being 'pussy-hearted' when we wanted to scout out this

place before lighting it up. That was only two weeks ago."

"Two weeks can be a lifetime," Domi retorted stiffly.

"That's a little vague," Kane said, his temper fraying. "If you're going to cover my back, I need to know why you feel so differently, what you've gone through." He added wryly, "You seem to know what's been happening to me."

Domi acknowledged the comment with a playful smile. "Heard about it from Quavell and others."

Domi sighed and stood. She began pacing the room, her black outfit causing her to blend in with the shadows. Linking her hands behind her neck, she stretched, trying work out the kinks. "For the first couple of days after they found me, they kept me restrained to a bed. Had to feed me with an IV."

"Were you hurt that badly?"

"No, I just tried to chill anybody who came near me. Then after a while..." Her words trailed off and Kane waited. At length she shook her head and said, "I guess I got used to 'em. They didn't hurt me. Quavell and Maddoclc came every day to talk to me."

"Talk about what?" Kane inquired, trying to blunt the sharp edge of suspicion in his voice.

Her answer surprised him. "Negative conditioning, for one thing. On both sides."

Kane knew what she was talking about, since La-kesh and Brigid had discussed the matter several times. The similarity between Archons and hybrids and the traditional images of demons had been a matter of academic debate. Brigid opined the physical appearance of Balam's folk accounted for the instant enmity that sprang up between humans and the so-called Archon. Lakesh suggested that ancient depictions of imps, elves and djinns were based on early encounters between Balam's people and primitive man. Therefore, after thousands of years of negative conditioning, humans weren't capable of reaching an accord with creatures who resembled figures of evil.

Even by cross-breeding with humanity, the hybrids were still markedly different from humankind. But of course, different was not the same as alien.

"Quavell told me she had been conditioned to believe all humans were basically vicious apes," Domi went on. "Nothing but savages, not able to learn new things or transcend their roots as killers. Quavell said if she could change her mind, then so could I."

The terminology the girl employed at first amused then disturbed Kane. Almost since the day he had met her more than a year ago, one character trait had never changed; her tendency to never use two syllables when she thought one would do. Slowly he began to realize Domi was far more intelligent than he had ever given her credit for.

"What made Quavell change her mind?" asked Kane.

Domi turned her face toward him. In the dim light she looked like a disembodied wraith. "You did."

"Me?" Kane echoed, nonplussed. "Not just because I—"

"No, not that," she broke in impatiently. "It was

when you spared her life in New Mexico, after we destroyed the mesa facility. She hadn't expected a show of mercy from any human, let alone you. That made her start questioning the whole setup of the baronies, the villes, everything."

Although Kane had come to accept that the barons were not semidivine god-kings, he always wondered if the hybrids, with their purported superior intelligence, would ever reach the same conclusion. Apparently, a few of them had.

"So," Domi continued, "if she could change her mind about us, I guess I could change my mind about them...especially after I saw the babies—"

She clamped her lips tight and to Kane's dismay, he was sure he heard a sob catch at the back of her throat.

"What are you saying?" he demanded. "That the sight of dying hybrid babies turned you around? How many dying human babies have you seen in the Out-lands, in the Pits of Cobaltville?"

Domi whirled on him, her eyes blazing with crimson fury, her teeth bared. "Too fucking many!" she shrieked. "Seen 'em, nursed 'em, held 'em when they breathed their last and buried 'em!"

In her agitation, Domi reverted to her clipped out-lander mode of speech. "War isn't against babies, not even against hybrids. It's against the barons and—" she stabbed an accusatory finger at him "—against men like you and Grant! Men like you used to be."

Kane felt a flush of astonishment, then one of resentment. But before he could react, Domi said angrily, "I wasn't afraid of hybrids in the Outlands. Didn't even know such as them existed. But I was sure as shit scared of the baron's sec men—the Mags. That's who was my enemy."

She inhaled a deep breath, trying to compose herself. "Mebbe I've thought of a better reason to stay alive than chilling babies, Kane. Mebbe you should, too. If making war is the only reason you can think of to live, then you and Grant might as well die."

Kane was shocked by the passion and reproach in Domi's stance and voice. Death was part of the life she had lived in the raw border territories of the Out-lands. He had always assumed she accepted violence and bloodshed as natural parts of existence. Because he had seen her kill frequently, with no outward twinge of conscience, he had presumed she didn't have one. With a pang of guilt, he suddenly realized how little he understood about Domi, and how he had misjudged her.

"You can't live your life hating all the time," she continued. "Always looking for enemies to hate, to fight, to chill."

Kane blew out a frustrated breath and ran his hands through his hair. "This sure doesn't sound like you."

She glared at him defiantly, challengingly. "You and Grant didn't stay what you were. I don't have to stay what I am. If it means working with the hybrids against the barons, against the Mags, then I will. I'll forgive 'em for being born."

Falteringly, Kane said, "I'm not a forgiving man."

In a hollow, ghostly murmur, Domi intoned, "Had

a saying in my settlement, Kane—wind and fire. One wastes its strength in trying to blow down a mountain, the other devours without thought."

"Which are you?" he asked.

She smiled without mirth, without warmth. "Ask me this time tomorrow. Mebbe we'll both know what we are."

Kane studied her, and with a faraway sense of shock, he felt as if he were seeing her for the first time. Her face held a white strength in it, her eyes a crimson blaze of pride and iron will. He couldn't really argue with her about who was the true enemy. Outlanders, sneered at by the elite of the villes, were possibly the last real human beings on the planet, and as a Magistrate, he had chilled scores of them in the performance of his duty.

Kane reached for her, drawing her toward him by her shoulders. She resisted for a moment, then of her own volition pressed herself against his polycarbonate-encased chest. Kane hesitantly enfolded her small frame in his arms and clumsily patted her tousled head.

"Wind and fire," she whispered. "One feeds the other. We'll find who is what."

Chapter"! 5

The wag shuddered brutally, slamming both Brigid and Grant back against their seats. The nose of the MCP rose as if breasting a wave, but the machine kept advancing. A sheet of sand slid down the exterior surface of the windshield, leaving a dusty film in its wake.

Tensely, Brigid listened for the clattering of a severed tread, but she heard only the steady thud of the drivetrain. She said, "Not a bar mine, I guess."

"No," Grant replied flatly. "Not a Claymore, either. Probably an M-14. Not enough of a charge to damage us, but it would've disabled a Cat...and blown a man's legs off."

"Is the comm link open to the Cats?" she asked anxiously.

Grant tapped the headset and replied, "It's okay. We're still on-line to Ramirez."

Turning in his chair, Grant shouted down the passageway, "Sky Dog! Are you and your men all right?"

After a few moments, Sky Dog called an affirmative. Grant tightened his hands on the wheel. "We don't have any choice but to keep rolling."

He kept the MCP on course for the distant hangar.

The sun rose higher over the mountain peaks, flooding the dry basin with lambent light. Within a minute, another explosion mumped beneath the C2VI. This time the jolt of detonation was accompanied by a clattering, drumming vibration against the undercarriage.

"That was a Claymore," Grant declared. He almost sounded happy about it. "Hear the ball bearings?"

Brigid only nodded, swallowing hard. She repressed the urge to comment on how fraught with danger Grant's agreement was to use the war wag as a mine sweeper. One of the tracks could be sheared away, or the engine disabled, or even the undercoat-ing of armor breached, which could touch off the flammable fuel in storage. But she kept silent, not voicing the litany of things that could go wrong. There were too many of them, for one thing.

Grant glanced out the side window and saw a gap in the convoy. It was split into two sections. The C2VI had pulled well ahead, and two of the Cats followed it in a straight line. The other two vehicles

had strayed well off course, flanking the MCP's port side.

"Drop back!" Grant snapped into the mike. "Drop back and close it up!"

One of the Sandcats slowed, slewed around on one track—and vanished in a billowing fireball. The tremendous cracking roar was nearly deafening, even inside the control cabin of the war wag. The shock wave of the explosion jarred the MCP from stem to stern. Pieces of the Sandcat rained down, clanging loudly on the hull of the C2VI.

Grant slowed the wag. "That," he announced grimly, "was a bar mine."

The Cat lay at an angle in the middle of a steaming crater. Black smoke poured from the splits in the hull. Brigid gazed at it, looking for movement behind the ob slits. Only streamers of dark, spark-shot vapor curled out of them.

"Shit." Grant's voice was soft and disgusted. "That mine must have had a tilt-rod delay fuse. When the Cat bent it, the fuse wasn't ignited until it straddled the damn thing."

Peering through the planes of drifting smoke and pulverized dust, Brigid glimpsed dark shapes approaching then- position. When the cloud of grit and vapor thinned, she saw ten Hummers rolling in a re-verses-horseshoe formation across the lakebed.

The Hummers had huge knobby tires and extremely broad wheel bases. The driver and passenger compartments were enclosed by a superstructure of metal shielding. The front and sides bore slabs of reactive armor, interconnected plates of alloy that distributed and dissipated both kinetic force and explosive penetration. M-60 machine guns were mounted on the roofs, giving the wags a top-heavy appearance. They were about a hundred yards away from the convoy, but closing the gap quickly.

"I guess we're all out of mines," Brigid remarked.

Grant frowned her way. "Why do you say that?"

She pointed out the side window, toward the advancing vehicles. "They wouldn't show up otherwise."

"Shit," Grant said again. Then, into the microphone, he snapped, "Yeah, I see them, Ramirez. Keep your Cats together, don't get separated."

The Hummers traveled at such a high rate of speed, rooster tails of sand and dust spumed from beneath their tires, forming a dense cloud behind them. Grant pressed the gas pedal to the floorboards, saying loudly over the nimble of the engine, "If any of those bastards get in our way, it'll be them all over."

Brigid didn't laugh.

One of the Sandcats that had drifted off course turned and rumbled back to join the convoy. It hadn't crossed more than twenty yards of lakebed when a flower of flame bloomed beneath it. Even before her stunned eardrums recovered from the concussion, Brigid heard the jackhammer clanging of treads shearing away from the rollers. The entire left track thrashed in a long flapping strip, crashing against the hull. Sparks showered and metal screamed as the tread slashed deep scars into the armor. The vehicle rocked to a shuddering, clanking halt.

"I guess there was one more mine," Brigid observed.

The gull-wing doors popped open. Amid a cloud of smoke, six Mags poured out of the Sandcat. They were dazed, unsure of themselves, but not seriously injured. They saw the approaching Hummers and opened up with their handblasters and subguns.

One of the Hummers returned the fire, the perforated snout of the big M-60 machine roaring with flame and thunder. For a moment, the ripping snarls

of Sin Eaters and Copperheads on full-auto drowned out the jackhammer roar of the roof-mounted machine gun.

Two of the Magistrates spun in sprays of blood, flinders of black polycarbonate armor flying away from their bodies. The remaining four dashed to cover behind their disabled vehicle. The M-60 continued to rattle and a hail of bullets peppered the Cat's hull. Sparks flared on the metal hide, leaving deep dents to commemorate the multiple impacts of armor-piercing rounds.

Then the ten Hummers were circling the convoy, machine guns chattering. They were far more maneuverable and faster than the Sandcats, and the C2VI. The billowing waves of dust rising in their wakes made for an effective smoke screen. The Hummers weaved in and out between the two Sandcats still mobile. The turrets of the Cats rotated, following their passage, the USMG-73s spitting a staccato hail of bullets at them. Sparks jumped from the chassis of the armored fighting vehicles but the slugs didn't achieve penetration in vital areas.

Three of the Hummers chose to circle the disabled Cat, barreling around it like a pack of wolves cutting a hapless sheep out of the herd. The gunners on the other Cats couldn't open up on the vehicles without hitting their own men.

A Hummer drew close to the C2VI, its M-60 spitting spear points of flame. Brass arced in a glittering rain from the ejector port. Sparks danced on the hull of the war wag, and the left corner of the windshield

acquired a starred pattern of cracks. Grant twisted the wheel and the MCP heeled around, making a lunging port-side rush. The MG continued to hammer as it sped away from the war wag's prow. It fired a final burst as it retreated.

Brigid and Grant ducked as part of the Plexiglas shield smashed inward. Cursing, Grant jammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel hard. The MCP slewed around in a sharp ninety-degree turn and came to a halt. Snatching his helmet from its hook and stripping off the headset, Grant bellowed down the companion-way, "Sky Dog! Grab a LAW and meet me at the starboard hatch!"

Brigid started to rise from her chair, but Grant said tersely, "Stand by the fire-control board. I'll give you orders through the helmet comm link."

She gave him a cold look, then nodded and put on the headset. By the time Grant had secured his helmet on his head and reached the starboard side hatch, Sky Dog emerged from a cubicle hefting the long hollow cylinder of a LAW 80 rocket launcher in his arms.

"It's already loaded." He handed the tube to Grant, who pulled apart the two sections to their full extended length and unfolded the reflex collimator sight on its upper surface.

Sky Dog undid the complicated series of levers and latches on the door, then kicked it open. He narrowed his eyes as an astringent blend of smoke and dust drifted inward.

"Stay aboard," Grant told him.

Sky Dog recoiled as a wild round spanged off the

MCP's hide over his head. Dryly he said, "Whatever you say."

Grant leaped to the ground and moved away from the C2VI. Looking toward the disabled Sandcat, he saw one of the pinned-down Mags pitch over onto his face, his armored torso stitched through with a zipper of slugs fired from a Hummer's M-60. The two survivors were completely occupied with avoiding the 7.62 mm rounds crashing and ricocheting from the smoldering Cat's hull.

Placing the launch tube on his right shoulder, Grant inserted his finger into the molded bulge of the trigger on the cylinder's underside. Holding his breath, he placed one of the Hummers in target acquisition, sighting on a small area in the rear not covered by the reactive armor plate. He tracked the wag, led it a few yards, then squeezed into the trigger pull.

Smoke and flame gouted from the hollow bore of the missile launcher as the 94 mm HEAT rocket ignited in the tube. Propelled by a wavering ribbon of vapor and sparks, the projectile seared the air in a direct line toward its target.

The High Explosive Anti-Tank warhead exploded in a flaring fireball on the Hummer's port side aft. The shaped hollow charge smashed a deep cavity into the chassis, and the kinetic force tipped the wag up then over on its side. Fragments clattered against Grant and he flinched, but his polycarbonate sheathing turned them away.

He dropped the launch tube and turned just as a Hummer wheeled around and arrowed for him, its

course taking it between him and the safety of the MCP's hatch. Grant stood his ground, his Sin Eater springing into his palm. He fired twice through the ob port at the man behind the Hummer's steering wheel. The bullets punched starred holes through the Plexiglas, coring into the driver's chest. The vehicle immediately slowed, but still maintained its course. The M-60 swung around, trying to align Grant in front of the barrel.

Grant planted a foot against the front bumper of the Hummer and propelled himself onto the wag's hood, then inserted the barrel of the Sin Eater into the gunner's port. He squeezed off a single shot, the round driving through the blasterman's head.

He jumped off the Hummer as it continued to roll. It collided with the disabled Sandcat and bounced to a halt. As Grant edged back toward the MCP, he glanced around the zone. The roar of many engines was loud even through the polystyrene lining of his helmet. The reek of smoke and exhaust fumes filled his nostrils.

Twenty or so yards away, half of the Hummers braked to disgorge men wearing bulletproof vests over gray jumpsuits. Grens hung from canvas bandoliers crisscrossing their chests. They cradled Ar-malite assault rifles in their arms. The other four Hummers maintained hit-and-run maneuvers around the Sandcats.

There were at least six men, and they ran toward the Cats, using the sandy backwash created by the Hummers as cover. Grant instantly grasped their strat-

egy. Their clothes were neutral colored, and the gunners aboard the Cats were occupied with the Hummers. Creeping under the blanket of dust and smoke, the men intended to chuck grens into ob ports of the Cats.

Grant dropped the Sin Eater's sights over one of the men and squeezed the trigger. The bullet slammed through the sec man's head, jerking him off his feet and throwing him against the man beside him.

Two of the sec men whirled toward Grant, their Armalites blazing. Grant flung himself backward, behind the shield of the open hatch of the MCP. Rounds crashed into it, tearing metal splinters loose and driving sparks high into the air.

Behind him, from the interior, Sky Dog inquired, "Still want me to stay inside?"

"Yes." Ducking beneath the door, Grant fired at one of the men, missing him by inches as he shifted position, sliding into the smoke and dust.

Growling an oath, Grant targeted the man's exposed shoulder. He squeezed the trigger. The 9 mm, 248-grain bullet hit the man in the right thigh and spun him into the open. Aiming for his chest, Grant fired again, but the man staggered and the round struck a gren on the man's bandolier. It instantly exploded and enveloped him in a ballooning ball of flame. The other grens detonated, and the concussion slammed Grant violently against the side of the war wag, the shock wave nearly crowding him back into the open hatch.

He caught only glimpses of sec men's bodies hur-

tlng in fragments in all directions. Arms and legs, and chunks of bloody, ragged flesh thudded down all around. Scarlet sprinkled the ground.

As his stunned ears recovered from multiple explosions, he heard Sky Dog exclaiming in his own language. Grant cautiously moved away from the shield of the hatch door, stepping toward the smoldering crater in the lakebed, searching for other casualties engulfed by the detonations. All he saw was a thick, corkscrewing column of smoke.

A Hummer erupted out of the swirl of gray-black vapor and lunged toward him. Grant leaped backward, but its bumper grazed his hip, nearly knocking the big man from his feet. It roared on by, the M-60 drumming.

Teeth bared, Grant raced after it. When the vehicle slowed to avoid running over a straggling sec man, he bounded onto the back of it. Standing on the bumper, Grant struggled to keep his balance as the Hummer bounced and rocked across the terrain. Bullets from Ramirez's Sandcat scored the Hummer's hull and skimmed across Grant's polycarbonate-sheathed backside. He winced and swore at the pain as the wag crossed twenty yards of lakebed.

Grant crawled to the MG mount and emptied the Sin Eater's clip through the gun port. The M-60 ceased its deadly chatter. Apparently, a couple of rounds found the driver, because the Hummer listed out of control, losing speed and making a slow, leisurely turn to the left.

Dropping from the roof, Grant shoulder-rolled and

came quickly to his knees. He thumbed the Sin Eater's magazine release, ejecting the empty, and slammed a fresh clip home. He chambered the first round and got to his feet, surveying the battle zone.

The rushing circle of Hummers had slowed, their movements more deliberate now that their crews realized they'd incurred casualties.

The two Sandcats and seven Hummers raced and whirled around the lakebed, circling and feinting at one another, then veering away. Great clouds of dust hung heavily in the air like curtains of dingy chiffon. Grit and dirt particles coated the visor of Grant's helmet, and he had to constantly palm it clean in order to see.

The Hummers continued to harass the Cats, their big M-60s hammering incessantly, pocking the hulls of the tracked vehicles with fist-sized craters. The heavier Sandcats tried to broadside the Hummers, but the smaller wags were too fast.

Brigid's voice suddenly blared through the comm link, tight with anxiety. "Grant! Two o'clock!"

Grant spun around as two of the Hummers vectored in on him, their engines roaring like rampaging beasts. The barrels of the M-60s trained on him. Instinctively, he opened up with the Sin Eater on full-auto, shifting the flaming barrel from one wag to another. The bullets struck the reactive plate armor and bounced away with keening whines. He fired the blaster dry within a few seconds, but the two vehicles came on.

He knew holding his ground would only get him

shot or flattened, so he turned and ran as fast as he could, his long legs pumping. Although his speed was impressive, Grant could only maintain it for short distances. Flame strobed from the bores of the M-60s, and the bullets thumped the air over his head.

He concentrated on running, praying he wouldn't stumble and hoping the nagging pull of an old injury wouldn't slow him up. Grant's thigh muscles felt as if they were seizing, his lungs were squeezed between the jaws of an ever tightening vise and his vision was shot through with gray spots.

The ground suddenly shuddered beneath his pounding feet, and he felt a blast of withering heat right through his armor. A split second later he heard the report of the MCP's 20 mm cannon, sounding like the handclap of a giant. The incendiary agent of the round impacted squarely on the hood of one of the Hummers. Fire bloomed from the engine block.

The wag swerved into a crazed fishtail, strewing the ground with engine parts. Its front end broadsided the Hummer beside it, and with a shriek of metal grinding into metal and a flurry of sparks, the two wags careened madly in a wild figure eight.

The MCP's cannon belched flame and smoke again, and the second round impacted on the right rear tire of the Hummer with its engine aflame. Both wags went tumbling in a cartwheel. A fuel tank ignited on the third bounce, and the bodywork of both vehicles was swallowed by a mushroom of roiling yellow flame. The crashing Hummers finally came to rest amid a shower of hardware, fire and loose tires.

Breathing hard, his hands resting on his knees, Grant said into the helmet transceiver, "Good thing you didn't wait for me to give you an order."

Brigid's voice responded crisply, "Do I ever? Maybe you'd better get back here—when I fired the cannon, I stalled out the engine. If I fire off any more rounds without the engine running, I'll drain the battery."

Grant straightened, drinking in great gasps of air. He started walking toward the war wag, a couple of hundred feet away. "Just sit tight. I'll be back in a minute."

He had just uttered the words when a man materialized out of the drifting planes of vapor. His eyes were narrowed against the dust and smoke, and he didn't immediately see Grant. Quickly, Grant reached for the combat knife sheathed in his boot, and his hand closed around the Nylex handle. He whipped it free just as the man spotted him, swinging the barrel of the longblaster in a flat arc toward him.

Lunging forward, Grant rammed the fourteen-inch knife into the sec man's lower belly and wrenched upward. The blued, razor-keen blade slit the man's torso from just above his pelvic bone to his clavicle. He yanked the knife free, and the guard fell to his knees, frantically grabbing at his blue-sheened entrails as they spilled into the dust at his feet.

Stepping back, Grant ejected the spent clip from his Sin Eater and slid in a fresh one. He returned the knife to its scabbard just as a bullet punched into his left shoulder and knocked him off balance. Another

shot skated along the right side of his helmet. He pivoted on his heel and fired a triple burst into a sec man's chest. The hydrostatic shock of the center-punching rounds dropped him dead.

A Sandcat lumbered past Grant in pursuit of a Hummer. One of the gray-clad men managed to get close enough to it to jam a gren through the ob port, but a stuttering barrage from the MG in the turret tore through his head and dropped him dead less than three seconds after he deposited his gift. The rear hatch swung open and four Magistrates tumbled headlong out of it. A second later, the vehicle jumped, tongues of flame spouting from every seam and opening. The fuel tank ignited and when it exploded, the entire vehicle was engulfed in an orange-yellow fireball.

The Hummer skidded around in a fast turn and charged toward the Sandcat's crew. The Mags fired at it, but the wag came on and they scattered in all directions. They were swallowed up by smoke. Grant ground his teeth in angry frustration. The Hummers were too fast for stray shots to blow out tires or strike vulnerable areas, and their AP rounds gave them the distinct edge in a shootout.

Over the roar of engines and the clanking of treads came another sound. It was a faint rustle for a handful of seconds, then a violent downdraft scoured him with an abrasive bath of sand. His visor was occluded by the wind-borne grit, and he cleared it with a swipe of his left hand.

The Deathbird made a low, high-speed pass, diving

down with automatic fire spitting from the chain gun. Streams of .50-caliber slugs slashed long trenches in the lakebed floor, dirt gouting up in high fountains. The streams intersected with a Hummer, banging loudly on the hull as they ripped through both the reactive armor and the shielded bodywork.

The Hummer tipped to the right under the barrage. A rocket burst from the chopper's port stub wing and soared, flaming, directly toward the Hummer. It exploded six feet before impact, causing the wag to list, tilt, then crash over on its right side, wheels spinning. The helicopter hovered over the Hummer like a bird of prey, strafing the undercarriage in steady bursts from the chain gun. One burst punctured the gas tank, and its contents went up in a brilliant fireball.

The Deathbird wheeled away from the licking flames and flew over Grant's head. He ducked as the rotor wash drove a strong puff of grit-laden air down into his face. Spitting, he watched as another puff of smoke and a streak of flame flared from the Death-bird's port-side wing.

The Shrike missile exploded to the right of a racing Hummer in a brilliant red-yellow spout of fire. Shrapnel rattled loudly against the hull. The M-60 on the roof hammered rhythmically, spent shell casings spewing from the ejector port. The Deathbird wagged back and forth, avoiding the machine gun's armor-piercing rounds.

The Deathbird curved around in a wind-screaming arc, points of orange flame dancing from the chain gun. Dirt burst up in columns all around the Hummer,

and then came a series of ear-knocking clangs as .50-caliber rounds struck the armor. The black chopper described a swift, strafing circle around the vehicle.

Grant admired the Bird jockey's skill. As a former Deathbird pilot himself, he knew the machines were exceptionally difficult to maneuver, especially when under fire. He also knew that reactive armor or not, the Hummer could not withstand a prolonged hammering of .50-caliber blockbusters. But a Shrike missile with a high-ex warhead had the capacity of piercing even the thickest armor plate to a depth of twelve inches.

As if the pilot had picked up on his thoughts, a missile sprang from the chopper's starboard wing, inscribing a smoking, fiery arc through the air. It struck the Hummer broadside and exploded with such concussive force Grant was sent stumbling backward a few feet. Chunks of the wag rained down for yards around.

Another Hummer plunged out of the dust-laden smoke from behind the helicopter, fire darting from the long barrel like the tongue of a questing serpent. Grant started to call out a warning before he realized the pilot couldn't hear him. Still, when the first shots struck the chopper, twisting a landing skid out of shape, the Deathbird rose in a fast, frantic ascent.

Grant glimpsed metal pieces of the tail-boom assembly fly away in flinders. As the chopper gained altitude, flame flared when an exhaust cowling was shot away. The chopper's engine whined, missed, cut out altogether and caught again.

The Deathbird's rise halted and it hovered for a instant, listing noticeably. Trailing a plume of smoke, it flew away from the lakebed and sank from view behind the ridgeline.

Grant made a wordless utterance of disgust, but still the Deathbird's contribution had evened the odds a bit. A Sandcat lunged out of the dusty pall, the treads missing the toes of Grant's boots by a handbreadth. It roared toward a surviving pair of Hummers. The MG emplacements in the turret fired a solid stream of rounds at the wags.

For a long, stretched-out tick of time, Grant wondered who would blink first, the drivers of the Hummers or the pilot of the Cat. At the last possible microsecond, one of the Hummers veered away, but the blunt prow of the Cat clipped its wheel-well fender. The vehicle spun in a complete circle, the big tires churning up bushels of sand. The Cat rumbled onward toward the hangar.

Grant couldn't be sure, but he felt fairly confident Ramirez was behind the wheel, and that meant Baron Sharpe was aboard. He wondered how the baron was reacting to the little lakebed war. If he was indeed convinced he couldn't die, he more than likely was enjoying himself immensely.

Brigid's voice shouted in his ear through the comm link, and he sprinted back to the MCP. He leaped through the open hatch, running past Sky Dog in the passageway to the control compartment. The shaman pulled the door closed and sealed it.

Taking his seat, he keyed on the ignition and felt

great relief when the engine bellowed to life. He shifted gears, and the huge C2VI lurched forward. He kept the accelerator floored. A fusillade of machine-gun fire chopped into the mammoth war wag as it ran a gauntlet formed by the two remaining Hummers. Despite the AP rounds, the bullets only scored the dense steel planking, but didn't penetrate it.

The racket was deafening, and nerve-racking all the same. The rattling bursts of autofire, the sledgehammer pounding of rounds crashing against the exterior and the high-pitched whines of ricochets all combined to make a hellish cacophony.

From Grant's left, a Hummer arrowed in on an intercept course, its roof-mounted MG spitting flame and lead. There was a gargling cry from behind them. He and Brigid swung their chairs around and saw Red Quill fall from the turret, his hands clasped to his upper chest. Blood bubbled up between his fingers. It had been one hell of a lucky shot for the Hummer's blasterman, but Grant doubted Red Quill would see it that way.

Sky Dog caught the warrior, then handed him off to a comrade. Then the shaman swarmed up the steel rungs of the ladder into the MG blister and squeezed himself into the chair. It wasn't so much a chair as a sling, cobbled together out of flat pieces of board, canvas strappings and cargo netting. He swung around the barrel of the RPK, pressing on the trigger, weaving short-burst cross-stitch patterns across the path of the racing Hummer, which kept rolling beside the C2VI, returning the fire.

"I'm through playing tag with these bastards," Grant growled.

Savagely, he jerked the wheel and sent the MCP barreling into the Hummer. Although the war wag struck it only a glancing blow, the smaller vehicle was smashed sideways, spinning it, then flipping it completely over.

Grant tried to pace the rolling Sandcat, but the vehicle quickly outdistanced the heavier and more cumbersome MCP. The last Hummer drifted away, at an oblique angle across the flatlands, followed by machine-gun fire from the roof bubble.

Grant turned the wheel slightly to avoid eating the dust churned up by the Sandcat. "Patch us through to Ramirez," he instructed Brigid.

She flicked switches on the comm board and adjusted the frequency knob. Into the microphone she intoned, "Ramirez, are you receiving? This is Titano. Are you receiving me?"

She waited a few seconds, repeated the question, then shook her head. "The frequency is open, but he's not answering. The comm link is clear."

Grant grunted noncommittally.

"You don't seem too surprised by the silent treatment."

"I'm not," he declared. "I knew he wasn't eager to team up with us. I'm sure he was hoping a mine would damage us enough so he wouldn't have to worry about us."

His lips quirked beneath his mustache in a sardonic smile. "Now he's outmatched in firepower and per-

sonnel. He really has something to sweat over now— particularly since he's charged with protecting the baron."

Brigid considered Grant's words for a thoughtful moment. "They have somebody on the inside, feeding them information," she said. "That still gives them an advantage over us. Ramirez'll know what's coming up next, long before we will."

"Mebbe. We'll see."

Uneasily, Brigid said, "We may want to consider he has an ace on the line. If so, we should probably come up with one of our own."

Under other circumstances, Grant might have grinned at her use of the slang she had picked up over the past year. Because of her precise manner of speaking, it sounded incongruous.

As the MCP clanked across the basin, the hangar swelled quickly in the ob port, growing to truly staggering proportions. Within its shadowed interior, Grant barely discerned flashes of movement, as of sunlight winking briefly on metal.

The plume of dust kicked up in the wake of the Sandcat suddenly lessened in density and height. It curved off to the right, away from the cavernous mouth of the hangar.

Grant leaned over the wheel, muttering, "Where the hell is he going?"

"I'm more interested in why," Brigid commented, her voice humming with tension. Her hand reflexively reached for the fire controls. "Maybe he's acting on some of that inside information."

The MCP crossed the broad, flat expanse of runway. The surface was rutted with scraggly weeds sprouting from cracks, but it still seemed in fairly good shape. The hangar loomed over them, seeming like a mountain itself. Suddenly, little red fireflies seemed to twinkle from the throat of the dark interior.

The bullets clanged and rattled off the prow of the war wag. Grant flinched as the rounds banged against the thick bulletproof polymer of the windscreen. Most of the bullets bounced away, leaving little white stars to commemorate their impacts, while others splatted into shapeless blobs.

"At least they're not AP rounds," Grant grated from between clenched teeth. He kept the gas pedal pressed to the floor.

A blocky shape hove out of the gloom of the hangar. A boxy, rivet-studded chassis rested atop two treaded tracks, which bore it forward in a clanking, lumbering charge. Grant recognized it immediately as a M-113 APC, the predark template on which the Sandcats were based.

More of a battle taxi than a fast-attack vehicle, the M-113's main armament were a single .50-caliber heavy-barrel machine gun and a .30-caliber machine gun. If he recalled correctly, the M-113 was built of aluminum to give a weight and maneuverability advantage, since the vehicle was capable of crossing large bodies of water. All of the information crossed his mind in a split second, even as the APC's .50-caliber machine gun began gouting flame from the muzzle in a foot-long, wavering tongue.

Brigid slapped at a button on the fire-control console, and cannon fire hammered out a staccato rhythm. The desert hardpan exploded in several mushroom clouds all around the M-113, but she didn't score a

direct hit. The APC veered sharply to starboard, the .30-caliber machine gun chattering now.

Grant snarled a profanity and wrestled with the wheel of the C2VI, steering it on a collision course with the smaller vehicle. "I'm *so* sick of this shit!"

Brigid said nothing as Grant literally stood on the accelerator, running the engine temperature to redline vicinity. Bullets from the APC hosed the front of the MCP, ricochets screaming through the air, skimming over the wag's nose and leaving faint scars in the armor.

The armored leviathan rear-ended the M-113, its snout impacting with the aft section of the M-113, pushing it forward a dozen feet.

Brigid lurched from her seat, and Grant slammed chest first into the steering wheel. He kept his foot on the gas pedal as the .30-caliber machine gun continued to spit fire and smoke.

Engine roaring, the drive axles squealing with torque, Grant shifted the transmission into reverse. As the war wag began rumbling backward, he glanced toward Brigid and shouted, "Fire in the hole!"

Without hesitation, she thumbed the red button on the fire-control board and kept it depressed. The flurry of 20 mm HE rounds exploded at extreme close range, shattering the aluminum hide of the M-113.

The flying stops of debris struck the C2VI's hull only glancing blows, since it was rolling backward, equalizing the recoil of the cannon fire and the blowback of the detonating shells.

Grant braked to a halt, gave the burst-apart APC a single, dispassionate glance and shifted gears, rolling once more toward the hangar. "That," he said calmly, "ought to send somebody a message."

Static hissed into his ear, and he sat bolt upright. Brigid noticed his sudden startled movement. "What is it?"

He shushed her into silence, concentrating on focusing through the blur of static to understand the faint murmur of words.

"—receiving—"

His throat was suddenly constricted, but he forced out the words, "Say again."

Grant heard nothing for a moment but fuzzy hisses, pops and crackles. He was on the verge of repeating the request when Kane's voice said, "Slow but sure. What'd you do—walk?"

I

Chapter 16

The LED on Kane's wrist chron glowed with the numerals 5:29. He watched as the last digit changed to a zero, then said quietly, "Time to make the call."

Domi nodded and rested her hand on the butt of her bolstered automatic as if she were preparing herself

to shoot the trans-comm in Kane's hand if anything went wrong.

Standing on the monorail platform, looking down the round tunnel stretching to his left and right, Kane keyed in two numbers on the unit and said, "This is Phillipson at station 20."

"Code," came the bored response.

Kane inhaled a calming breath, trying to steady both his nerves and voice. "Jimmy six January."

"Roger," said the voice from the comm. "Powering up."

When the monorail engine emitted a soft electric purr, it required great effort for Kane not to sigh with relief. He and Domi climbed aboard. Kane said into the comm, "Green. Go."

The train hissed along the rail, quickly building up velocity. The train sped down the shaft, passing several stations. Each platform was a potential threat if

guards were posted. Fortunately, they saw no one as the car whizzed past the numbered stations.

"Twenty-seven," Kane said as they shot past a pair of faded numbers. "We're getting close."

They whizzed past three more stations without seeing anyone. Dorm's tense posture didn't relax. "If power gets cut, we be like rats in trap in here," she muttered.

Kane didn't respond. When they zipped past station 32, he began pulling back on the emergency-brake lever. The metal shoes caught the track with prolonged scraping screeches. He continued to increase the pressure until the car slid to a halt in front of the platform marked 32. As they disembarked and moved into the narrow passageway, Kane said, "Watch our backtrail."

Domi drew her Combat Master and cycled a round into the chamber. The two people cautiously walked through the passage until it opened up on a main corridor. At the far end, two hundred feet away, they saw the double doors of an elevator. Several of the overhead light fixtures were burned out, so Kane relied on his helmet's passive night sight, which turned everything to various shades of gray.

Domi and Kane had crossed about a hundred feet when they heard the scream. It was protracted, exceptionally loud and undeniably an alarm Klaxon.

"Son of a bitch!" Kane snarled out the words. He and Domi broke into sprints.

The elevator doors suddenly slid apart, and a man in a coverall stepped out, holding a trans-comm unit

to his mouth. He took one look at the jet-black and snow-white figures racing toward him, and rumbled to draw a long-barreled handblaster from his belt. He yelled, "Intruders!" into the comm unit.

He used a high-velocity slug to emphasize the shout. The round splashed cool air on Kane's cheek as it whipped by. It hit the wall and ricocheted, shattering a ceiling light. He increased his speed, trying to put himself between the guard's pistol and Domi.

The man fired again and the heavy round smashed into the left side of his chest, knocking him backward

and nearly driving all the air from his lungs. The molded polycarbonate breastplate had rounded pectorals designed to turn even high-velocity bullets, but the impact still rocked him back on his heels, and the blunt trauma momentarily stunned him.

Domi sidestepped his staggering body and squeezed the trigger of her Combat Master. The booming report sounding like a condensed thunderclap in the confines of the corridor. The steel-jacketed wad of lead punched through the man's chest and erupted from the center of his back amid a geyser of blood and lung tissue. He fell over backward into the elevator car, and the doors closed on his ankles. They popped open again just as she and Kane reached it.

Kane kicked the man's legs out of the way, and the doors slid shut. He breathed heavily, wincing at each inhalation. He never could understand why the duty badge was colored red. He knew it symbolized the Magistrate's oath, the importance of keeping the wheels of justice turning, but to his mind it was nothing more than a target. To blastermen, the red-on-black emblem was an invitation, saying "Shoot here."

Domi eyed him keenly. "You okay?"

Kane forced a rueful grin. "About as okay as I usually am when some bastard shoots me."

He punched the button labeled 10, and as the elevator ascended, he took the trans-comm unit from the dead man's hand, flipped open the cover to see the frequency number and extended it to Domi. His vi-sored eyes met hers. "Once we stop, we need to split up like we talked about. The sec teams are onto us now, and we can't count on Maddock or Quavell being able to run interference for us."

She opened her mouth to protest, but Kane held up a peremptory hand. "No arguments on this, Domi. One of us needs to get out of here. If we travel together we'll end up as either prisoners or corpses. Working independently, we stand a better chance. Understood?"

Domi's ruby eyes were unblinking. She took the trans-comm. Her lips stirred and she whispered, "Understood."

The car bumped to a stop with a pneumatic hiss. The doors slid open to reveal a short stretch of polished flooring leading to a pair of stairwells branching off in a Y. The wall bore a sign reading Z-9. Before Domi took the right-hand stairs, she threw Kane an impudent grin, lifted her index finger to her nose and snapped it away in a smart salute. It was a gesture she had seen Kane and Grant exchange many times,

an acknowledgment of high odds with the chances of success being one percent.

"Fire," she said.

He smiled fleetingly in appreciation and returned the salute. "Wind."

Then he entered the stairwell. As he loped up the steps, he heard the brief chatter of a subgun, then the unmistakable boom of Domi's Combat Master. He paused, wrestling with the urge to retrace his steps and make sure she was all right. The staccato rattling of the machine gun ended abruptly, cut off by two explosive reports from Domi's handblaster. He told himself she had dealt with the blasterman and continued up the stairs to the next level.

Kane came out on another stretch of corridor, identical to the one below. He moved swiftly, walking

heel-to-toe, leading with his Sin Eater. When he reached a large observation window inset into the right-hand wall, he carefully edged his head around the frame for a look at what lay on the other side.

He looked down on a large room lined with two aisles of computer stations. Only one man was present, sitting at a terminal with his back to the window. A huge flat-screen vid monitor covered the wall he faced. The screen was divided into small square sections, each one showing different black-and-white views of the interior. Kane assumed the exterior was shown, as well, though it was hard to tell.

One square showed an upright rectangle made of heavy, cross-braced steel. Kane couldn't understand what it was, but then massive blast doors opened on

its surface like the interlocking jaws of a trap. A dozen men clad in gray coveralls and wielding Ar-malite longblasters emerged from the steel box. Bandoliers crisscrossed their chests, and all of them looked tense and more than a little confused.

Shifting his gaze to another section of the screen, he saw Domi, pistol in hand, flit across it, turn a corner and vanish. He smiled in satisfaction. Another square showed a flat, sandy expanse of unbroken desolation. Judging by the quality of the light, he guessed the sun had just risen. He could barely discern a number of dark specks rolling across the lakebed. Puffs of dust floated in their wake.

The section of the screen beside it flickered and displayed the same scene but from a slightly different perspective and much closer. He stared at the dark image dominating the square for so long without blinking his eyes began to sting.

For a chaotic moment, his conscious mind refused to register the recognition signals his optic nerves transmitted to his brain. The huge tracked vehicle looked enough like Titano to be its twin. Finally, with a wild rush of elation, he realized it was Titano—and Grant had to be behind the wheel with Brigid more than likely sitting beside him.

Kane backed up and leaned against the wall, almost light-headed with relief. He had deliberately refused to entertain the concept of a rescue attempt from Cerberus, relegating the possibility to the status of a pipe dream. Now that it was a reality, he was nearly too giddy to move.

He activated his helmet's comm link and wasn't too disappointed when he heard nothing but squawks and crackles. Even if Grant was armored up, the range of the helmet comms was limited to little more than a hundred yards, depending on the terrain and the weather. For that matter, the strongest radio signals would probably have difficulty penetrating the shielded rock surrounding the base.

Kane eased back around and took another swift look at the screen. He saw four ville-issue Sandcats trailing behind the big MCP like shy lion cubs following their mother. The deployment perplexed him for a few seconds, then flame, smoke and sand bloomed from beneath the C2VI. Titano kept rolling, apparently undamaged or even slowed by the land mine. Grant had obviously decided to let the war wag sweep the minefield, depending on its heavy armor to carry it through unscathed. The presence of the Sand-cats disquieted him even though he had been told about Barons Sharpe and Snakefish combining forces. Four wags didn't seem to be much in the way of an investment on their part.

Kane strode past the observation window, continuing on down the corridor, following the route outlined on the blueprint. He knew the defenses of Area 51 had to be more extensive than mines, and he suspected his human and hybrid allies had more knowledge of them than they were willing to reveal. Despite Domi's willingness to buy into their antibaron political platform, Kane didn't trust them any farther than he could piss in a chem storm.

Turning a corner, he saw a door hanging ajar. It was stout and thick, sheathed with sheet metal. He crept toward it, barely able to hear the murmur of voices from within over the Klaxon. Instinctively lowering himself to one knee, Kane peered around the door's edge.

The room beyond was crowded with tiers of automatic weapons racked in orderly rows. He also saw an open crate of grens resting on a trestle table. Eight gray-clad men moved about the armory, taking autorifles from the racks and attaching grens to canvas bandoliers. Their motions were quick and expert, their expressions grim.

Standing up, Kane detached the V-60 high-ex mini gren from his web belt. He unpinned it and stepped to the door. One of the men glanced up, looked away, then performed a wild double take. His jaw fell open as if he couldn't believe his eyes. In a move of sheer panic, he fumbled to raise his autorifle. "Kane!" he shouted.

Kane responded by saluting the man, then tossing the gren underhanded into the room. He threw his shoulder against the door and slammed it shut. The electronically controlled solenoids caught with triple clicks.

He sprinted down the corridor, but he had only gone a half dozen yards when heard the detonation of the V-60. It sounded faraway and mushy as if it were only a paper bag bursting. It was followed a few seconds later by a cannonading series of blasts that caused the overhead lights to flicker and dust to fall

from the ceiling. At a corner, Kane looked back just as the door flew off its hinges, propelled by a column of hellfire.

The explosion shook the floor beneath his feet, and pieces of ceiling tile showered down. The lights flickered again and went out entirely. A few moments later, emergency lighting kicked in, but it was feeble. The image enhancer mounted on his helmet gathered all available light and made the most of it to provide him with one-color night vision, at least for twenty feet or so.

A new siren began to wail, a high-pitched hooting that sounded like a flock of mutie lake loons in great distress. He wondered if the noise signified something in particular. He didn't wonder long. As he turned the corridor, he saw two men in the corridor ahead of him. They were clad in the gray coveralls of Area 51 security, and the way they held their automatics showed plainly they were combat veterans.

Despite the dim light, the men saw him at the same time and went to opposite sides of the corridor to present more difficult targets and to confuse him. But habit and training took over now, Kane's Magistrate consciousness driving away fears and anxieties.

One of the men shouted something into a trans-comm. The other snarled wordlessly and raised his blaster. He didn't fire it, so Kane presumed he had snarled at him to freeze.

Kane didn't know who had given the orders to apprehend rather than kill him, but the sec man should have known chances were sum he would surrender.

Stupe, Kane thought as he squeezed the trigger stud of his Sin Eater. The sound of the 9 mm round exploding from the bore of the Sin Eater was smothered by the siren. The man took the shot in his lower belly. As though he had been slapped off his feet by a giant invisible hand, he catapulted backward down the corridor.

Diving headfirst, Kane went into a somersault and the bullet fired at him from the second man seared the air well above him. Coming out of the roll, Kane triggered the Sin Eater again. The round pounded into the man's chest, picking him up and knocking him down like a disjointed puppet.

Kane regained his feet and ran, leaping over the bleeding bodies of the two guards. A door opened some twenty paces down the hallway, at the outer edge of his night sight. A man ran toward him, and Kane saw he wore one of the infrared vision headsets. Still he seemed oblivious to Kane's presence until he was only a few feet away. He caught a glimpse of a big-bored pistol in the man's hand.

Kane shot him once between the goggles. The man flailed backward, his blood and brains splashing the walls. As Kane stepped to the corpse, he noted the build of a hybrid. Bending, he stripped off the headset and though the light and blood smeared over the man's face made positive identification difficult, Kane thought he was the hybrid named Quaiçe. What he had mistaken for a blaster was a flare gun.

Kane set his teeth on a groan and squelched a sudden rise of guilt. If the hybrid had been sent to meet

him, Maddock should have radioed him and let Mm know. He walked down the corridor and opened the door Quaiçe had come through. To his consternation he saw another stairwell extending upward. His trans-comm warbled, and he shut the door behind him to muffle the wail of the siren.

Opening the frequency, he heard Maddock's tense voice ask, "Kane?"

"Right here."

"You won't be able to reach the elevator from level ten. You'll have to take the stairs to level nine. We sent one of our people to lead you."

Kane hesitated a moment before saying, "Yeah, I met up with him."

"Good. Me and Tavares are waiting for you. Be careful. The level is crawling with guards. The orders are to take you alive if possible, but I wouldn't count on that."

"Don't worry—that's the last damn thing I'd count on." Kane cut the connection and put one foot on the first riser.

The door behind him slammed open, shoved by a sec man with an autoblaster in his hand and night-sight goggles over his eyes. He swung the barrel of his pistol in short left-to-right arcs. When he caught sight of the man in black armor, he tried to adjust his aim, but Kane was a shade faster. The Sin Eater spit a stream of 9 mm tumblers that tore through the guard's head, shattering the goggles and pounding his face into red jelly. By the time the dead man fell

through the open door, Kane was running up the stairway.

When he reached the landing, he continued to sprint up to the next level, not slowing his pace, the sound of gunfire nearly smothered by the warble of alarm. His breath tore raggedly through his throat, and his lungs ached. Gray spots swam across his eyes, and his legs felt rubbery from the run up stairways and through the hallways. Two weeks of relative inactivity was beginning to take its toll.

When he reached level nine, he eased open the door to the corridor and stopped to catch his breath. Wheezing, he thumbed the magazine release on the Sin Eater, checking the load. The machine pistol's oversize clip still held ten rounds, and he had three spare clips in his belt.

Pushing himself around the corner, he saw a guard standing in the T junction of a hallway. His gray jumpsuit was dark with either sweat or blood. Catching sight of Kane, the guard whipped his assault rifle to his shoulder, but Kane fired his blaster first. Kane's triburst hammered three neat holes in his chest and slapped him to the floor.

Kane moved out, running hard, ignoring the burning muscles in his legs. He raced into another stairwell, literally clawing himself upward by the handrails. Steps went by in a blur. Footfalls slapped against the risers behind him. An over-the-shoulder glance showed him Maddock and Tavares running up behind him.

"On the right track?" he called out hoarsely.

Sounding infuriatingly unwinded, Maddock shouted back, "On track!"

He reached another landing and nearly collided with a dark-haired hybrid. The small man instantly fired an assault rifle at Kane, but the recoil sent him skittering backward across the slick floor. The rounds chewed up ceiling tiles but came nowhere near Kane. Whipping up the Sin Eater, Kane fired a single shot and punched a hole through the hybrid's mouth from less than three feet.

He shouldered open the door to level seven, and almost immediately a fusillade of bullets sizzled through the air where Kane stood. He pulled back to cover. One of the rounds clipped his helmet, jerking his head violently enough to blur his vision and send a wave of nausea through him. No one seemed inclined to take him alive anymore.

He unhooked the flash-bang stun grenade from his belt, pulling the pin and slipping the spoon all in one smooth motion. He threw it toward the knot of guards advancing down the hallway toward his position. He watched it bounce among their feet just before he ducked back into the doorway. A stunning, painfully loud thunderclap battered at his ears. A blazing nova of dazzling white light accompanied the teeth-jarring concussion of compressed air.

Tavares and Maddock reached him, but Kane said nothing to them. He poked his head out and saw three of the hybrids writhing on the floor, hands over their eyes. With their light-sensitive optic nerves, they were completely blinded by the flash.

The two others were human males, and they stumbled and staggered half blind and half deaf. Kane did not hesitate. He extended his Sin Eater, pressing the trigger stud, and six rounds took the men in their torsos, punching dark dots from groin to throat.

The sec men lurched into each other, not knowing what hit them, dazed from the shock of the multiple impacts, tendrils of blood squirting from their chests. As they collapsed, Maddock snapped, "Goddamn you, Kane! They were blind! We could've got through them without chilling them!"

Kane whirled on him, his lips peeled back from his teeth in a silent snarl. The ferocity of his expression drove the man back half a pace. "Then you should've led the fucking way like you claimed you would. When a hand is dealt to me, I play the cards so I can win, not to break even!"

Tavares said flatly, "There's about a quarter mile of hallways between us and the lift. Let's get going, not argue about it"

Kane moved out into the corridor, unconsciously assuming the point position. It was an ingrained habit

from his years in the Mag Division. When he acted as point man, he felt electrically alive, sharply attuned to every nuance of his surroundings.

"All hell is breaking loose upstairs," Maddock said lowly. "The assault force has some kind of war wag that nobody here expected. I don't know which ville supplied it."

Kane chose not to correct his misapprehension. He broke into a jog down the corridor, trying to ignore the little flares of pain igniting in his legs. He unhooked the trans-comm unit from his belt and keyed in Domi's frequency. He heard nothing, not even the buzzing of the circuit.

"Who are you trying to call?" Tavares asked.

"Domi."

"Won't work," he replied between pants. "I set a timer to disrupt and jam all local transmitters. It kicked in about three minutes ago."

Kane grunted approvingly. The installation was so gargantuan that by inhibiting communications among the scattered personnel, it minimized their chances of organizing a concerted defense.

"Anyhow," interjected Maddock, "Domi's faster than you. She probably reached the lift and is on the surface by now."

Kane nodded. The three men ran steadily through the dimly lit corridors, not encountering any sec men. Their absence didn't calm Kane's anxieties. "Where the hell is everybody?"

"Most of them went topside," Tavares answered breathlessly. "To either fight or to surrender, depending on how the battle is going."

"That sounds like the Mag way," Kane commented with icy sarcasm. "Either at your feet or at your throat."

The passageway doglegged to the right and opened up into a broad foyerlike area. Kane and his two companions halted. About fifty feet away, feebly illuminated by the emergency lighting fixtures, Kane saw a wide, rectangular opening in the wall. He estimated

it to be approximately fifteen feet tall by twelve wide. Because of the shadows and the limited range of his vision enhancer, he couldn't tell its depth.

"There it is," Maddock whispered, hoarse from the exertion of running. "Your ticket out of here. Once you get in, hit the first button on the wall."

Kane didn't move.

"Well?" Tavares demanded impatiently. "We've got your back. Go."

Kane swiveled his head to face the men. "I still don't know about Domi."

Maddock frowned. "If she's still down here, we'll find her and send her up to you. But I'll bet she's already topside and wondering where you are."

Kane's lips compressed in a tight line. "She'd better be, Maddock. If she's not, I'll be coming back. And I won't be alone."

The young man's eyes flickered with uncertainty. "What do you mean?"

Kane shook his head, signifying the conversation was over. Setting himself, he took deep breaths and plunged into the foyer, his legs pumping. He crossed the open area in a sprint, half-expecting Maddock and Tavares to open up on him with their blasters.

When he reached the big elevator car, he fell into it, grabbing a handrail for support. He turned and slapped at the button. A pair of heavy doors rumbled shut, and an overhead light came on. The lift had its own power source, and Kane saw the car was almost the size of a Sandcat's interior.

The elevator shot upward at breathtaking speed,

making Kane's stomach feel as if it were sinking into the soles of his boots. He leaned against one wall, ejecting the nearly empty clip from his Sin Eater and trading it for a fully loaded one on his belt. When the car stopped automatically on level six, he wanted to be prepared for whatever might lie on the other side of the doors.

The cargo elevator jolted to a stop sooner than he'd expected. He staggered and dropped the magazine he'd been inserting into the Sin Eater. As he bent to retrieve it, the doors rolled open and four men stood there, poised to enter. They stared at him and he stared back. All of them were blood streaked and burned, hair crisped and faces blistered.

Kane recognized them as all that was left of the eight-man squad he'd trapped in the armory. He was surprised that even one of them had survived and was ambulatory, much less four. Only one was armed with a blaster, a .38-caliber Walther. Another man gripped a Shockstick. All four of them were unsteady on their feet, and as far as Kane was concerned, they presented no substantial threat even if he couldn't reload.

They gazed at him silently and he returned the stare. Since they were former Magistrates themselves, they weren't intimidated by his grim appearance. In a soft, flat voice, he said, "You were lucky before. Let me pass and I'll let you live."

The man holding the Walther uttered a snarl of derision. "Fuck you, Kane. You stinking traitor. You're not leaving here alive, you shit-faced slag-

ger!" He hawked up from deep in his lungs and spit a glob of saliva onto Kane's molded left pectoral.

Two weeks of accumulated humiliation, of pent-up rage, of suppressed frustration came boiling up out of Kane in a wild torrent. Sheer homicidal fury took possession of him, the hot blood beating up in him, thundering in his ears. With a slow, deliberately provocative motion, Kane leathered his Sin Eater and said in a gravelly whisper, "Come on and get the job done."

The four men rushed forward, milling around him, trying to crowd him into a corner. The Shockstick swung toward his face. Kane sidestepped, locking the man's right wrist in the crook of his left arm at the same time that he secured a grip on the baton. He wrenched it back and up violently, breaking the man's wrist with a wet crunching sound. The man uttered an animal groan and his eyes rolled up in his head. Unconscious, he sagged in Kane's grasp.

The Shockstick clattered to the floor, and Kane kicked it out into the hallway. At the same time he used his left arm to block a fist driving toward his jaw. He dropped the sec man with a backhanded ram's-head jab between the eyes.

He stopped the third man from tackling him from the rear with a sideways snap-kick to the jaw. The fourth man managed to bore in from the other side, knocking Kane off balance just long enough to out-muscle him and apply a full nelson.

"Kill the son of a bitch!" he gasped, his voice hoarse with fury.

The man he had snap-kicked staggered to his feet, spitting out blood and teeth splinters. He lunged forward, trying to draw a bead on Kane's visor with his Walther. Using the man holding him as support, Kane bunched the muscles in his legs and sprang upward, the thick soles of his boots catching the blasterman squarely between the legs. There was a sound as if a butcher's cleaver had chopped into a side of beef.

The sec man doubled up, croaking in agony, clawing at his crotch. His spasming finger squeezed the trigger and the Walther cracked, the short barrel lip-ping flame. The bullet sheared through his testicle sac and severed his femoral artery. He fell over on his side, jets of liquid vermilion spraying from between his fingers.

The sec man holding Kane in the full nelson jerked in response to the shot, bleating wordlessly in fear and confusion. Planting his heels firmly on the floor, Kane kicked himself backward. The sec man stumbled the width of the car and his grip loosened. In the split second it required for him to bear down with the full nelson again, Kane flung his arms straight up over his head, relaxed, bent his knees and slipped down between the man's arms.

He pivoted as he did so, knocking the man's legs out from under him with a scything arm sweep. The man fell heavily on his back, and Kane sprang atop him, delivering a *yeko-hija-ate* smash with his polycarbonate-shod elbow into his chest, powering it with his entire weight. Rib bones caved in with grisly snaps, and the kinetic shock stopped the man's heart.

Rising to his feet, Kane glanced dispassionately at the corpses he had just made. In the past, when forced to injure or kill members of his former fraternity, he'd experienced pangs of guilt and remorse. This time he felt nothing at all except a savage satisfaction.

He stooped over to retrieve the fallen ammo clip that had been kicked to the far side of the car. A bass humming sound suddenly filled his head. The magazine suddenly jumped, acquired a deep dent that bent it almost double and, accompanied by a whang of sound, went skittering across the floor into a corner.

Kane whirled and saw a figure standing just outside the doors. "I disobeyed an order," Gifford said genially. "I left my post just in hopes you'd show up around here."

He wore one of the night-sight headsets. Even in the poor light, Kane saw white twists of tissue paper plugged into his swollen, bruised nostrils. In his right hand he carried a slender silver rod. Kane instantly recognized the rod as an infrasound wand. The energy it delivered was far deadlier than the voltage of a Shockstick.

Gifford gestured with it. "Come on out here, Kane. I was told to take you alive."

"That's nice," Kane said. "I'm glad you're here."

"Why?" Gifford asked as Kane shuffle-footed around a corpse.

He turned a motion to step over a pool of blood into a headlong leap. Gifford bent aside, pivoting around on a heel, moving far faster than Kane would have guessed. As Kane's momentum carried him into

the corridor and past the man, the infrasound wand inscribed a short, humming arc through the air and touched the back plate of his armor.

Kane heard the polycarbonate crack on impact and he reeled forward as if he had been drop-kicked by two men Grant's size. A numbing pain ran up and down his spine.

Shambling around, Kane performed a clumsy crescent kick with his right leg. Gifford leaned away from it, and the point tapped Kane twice on the left side. A rib cracked audibly and Kane staggered sideways, trying to stay on his feet and not curl into a ball around the flaring pain.

Gifford pressed the attack, Kane reached down, plucking the Shockstick from the floor and swinging it at the sec man's face. Gifford's wand hummed as he countered the thrust. The pain in Kane's back and ribs was distracting to his concentration, but he knew if the wand touched his helmet, his brains would be blown out his ears. He'd seen it happen.

Gifford slashed with the wand as if it were a saber. Kane parried the blow and the Shockstick vibrated furiously, spit sparks and flew from his hand, spinning end over end.

The man's face was creased by a cold grin as he advanced on Kane, driving him to the wall. Kane fainted with a kick, and Gifford backed away hastily. Kane's hand darted down to his boot, his finger touching the quick-release button of his knife sheath. He came up with the weapon as Gifford brought up the

wand. Kane flipped the knife, caught it by the point and hurled it at him.

His aim was off. The knife didn't sink into Gifford's thigh. Instead, it split his right kneecap and stayed there, quivering. Gifford screamed in agony and dropped the infrasound wand. He convulsively plucked at the Nylex handle to wrench the blade free.

Kane bounded forward and rammed the heel of his right palm in a *teisho* blow to Gifford's nose, driving splinters of broken cartilage up into his brain. Gifford died still trying to pull the knife from his leg.

"Fm glad I got the chance to say goodbye," Kane husked out. "Give my regards to Baron Cobalt, asshole."

He yanked the knife from the man's kneecap and shambled back into the cargo elevator, his teeth clenched against the throbbing pain in his back and side. He used the carmine-coated point of the blade to depress the button.

The doors slid shut. As the car began to ascend again, a faint crackle of static filtered into his ear. He adjusted the gain with the small knurled knob on the underside of his helmet and said loudly, "Grant! Are you receiving me?" He waited a moment, then half shouted, "Are you receiving me?"

Very faintly, almost on the edges of inaudibility he heard Grant's voice. "Say again."

Kane hung his head, leaning against the handrail. Tension drained out of him, leaving him weak and weary. "Slow but sure," he said. "What'd you do— walk?"

Chapter 17

The elevator doors slid open, and for a second Kane saw only a flat expanse of gray metal. Then a seam appeared in its surface and the massive blast doors rumbled apart with a squeak and groaning of gears. Beyond them lay a scene like an impressionistic painting of Hell.

Smoke drifted in streamers, and he caught only glimpses of shapes moving about. Autofire rattled, interwoven with single-shot cracks and pain-filled screams. Bodies rushed back and forth, shooting and yelling.

A bullet whipped past Kane's head, and he felt rather than heard the little slap of displaced air. It flattened on the metal wall of the elevator car. He had reloaded his Sin Eater during the short ascent, but he duck-walked out of the massive cupola housing the cargo elevator. The ground looked to be acres upon acres of cracked concrete.

He looked above him, but the roof of the hangar was obscured by rising vapors. Sweeping his gaze back and forth, he saw the interior of the hangar was at least dozens of square miles long and broad. He heard a metallic clicking behind him and turned as the elevator's blast doors sealed with a hollow boom.

Squinting in the direction of hangar's open front, he tried to pinpoint Titano in the milling confusion. "Grant!" he said loudly. "Where the hell are you?"

"About twenty yards from the hangar," came the clear response. Now that Kane was out in the open, comm reception was unimpaired. "Where the hell are you and Domi?"

Before Kane could answer, a rush of bodies knocked him sprawling and heavy weights trampled him. Sec men, half-blinded by smoke, were running like panicked deer. Kicking and elbowing, he rolled to one side and got to a knee. A man who had stumbled over him turned, leading with a handblaster. Kane put two bullets through his lungs before he could squeeze the trigger.

A slug plucked at his shoulder and he spun, sighting a gray-clad man leveling an Armalite at him. Kane pressed the trigger stud and sent a wad of lead into the man's chest.

The area was screaming, bloody chaos, bullets splitting the air, men screaming and shouting contradictory orders. Through a part in the roiling vapors, Kane saw at least a dozen gray-clad, bandoliered men hunkering down behind fuel drums and big wooden crates. They frantically reloaded their Armalites.

Grant's voice bellowed in his ear, "What's going on?"

"You tell me." Kane rose to a crouch, choking back a cough. Dust floated in the air, mixing with the drifting planes of cordite smoke to make an impenetrable and eye-irritating fog. "Where are the Cats?"

"All disabled except for one. I don't know where it—"

The air suddenly filled the white phosphorescent threads of tracer bullets. He heard the steady, familiar hammering of two USMG-73s. The rounds smashed into the sec men from the rear, punching holes through them and the metal drums, tearing long splinters from the wooden crates.

Kane instinctively tensed, waiting for the tracers to ignite the fuel, but it didn't happen. The punctured cans were empty. The bullets slapped into the men, ripping away body parts amid mistings of blood. The double fusillade sent them scrambling to take cover on the other side of the crates and drums.

Over the racket, Kane heard the steady drone of an engine and the clanking of machinery. A Sandcat materialized out of the smoke and dust, the turret guns flaming and snapping. Return fire against the vehicle was sporadic and futile. The bullets clanged against the metal sides of the Cat without effect.

It lurched to a halt and the rear hatch opened. Eight black-armored Magistrates tumbled out, armed with Copperheads and Sin Eaters. They opened fire, shooting indiscriminately. Kane flattened himself on the ground. The MGs continued to spray twin streams of steel-jacketed death. More fuel drums were punctured, and one exploded in a ball of flame. A sec man, wreathed in fire, ran a shrieking death race toward the front of the hangar. He crossed less than twenty feet before he was shot dead by a Magistrate. The others broke from cover and ran. Kane watched, a cold knot

tightening in his stomach as the Mags calmly back-shot them.

The deep roar of an engine floated through the haze, and mingled with it was the crackle of blaster-fire and frightened outcries. The C2VI exploded out of the fog, driving men ahead of it. They screamed in terror as they sprinted to get out of its path. The MCP kept coming on a straight course. A few sec men triggered their blasters. Ricochets sparked from the hull and the windscreen acquired a few cracks but didn't break.

One of the guards flung a gren in Titano's path, trying to place it beneath a tread. A red-yellow spray of flame erupted under the vehicle's prow and the thunder of its detonation rumbled loudly, but the wag did not deviate from its course.

The MCP suddenly turned sharply to the right and braked at the same time. The resulting skid wasn't controlled, and the rear end arced around in a 180-degree turn. It slapped against a couple of men, swatting them head-over-heels a score or more feet away. The aft and starboard hatches opened and blaster-toting, feather-bedecked, face-painted men streamed out of the wag. They shouted the Lakota war cry: "*Hoka-hey! Hoka-hey!*"

The Indians wore padded body armor that covered their chests, stomachs and groins. The Mags herded the sec men right into the stuttering bores of their M-16 assault rifles.

The men in front crumpled, and the ones behind them threw down their blasters and threw up their arms. A couple of them were killed before the warriors realized their enemies were surrendering. When the Indians understood the battle was over, they voiced an ululating, primeval shout of victory, ending it with their tribe's kill cry, "*Huhn!*" There was a current of disappointment underscoring their cries. The warriors hadn't really joined a battle; they had come in on the tail end of a massacre.

As the Mags and Indians sandwiched the few surviving sec men between them, forcing them to kneel with their hands atop their heads, the starboard hatch of the MCP opened. Grant, in full body armor, leaped down, followed by Sky Dog and a heartbeat later by Brigid Baptiste.

She was disheveled, her mane of hair in disarray, and she had obviously neglected both grooming and personal hygiene over the past several days. Still, in Kane's eyes, she was the most beautiful, desirable woman he had ever seen.

Brigid and Grant looked around, trying to find him amid the pall of smoke, dust and other black-armored figures. Kane approached them, taking off his helmet as he did so. Brigid caught sight of him first and made a reflexive move to run to him. She checked the motion but she smiled, transforming her face.

Kane easily recalled when he had first seen that smile, well over a year ago in her little flat in Co-baltville. It was an open smile of relief and honesty, of happiness at finding someone with whom she could discard her emotionless archivist's persona and at last be herself. That same smile now turned her pretty face

into something heartachingly beautiful, despite the smears of dirt begriming it.

Kane's eyes suddenly stung, and he wished he hadn't removed his helmet. He told himself it was due to the irritating smoke and dust in the air. He kept walking until he joined his friends. When he stood next to them, all of the humiliation and fears of the past two weeks evaporated like snowflakes on a hot sidewalk. Facing the big black man and the green-eyed woman, he felt a sense of the world righting itself after being out of kilter for a long time.

Grant was the first to speak, saying gruffly, "Slow, my ass. Next time you decide to get captured, would you mind doing it a little closer to home?"

Kane nodded contritely. "I'll arrange it in advance." He glanced at the fresh bullet scars scoring the MCP's hull, then back to Grant. Softly, he said, "You are one hardheaded son of a bitch."

To Brigid, he said simply, "Thanks, Baptiste."

She arched an eyebrow. "For what?"

"For not reaching the logical and understandable conclusion that me and Domi were dead."

She nodded. "If our positions were reversed, would you reach that conclusion?"

He pretended to seriously ponder the question for a few seconds. "Probably."

"But you'd come anyway."

"Probably."

Brigid put her hands behind her back and nodded in complete understanding. Turning to Sky Dog, Kane clasped the shaman's extended hand. "Thanks for loaning out Titano."

Sky Dog smiled. "My pleasure, Unktomi Shun-kaha." The nickname translated as Trickster Wolf, and was a reflection of Sky Dog's respect for Kane's courage and cunning. He eyed Kane keenly. "You've been suffering, I can see it. But it's not pain of the body, is it?"

Kane became newly aware of the ache in his back and ribs. "As a point of fact—"

"Where's Domi?" Grant broke in brusquely.

Kane disengaged his grasp from Sky Dog's. "I don't know. I thought she might be up here already. But I haven't seen her."

Grant opened his mouth to respond, then stiffened, gazing at a sight behind Kane. "Best we talk about her later," he commented, quietly.

The back of his neck prickling, Kane turned to see the line of the Magistrates parting to allow three figures through. As he recognized the two in the lead immediately, the tension coiled in his belly like a length of slimy rope. Baron Sharpe, with Crawler wriggling along beside him, beamed at Kane with a wide, friendly grin. "Why, hello, you murderous bastard! Surely you remember me!" he said boisterously.

Kane gave him a cold, imperious nod. "Vividly. And your pet doomie." He nodded down to Crawler, who smirked up in response.

The third figure was a Magistrate of medium height, his lips and chin fixed firmly in grim lines. Sharpe gestured to him indifferently. "This is Kami-

rez, the commander of this little escapade. Brother Snakefish sent him to nursemaid me,"

Kane wasn't overly surprised by Sharpe's presence on the mission. He had personally led the expedition to Redoubt Papa in Washington Hole. The baron believed he couldn't die, so he wasn't concerned with taking risks, like all the other members of the oligarchy. With a touch of sour regret, Kane realized he had solidified Sharpe's crazy belief in his own immortality by not chilling him when he'd had the chance.

Addressing Crawler, Kane commented, "Looks like you two have ironed out your differences. I'm glad. There's too much discord in the world today as it is."

Nobody laughed. Ramirez snorted with contempt and said, "Kane, we need you for a quick debrief before we occupy the installation."

Kane looked at the eight Magistrates holding blasters on the surviving sec men. "You'll be stretching your personnel pretty damn thin to occupy this place. Besides, *the* doors to the elevator are shut, and I don't know how to get them open."

"More of us will be coming along," Ramirez said harshly, pointing to the front of the hangar. The man exuded hostility like a field of static electricity. Kane sensed it was directed primarily at him.

Turning to follow Ramirez's finger, Kane saw at least a dozen obsidian figures trudging across the lakebed toward them. "Our wags may've been disabled," Ramirez continued, "but not all of our re-

sources. We've got five kilos of C-4 and remote detonators—that should be enough to blast our way in."

"One of their resources is a Deathbird," Grant commented casually, so casually Kane knew he was warning him.

"But it's damaged," Brigid put in helpfully.

"That's a shame," Kane said inanely. "There's a member of our party missing, so I'll lead you down so—"

Ramirez cut him off with a sharp hand wave. "You won't be leading us anywhere, Kane. You're under arrest. All of you are under arrest."

The Magistrates snapped up their blasters and covered Sky Dog's warriors. To the kneeling sec men, Ramirez called, "You stupes can either change sides or get bullets in your heads. What's it to be?"

The guards didn't bother even to pretend to think over the offer. They clamored over one another agreeing, thanking and swearing loyalty to Baron Sharpe.

"Let 'em up," Ramirez directed, "Give them back their blasters."

He turned back to Grant, Kane, Brigid and Sky Dog, who gazed at him stone-faced, apparently unmoved or unsurprised by the change of events. Ramirez grinned. "Don't tell me you expected this."

Brigid returned the grin. "One constant is that you can always expect Mags and barons to do the unexpected. Your problem is you never expect anybody to catch on."

Slowly, she brought her hands out from behind her back. Nestled between them was a metal-walled canister. A tiny red light atop it blinked purposefully. Ramirez inhaled sharply between his teeth.

"This," Brigid said matter-of-factly, "is a DM 54 implode grenade. In case you don't know, its effect radius is about thirty feet. And, by coincidence, all of you are within it." She glanced at Grant. "What did you call this kind of gren?"

"The proverbial handful of Hell," Grant supplied helpfully.

"That's right," she replied, bobbing her head in agreement. "But I prefer to call it an ace on the line."

Baron Sharpe tittered wildly. "Well played, Miss Baptiste."

Ramirez cast him a look that bordered on complete contempt. "They're bluffing, my lord."

Sharpe glanced down at Crawler. "Your opinion?"

Crawler peered curiously and intently at Brigid, who affected not to notice him at all. After a few seconds, the crippled doom seer sighed in frustration. "I don't know. Her mind is remarkably structured. I'd hate to gamble my life on whether she's running a bluff or not."

"I'm willing to gamble that she's bluffing," Ramirez snapped.

Baron Sharpe pursed his lips contemplatively. "I can't deny having you three in custody would be an excellent fulcrum by which to tip brother Cobalt from his position. He's been quite obsessed with you, Kane in particular."

In a low voice, Ramirez intoned, "My lord, you forget that Baron Snakefish has questions for these three regarding the Port Morninglight incident and the Tigers of Heaven."

Sharpe brushed off the Magistrate's objection with an impatient gesture. "He can't very well ask them questions if they've blown themselves up, can he?" His big, back-slanting blue eyes flitted from Kane to

Grant and to Brigid. "What do you propose?"

"Simple," answered Grant. "You get Area 51 and we get to go on our way. It's only fair. After all, you wouldn't have been able to take this place without our help."

"It's not taken yet," Ramirez growled. "Besides, you don't dictate terms to us, renegade."

Even concealed by the visor, everyone saw how Grant's eyes flashed with anger. In a quiet, deadly tone he said, "These renegades do, Ramirez. You can watch us leave or watch yourselves die."

"You'd die, too."

Kane joined the conversation with a snort of disdain. "You'd kill us anyway, so what do we have to lose? And I'd get to finish the job I started with Baron Sharpe months ago."

For a long moment, the tableau held. Everybody stared at everybody else—Mags and sec men stared at the Amerindians, who stared back, while Baron Sharpe and Ramirez stared at Grant, Brigid and Kane. Nobody spoke, moved or even appeared to breathe.

The frozen scene was broken by the sudden groaning creak of the elevator's heavy metal doors opening. A slender white wraith stepped cautiously out into the hangar, a streak of blood showing stark and bright

against the porcelain hue of her face. Domi caught sight of the standoff, stopped in her tracks and blurted, "Grant!"

A Magistrate whirled toward her, the bore of his Copperhead rising. Domi shot him broadside, the .45-caliber round bowling him off his feet. The bullet didn't breach the armor but when the man fell, his companions voiced a garbled babble of angry profanity. Without hesitation they opened fire on Domi. She leaped back into the elevator, returning the shots.

The Amerindian warriors triggered their assault rifles. The Magistrates stumbled and staggered from the multiple impacts, and they swung their blasters toward them. At the same time Ramirez yelled a wordless warning and threw himself in front of Baron Sharpe,

Grant depressed the trigger stud of his Sin Eater and a triburst stitched across Ramirez's midriff, beating him coughing and cursing to the ground. Sharpe uttered a sobbing laugh, and with a surprising degree of speed and agility dived into the smoke-shrouded shadows. Crawler wriggled along at his heels.

Sky Dog yelled a few words in Lakota, and his warriors began a retreat toward the MCP. The USMG-73 emplacements atop the Sandcat roared in stuttering rhythms, tracer rounds cutting lines of phosphorescence through the massed warriors. Men spun, clutching at themselves as the bullets clawed through the body armor. Fragments of flesh and bone flew off in all directions, accompanied by crimson sprays.

Kane flung himself between Brigid and the Cat,

wresting the gren from her hands. A line of bullets hammered into his back, painful punches even through the armor, doubling the ache in his spine. He let the impacts shove him forward, and he pushed Brigid ahead of him. "Get aboard!" he managed to shout.

He heeled around, flame sputtering from the bore of his handblaster. He and Grant bounded forward,

their blazing weapons clearing a path in the massed Magistrates. The Sin Eaters in their hands spit fire and thunder, unleashing round after round of 9 mm slugs.

Return fire ripped the air around Grant, and he dived to his left. Kane held down the trigger of his autoblaster, swinging the flame-belching barrel from left to right. Hot brass spewed from the ejector. When the firing pin clicked dry, he retracted the Sin Eater into its holster with a flexing twist of his wrist.

Even as the cables snapped the weapon back into its holster, Kane transferred the gren from his left to right hand. He thumbed the arming button and whipped his arm back, intending to hurl the gren over the heads of the Mags and plant it right beneath the blunt nose of the Sandcat.

A sledge pounded against his right arm and sent him staggering. The gren fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers and rolled across the concrete away from the Sandcat and toward the elevator housing.

Domi darted out from the cupola, scooped up the gren in one hand and cocked her arm back to throw it at the vehicle. Grant rushed toward her, bellowing

at the top of his lungs, "Domi, no! Get back in the—"

A brilliant white incandescent glare suddenly swallowed her form. A tremendous roar, half explosion, half gale-force wind slammed against Grant's and Kane's eardrums. The shock wave of the concussion was more like a riptide, gripping their bodies and yanking them forward in headlong tumbles, dragging them into clumsy somersaults.

A cascade of air, dust, rock particles and powdery sand swirled around them, irresistibly sucked toward the wedge of vacuum created by the detonation of the implode gren.

Then the maelstrom effect created by the implosive device collapsed in on itself and they felt fragments of stone pattering down all around onto them.

Kane found himself on his back, blinking up at the hangar's roof high above. For a few seconds he had no idea of why he was lying there, then Brigid appeared over him. She reached down and hauled at his arm. Her lips worked but he could barely hear her. He struggled to stand, shaking the fog out of his mind. At the periphery of his vision he saw Sky Dog pulling a stunned Grant to his feet.

Kane shambled drunkenly toward the detonation point of the gren. He saw no crater, only a charred star-shaped pattern on the concrete. From the center of it wisps of smoke curled. Several black-armored bodies were sprawl near it, their arms and legs elongated to unnatural lengths. Flat crimson ribbons

stretched from their heads toward the epicenter of the implosion.

He knew that beneath the polycarbonate the Mag's

r § bodies were mangled lumps of flesh, their eardrums

I shattered by the brutal decompression, their eyeballs

" - pulled from their sockets, internal organs burst, blood

from ruptured vessels flowing from every orifice, their lungs collapsed to wafers of tissue. Several more men at the edge of the effect radius were unconscious due to the sudden and absolute lack of oxygen.

"Domi!" Grant shouted. His voice had a nasal, snuffling quality as he tried to staunch the bleeding from ruptured capillaries in his nose.

"She's gone!" Brigid cried, pushing Kane toward the MCP.

Both Grant and Kane resisted Sky Dog's efforts to pull them into the MCP. They saw nothing that might have been the girl's body. Kane had never heard of an implosion vaporizing organic matter, but that didn't mean it couldn't happen. Soul-freezing horror

numbed Kane's mind and body.

The Sandcat's machine guns began to stutter again. Raking autofire smashed up concrete around them,

showering their legs with stinging rock chips. Putting

her face next to Kane's, Brigid screamed, "We've got

to go! We have wounded men to help! We're about

to be outnumbered!"

He started to shake her off, but she fought him, crying out, "Damn you, we've got no choice!" A cold sickness crept over him, a realization that

she spoke the complete truth. Brigid's eyes glittered as she fought back tears. "Do you understand?"

Kane stopped trying to pull away and bent to help one of Sky Dog's bloodied warriors to his feet. Grant and the shaman did likewise. Only four of them still lived. As they retreated toward the MCP, Grant saw Ramirez pushing himself up to his elbows. As he went past him, Grant paused long enough to kick him in the face.

They piled aboard the C2VI, and a warrior bleeding from a superficial wound in his left arm slammed the hatch shut. Grant and Kane turned the wounded men over to the warriors who had made it aboard. In the control compartment, Grant threw himself into the pilot's chair and Kane sat down beside him. Brigid and Sky Dog sat in the pull-down jump seats along the back wall.

Kane's hearing came back, but he still felt as if his ears were plugged with cotton wadding. "Why are we running, goddammit? We can't leave without Domi."

Brigid responded shrilly, "The other Mags will be here in a couple minutes. And remember the five kilos of C-4? Any one of them can jam some in our tracks and immobilize us."

"But Domi—"

"She's gone," Grant bit out. He worked the gearshift lever and popped the clutch. Bullets beat on the MCP's armored sides like outraged fists. "We've got to get out of here or more friends will die."

The C2VI rocked and jounced out of the hangar.

Peering through the ob port, Kane saw two Magistrates run into the path of the vehicle, unpinning grens. Grant slammed his foot against the accelerator, and the war wag surged forward. The Mags lobbed the grens and turned to run, but the MCP rolled right over them. The explosions were muffled and mushy.

"What did you mean?" Kane asked. "What friends will die?"

Grant's hands flexed around the steering wheel. "Other than Sky Dog's wounded men, Baron Snake-fish knows about the Tigers of Heaven. He won't let a little thing like a disagreement with Baron Cobalt stop him from rinding out where they are...and slaughtering everybody in New Edo. We've got to get there first."

Kane started to say something else, then he leaned back against the chair, hanging his head wearily. He suddenly felt completely worn-out, exhausted to the point of being comatose.

Brigid leaned forward and stroked Kane's sweat-damp hair. She said softly, "Domi gave her life to save ours. To stay and fight against these odds would make her sacrifice completely pointless."

As the war wag clattered across the lakebed, Kane focused his gaze on the burning Sandcats in the distance. "Yeah," he whispered bitterly. "Completely pointless."

Chapter 18

The early-morning sun rose above the flat blue horizon like a fiery jewel, as if it had been disgorged from the depths of the Cific. The open sea at dawn was beautiful with reflected iridescent colors shimmering on the waves.

"Watch your head, missy!" Dubois brayed.

Without looking behind her, Brigid ducked as the boom swung over her head. Grant and Kane, sitting on the other side of the mast, didn't even blink as they lowered their heads.

The single-sailed boat was barely large enough for a fisherman and a moderate-si/ed catch. With Brigid, Kane, Grant and Dubois all aboard, not to mention piles of equipment, the quarters were worse than cramped, they were barely tolerable, worse than being cooped up in Titano. The only advantage the boat had over the MCP was fresh air, untainted by the smell of blood and wounds turning septic.

The overland journey from Nevada to Port Morn-inglight on the coast of California had been almost unendurable. If Brigid had thought Grant was reticent, Kane almost matched him in general surliness. Neither man had spoken more than fifty words to anyone, much less to each other since getting out of the

Groom Lake basin. Kane hadn't questioned Brigid's terse explanation about Ramirez's knowledge of New Edo and how the Mag could either follow them or arrange for a Mag force from Snakefish to intercept them.

Kane knew New Edo could prove to be a valuable ally provided they weren't discovered and overrun by Magistrates. He and Grant took turns driving the MCP nonstop. While one slept, the other piloted. Brigid helped Sky Dog attend to his wounded warriors. Out of the seven men who had volunteered to join their shaman in the rescue mission, only two survivors of the firefight were uninjured. Even before they crossed the border into California, one of the wounded died.

The supply of fresh water ran low, and they were forced to strictly ration it, which didn't help buoy anyone's mood. Kane spoke little of his two weeks of captivity, and when Brigid began to tell him what they had learned of the imperator and the alleged return of Balam, he cut her off with a short "I know."

Brigid knew it was hopeless to pepper Kane with questions. He would only talk about his ordeal when and if he thought it had an immediate bearing on their circumstances. The only time they were alone with each other was when he asked her to put a splint-brace on his left wrist, citing a possible cracked bone. She did what he requested, but he refused to elaborate on how and why he had come to be injured. She noticed him favoring his back and gave him analgesics without him asking.

Fortunately for everyone's nerves, the journey to

the coast wasn't as long as the old predark maps indicated. In the months preceding the nukocaust, Soviet submarines had sown "earthshaker" bombs along fault lines in what was then called the Pacific. These detonated when the first mushroom clouds billowed over Washington, D.C. Thousands of square miles of California between the ocean and the Sierra Nevada split open, allowing the sea to come roaring through in mile-high tsunamis.

Now the Pacific coast was only twenty or so miles from the foothills of the Sierras. Once they crossed through Kings Canyon, the sea came into view. Port Morninglight wasn't difficult to find, since it was in the general vicinity of a predark ville named, appropriately enough, Porterville. The barony of Snakefish was located about seventy-five miles up the coast, where Fresno had once existed.

Brigid hadn't been sanguine about finding anyone in Port Morninglight inasmuch as the entire population had either been slaughtered or enslaved. The survivors had been marched away toward a redoubt in the Sierras. From there, they could be sent by gateway to Area 51, where their bodies would be processed for the raw genetic material the hybrids required.

Brigid presumed the Tigers of Heaven had escorted the people back to the settlement and returned with them to New Edo. Still, Ramirez had managed to locate at least one former citizen.

When the MCP chugged into the fishing port near sundown on the third day, they rolled over the shattered wreckage of a wooden palisade fence and then

past the burned-out husks of huts. Upon disembarking, they found fairly recent gravesites. Magistrates dispatched from Snakefish hadn't been so considerate of the dead, so somebody still resided in the little village. One of the thatch-roofed reed huts showed signs of habitation—primarily a huge collection of bones belonging to freshly filleted fish.

They saw no boats on the beach, but before they had time to curse their misfortune, Sky Dog's keen eyes spotted a speck moving across the heaving blue waves. Grant and Kane weren't wearing their

armor, but they drew their blasters just in case the approaching speck turned out to be hostile.

They waited on the shore with frothing waves lapping at their feet until the speck acquired definite shape and form. It was a small, single-masted sailboat piloted by an old man. He had a mop of white hair and a drooping leonine mustache.

Behind the boat bobbed a tightly woven net containing a writhing mass of trapped fish. The old man didn't seem perturbed or even surprised to see the quartet of people standing on the beach waiting for him, even though Brigid knew they must have presented a strange sight. He only squinted at them.

Since he didn't seem to be armed, Brigid waded through the shallows toward the boat's bow. The old fisherman could well have a knife or blaster hidden at the bottom of the boat, but he didn't look like much of a threat.

"Good afternoon," she said politely. "Do you live here?"

By way of a reply, the man tossed her a coil of rope and grunted, "Give me a pull, missy."

Brigid obliged, hauling on the rope as the old man climbed overboard and shoved from astern. When the prow grounded with a crunch of sand, he unhooked the net and struggled to drag it to shore. Glancing toward the three men he brayed, "Well, are you lame or what?"

Grant and Sky Dog waded out to help him land the net. Kane stayed where he was, his arms folded over his chest, his finger hovering over the trigger stud of his Sin Eater.

After the net and its catch were on the beach, the fisherman stated, "I'm the only one who lives here now. My name is Dubois. I was out at sea when the Mags attacked. I came back after they were gone and buried the bodies. Kiyomasa took the folks he rescued over to New Edo. I decided to stay here 'cause I don't care much for that damn spooky island of theirs. Last few days I seen patrol boats from Snakefish cruisin' up and down the coast, so I figured the baron must've heard a word or two about it from somewhere. Not from me, though."

He paused, looked challengingly into the faces of the people around him and demanded, "Satisfied?"

"You saved us a lot of interrogation time," Kane replied wryly.

"Good," snapped Dubois. "I hate answerin' questions. Anything I overlooked?"

"One thing," Grant said. "You don't seem too interested in who we are or why we're here."

Dubois snorted and began trudging across the beach, dragging the net behind him. "That's 'cause I know who you are...three of you, anyhow. Heard all about how you helped the Tigers whip the Mags." He cast a quizzical look toward Sky Dog. "Can't say as I recall them mentionin' the participation of an Injun."

Sky Dog chose to ignore the observation. Brigid said, "We need to get to New Edo. The whole island may be in danger."

Huffing and puffing, Dubois struggled to haul the net of fish toward the settlement. "Don't let me stop you, missy."

Grant said sternly, "We need your boat."

"You need more than that," Dubois said between little grunts of exertion. "You need to know where it is."

"We do know," Brigid replied, and crisply rattled off the longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates she had committed to memory.

Dubois didn't appear to be impressed. "You'd make me feel a whole lot more charitable if one of you strapping youngsters gave an old man a hand."

Grant and Kane took the net from him and carried it to the hut holding the pile of fishbones. As they did so, Brigid explained to Dubois why they feared for the safety of New Edo. Dubois listened with an impassive expression and declared, "Wouldn't surprise me none if ol' Baron Snakefish launched a patrol boat or two to intercept you here."

"We may have been followed overland as it is," Kane said grimly.

Dubois eyed the parked MCP. "A blind cripple wouldn't have no trouble followin' the trail that monster would leave."

Impatiently, Grant said, "Goddammit, you old fart—will you lend us the use of your boat or not?"

"What if I say no?"

With a note of weary exasperation underscoring his voice, Kane asked, "What do you think?"

The old man stroked his mustache. "I 'spect you'd just take it. That be just like Mags...which I heard you two were at one time."

"If we were just like Mags," Grant shot back hotly, "we'd shoot your scrawny ass and just take your boat."

Dubois grinned, exposing brown, cavity-speckled teeth. "I 'spect you would. But none of you look like quarterdeck breed to me. I don't want to lose my boat, so I'll take you to New Edo myself. It's about an eight-hour voyage, so we'll leave about midnight."

"Midnight?" Kane echoed uneasily. He glanced at the seemingly limitless blue expanse of the Cific Ocean. The idea of setting sail in the dark didn't comfort him.

"Full moon tonight," Dubois replied sagely. "Calm waters. An' if any patrol boats are out from Snakefish, we'll have a better chance of sneakin' right past 'em."

Brigid, Kane and Grant exchanged swift, questioning looks, then they agreed. They returned to the

MCP and unloaded equipment from it. Grant told Sky Dog to take the vehicle back to his village. The shaman, though given some training in driving the mammoth machine, didn't look particularly confident in his ability.

"How will you three get back?" he asked.

Brigid replied, "There's a redoubt about twenty miles away with a gateway unit. We'll use that to jump back to Cerberus."

Although they had explained the mat-trans network and the scientific principles upon which it was based, Sky Dog hadn't completely accepted such a manner of travel. He didn't argue with them. His Concern for his wounded men was overwhelming, and he knew they stood a better chance of recovering from their injuries among their own people.

Fortunately, Port Morninglight had an ample supply of fresh water, and they replenished the MCP's dwindling reserves. Now that there were three less people to keep alive, the water should last them on the trip back.

They spent the rest of the evening eating, checking out their ordnance and resting. Shortly before midnight, Kane, Brigid and Grant exchanged grave goodbyes with Sky Dog and his warriors. They loaded the fishing boat with their possessions and set sail.

The little ship moved swiftly across the sea, her sail filled by the thrust of the wind. The surface of the Pacific parted before her prow in silent ripples. Du-bois knew what he was doing, whereas his passengers did not, so he attended to the rigging, tacking and

furling. After the first hour of swinging the boom arm back and forth, and nearly braining all three of them at least once, he managed to achieve the navigational course he wanted. After that, he drowsed over the sweep.

Despite being on the open waters, the humidity was oppressive. Sweat gathered on everyone's faces, and their shirts stuck to their backs. There was something oppressively ominous about the sea itself. Brigid remembered how the ocean's name, the Pacific, was something of a deliberate misnomer. According to nautical lore, the Pacific Ocean was anything but placid, but then nothing in her life had been for the past year or so.

She cast a glance toward Kane, lying half-prone in the bow, his hand propping up his chin. She couldn't tell if his eyes were open, and even if he were napping, the slightest change in speed or direction would probably awaken him. Brigid considered trying to engage him in conversation, but all of her attempts during the journey from Area 51 had met with either monosyllables or a request to be left alone.

She hadn't been offended, though she knew she should have been. Something had happened to him that went deeper than either grief or guilt over Domi's death. Although she had often thought Kane was one of the most emotional men she had ever met, that didn't mean he always expressed what he was feeling.

Brigid knew he turned his grief over Domi's death inward, presenting only a detached mask to her and everyone else. She could relate to his reaction. During

her years as an archivist in Cobaltville's Historical Division, Brigid had perfected a poker face. Because historians were always watched, it didn't do for them to show emotional reaction to a scrap of knowledge that might have escaped the censor's notice. Grant obviously didn't want to talk about it, either, so she gave the two men the privacy they wanted and needed. Both were obviously grappling with their emotions, trying to come to terms with Domi's death.

In many ways, Brigid reflected, she, Kane and Grant had spent most of their exile trying to accept and come to terms with new knowledge and perspectives. Even after all this time, Brigid still had difficulty accepting what she had learned about the nuke-caust and the so-called Archon Directorate's involvement in it. Until a year or so ago, neither she, Grant or Kane had even the vaguest inkling of the existence of the Archons, much less the fact that they had coexisted with humanity and directed human

affairs for thousands of years.

Brigid rested her chin on her knees, desperately wishing she had something to think about other than what they had all lost over the past year. She watched the sun climb a handbreadth above the flat horizon, trying to concentrate on its beauty. A cluster of clouds wreathed the bottom edge of the sun. Beneath them, a dark shape rose from the sea.

"We're coming to the strait," Dubois suddenly announced. "Almost there. I hope you three will be welcome after what we'll go through getting into the damn place."

Chapter 19

"See there?" Dubois pointed, and Grant made out the shadowy cliffs looming up from the horizon. "There's a channel we have to navigate. It's some wild water, but once we're through it we'll be in New Edo."

He altered course to port, saying happily, "It's a sweet ride, if you like that sort of thing."

His passengers offered no comment. When Grant saw the island, he could barely restrain a sigh of relief. He desperately wanted to get out of the company of Kane and Brigid, at least for a few hours. His mind kept replaying his last sight of Domi, her small figure vanishing in a blinding flare of light. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her standing there, her arm poised to hurl the gren, like a poorly edited vid tape on continuous loop. The image lingered in his heart and head, like a wound that refused to heal.

Grant had gone through his life feeling he always knew what should be done and when, and the death of Domi proved he had deluded himself. He realized he hadn't known her, not really. Until a month or so ago, he had deliberately dismissed her as something of a caricature of an outlander, having only a set of characteristics not a true identity. It hadn't occurred

to him they had forged a relationship deeper than he knew or cared to admit.

In the past he had tried to cite the age difference as the reason he didn't want to get involved with her, sexually or otherwise. Domi had been patient and understanding for a year but grew tired of waiting. In truth, Grant had deliberately maintained a distance between himself and Domi so if either she or he died—or simply went away—the vacuum wouldn't be so difficult to endure. He recalled with crystal clarity what she had said to him a month or so ago when she confronted him: "If you can't do it, if you're impotent, then let me know right now so I can make plans."

When he angrily denied a physical disability was the reason, she snarled, "Then it is me, you lying sack of shit." With contempt dripping from every syllable, she said, "Big man, big chest, big shoulders, legs like trees. Guess they don't tell the story, huh?"

That was the last private conversation they had. Her angry outburst cut him like a knife, and now he burned from the brand of his own regret. When he remembered the recrimination in her voice, he knew he couldn't make up for anything he had done to use her.

Grant glanced at Kane. He was only a few feet away, but he exuded such an aura of isolation he might as well have been in another dimension. There was an emotional distance between them for similar reasons. If one were lost, the other could go on. He suspected that what kept Kane silent and distant was

not the fresh trauma he might have suffered in Area 51 but guilt. Because the gren had been in his hand, he felt Domi's life had been in it, too.

By Grant's way of thinking, Kane was purposefully punishing himself, but the man had always exhibited some peculiar whims when it came to setting standards of success and failure. He had partnered with Kane for many years and still didn't fully understand him. But the years they had spent together, fighting on the same side and guarding each other's back, hadn't made them much closer than the first day they had met.

He suddenly decided the distance he had observed with Domi, like the distance Kane maintained with Brigid and both of them demonstrated with each other, wasn't about remaining self-reliant—it was about a fear of commitment, a terror of not being able to accept the potential for personal loss or control the fates of others.

He remembered his helplessness and rage when Olivia had been torn from him by the caste standards of the villes. He could only watch as she fell away from him and his life. Her absence was never filled, but the pain it left strengthened him—he had silently vowed never to let anyone take control from him again. Now, because of that vow, guilt filled him like a cup. The taste of self-loathing was a bitter coating on his tongue and soul.

Grant focused his vision and concentration on the island, which grew closer with every passing minute. The rising sun reflected blindingly from the water as

if the Cific were a huge mirror, forcing everyone to put on sunglasses. From his pocket, he took the compact set of microbinoculars and scanned the irregular J hump rising out of the horizon. ^

The seas grew rougher as the sailboat pushed through the waters, skipping on the chop like a flat stone on a pond. Grant tried to keep the binoculars trained on the island, though with the way the boat bounced, it wasn't easy. The bridge of his nose was sore by the time he was able to pick out more details. -|J He saw that the island was the largest of a smaller i string consisting of four islets. The main landmass reared out of the sea like a massive cube of black volcanic rock, but he saw green vegetation on the summit of a small peak. Atop it he discerned the outline of a watch or bell tower. Castellated cliffs loomed at least a hundred feet above the surface of the Cific. Thundering waves crashed and broke on the bare rock, foaming spray flying in all directions.

Dubois worked the steering sweep, and the little ship began to pick up speed. He directed it into the grip of a current that swept toward the cliffs, like a thin river racing more swiftly than the sea itself. The dark walls seemed to plunge toward them. Kane turned toward the old man, demanding, "Are we supposed climb those damn cliffs?"

Shaking his head, Dubois said, "There's a passage. |l You just have to know where to look for it."

Grant squinted through the eyepieces toward the rock walls. At first, he could see no passage what- ;
soever. Then, suddenly, a narrow streak of light ap-

peared. The sea heaved under the boat as Dubois steered it closer. The gap widened and became a gushing channel swirling around broken rocks, spray rising like smoke.

Dubois swiftly furled the sail as the current caught the boat. The ship quivered, sprang ahead, then tore

like a wild animal into the heart of the churning, foaming strait. In spite of himself, Grant's hands tightened on the gunwales of the fishing boat as it rushed along the wild sweep of the current. Mist and spray swirled past the prow. The old man threw back his head and made a yelping outcry of pure exultation.

The fishing boat plunged into the strait between the slick, seaweed-draped walls of the narrow channel. It pitched and jumped as it followed the twisting passage. The boat picked up speed, shooting forward, threading its way between upthrusts of pitted rock. Everyone and everything was drenched by the cresting waves and flying foam.

The strait widened, and with startling abruptness the boat plunged into a lagoon. Even within the inlet, the sea was turbulent and swells threatened to pile the vessel up on the rocks. Dubois tilted his head back and shouted, "*Hin'yuu! Hin'yuu!*"

An upward glance showed Grant that the walls of the strait were defended on both sides. Squat, boxlike structures were built over deep clefts in the cliff face. Behind them, sunlight winked from metal helmets. He also saw windlasses and ballista arms for the dropping and drawing of nets across the narrow passage. According to Kiyomasa, New Edo had reason for such

defenses. Not only had the settlers fled from political strife on Japan, but also the inhabitants of other Western Islands depended on piracy and plunder.

The boiling sea calmed the farther the ship moved from the throat of the strait. It seemed to Grant the boat barely moved. His impatience and the subtle sense of danger deepened. Dubois unfurled the sail and when a breeze filled it, he steered the ship toward a stone jetty on the far side of the lagoon. Several quays and docks were built around a spit of volcanic rock that jutted into the blue waters. A cluster of vessels was tied up there, mainly barges and skiffs, but he saw three large vessels that had all the characteristics of warships.

They were all of a type, riding high above the waterline, consisting of sharp angles, arches and buttresses. The sails didn't look like broadcloth. They reminded him of window blinds made of a waxed and oiled paper. He, Kane and Brigid had seen similar craft before, on the island of Autarkic. As he recollected, the ships were called junks. Beyond the ships and the docks, he saw a crescent of a white sandy beach, bracketed by stunted palm trees and tropical ferns.

The port wasn't a beehive of activity. Only a few people, most of them wearing a simple ensemble of cotton T-shirts and shorts, seemed to be at the waterfront area. Green nets hung from pilings and were spread out over the docks. It struck Grant as decidedly odd that no fishermen were out at sea, particularly so early in the day.

Dubois docked the sailboat at the jetty. Kane tossed the mooring line to a boy who called Dubois by name. He tied it expertly around a cleat bolted into a support post. All of them disembarked, but no one spoke to them. The people moved away, giving them surreptitious up-from-under looks. "Something's wrong here," Brigid commented uneasily.

No sooner had she spoken than the tramp of many running feet reached them. Along a cobbled path that twisted between the foliage jogged a troop of armored figures.

"Setting loose the tigers on guests doesn't seem very hospitable," Kane commented.

Grant and Brigid silently agreed with his observation. The Tigers of Heaven were attired in suits of segmented armor made from wafers of metal held together by small, delicate chain. Overlaid with a dark

brown lacquer, the interlocked and overlapping plates were trimmed in scarlet and gold. Between flaring shoulder epaulets, war helmets fanned out with sweeping curves of metal. Some resembled wings, others horns. The face guards, wrought of a semi-transparent material, presented the inhuman visage of a snarling tiger.

Quivers of arrows dangled from their shoulders, and longbows made of lacquered wood were strapped to their backs. Each samurai carried two longswords in black scabbards swinging back from each hip. None of them carried firearms, but their skill with the *katanas* and the bows was such they didn't really need them. Besides, Grant knew the few blasters they

had at their disposal were hardly state-of-the-art. He had been told that ammunition was hard to come by, nor did New Edo have the natural resources to manufacture it themselves.

The troop, consisting of fourteen Tigers, collected *in a* knot at the far end of the dock. One samurai marched toward them, his gait aggressive, the wooden planks thumping hollowly under his boots. In one hand he carried a weapon that resembled a sheaving scythe topping a five-foot-long wooden staff wrapped by many turnings of rawhide. The polished, curving blade glinted in the sunlight. Its edge looked exceptionally sharp, and Grant briefly wondered if the process that made the *katonos* so razor keen had been applied to it.

Brigid said, under her breath, "He's carrying a *na-ginata*...a weapon better suited for foot soldiers than samurai. It's a butcher's weapon."

Grant and Kane eyed his approach dispassionately, but both of them unconsciously began tensing their wrist tendons just in case their Sin Eaters were needed.

The samurai halted abruptly and regarded the four people coldly. His helmet's visor was up, and they saw he was much younger than they expected, perhaps only in his early twenties. His body was square and strong, his legs long and straight. Still, he was slightly under medium height.

To Dubois, the samurai snapped, "Instead of trade goods, you bring us more gaijin?"

His English was excellent, which wasn't surprising.

According to Shizuka, English had developed into a second language, the tongue of business and politics.

The samurai's rudeness was uncharacteristic of the other Tigers they had met. Rather than react to it in kind, Grant said, "We're friends. My name is—"

"I know who you are," the man broke hi with an autocratic lift of his chin. "I've heard about you—all of you—for weeks now. The black samurai."

In a mild, inoffensive tone, Kane asked, "And may I inquire as to your name?"

"It is Shoki."

Kane nodded to him politely. "Well, Shoki, if you've heard about us, then you should have also heard we deserve a bit more respect than what you're showing. I'll attribute it to your youth and poor upbringing—this time."

Shoki's eyes flashed and spots of red appeared on his cheeks. His hand tightened around the handle of

the *naginata*. He opened his mouth to speak, but the clatter of hooves on cobblestones commanded his attention.

A roan horse cantered through the line of armored men, who quickly gave ground. A small, lithe figure sat on its back, easily controlling the horse with an air of authority. It was another Tiger of Heaven, but not wearing a helmet. When Grant saw who it was, he felt a surge of relief, comingled with intense happiness.

Shizuka reined her mount to a halt and vaulted lightly from the saddle. She spoke a stream of rapid-fire Japanese to the samurai, who instantly began

drifting away as if all of them had suddenly remembered something else they needed to do. She strode swiftly up the dock, and Shoki addressed her in angry tones, gesturing to Grant with his weapon. Her response was curt and sharp, and the young man backed away, casting his eyes downward.

Shizuka smiled at them all in turn. Her glossy black hair tumbled down over the shoulder epaulets of her armor, framing a smoothly sculpted face of extraordinary beauty. Her complexion was a very pale gold with roses and milk for an accent. The almond-shaped eyes held the fierce, proud gleam of a young eagle.

In flawless English she said, "I'm gratified to see all of you again." Her eyes never left Grant's face. "Truthfully, I did not expect it so soon."

"Neither did we," Brigid said.

Shizuka threw her a fleeting, almost apologetic smile. Her eyes narrowed. "Where is the ghost girl who accompanied you before?"

No one answered for a long moment. Finally, Kane intoned flatly, "She's no longer with us."

Shizuka bowed her head respectfully. "*Ah so desu ka*. I understand. I offer my condolences. She was a brave warrior."

In a strained voice, Brigid said, "We're here because the barons—one of them anyway—has learned of NewEdo."

Shizuka's lips compressed. "*Hoi*. We have observed mysterious craft in our waters over the past few days engaged in a search pattern. We knew our discovery was inevitable, but such an event could not have come at a worse time. We are torn by strife and discord."

Grant recollected Shizuka mentioning the disagreement between Captain Kiyomasa and the daimyo, Lord Takaun, about the path the future of New Edo should follow. Takaun wished to remain isolated and self-sufficient, while Kiyomasa wanted to expand New Edo's influence into the mainland and establish a colony on the Cific coast—a colony that would be within Baron Snakefish's territory.

"You'd better figure out a way to put your differences aside and make common cause," Grant said grimly. "I'm pretty sure we were followed to Port Morninglight by Magistrates." He hooked a thumb toward Dubois. "He told us he'd seen ville patrol boats, too."

Dubois nodded. "I have. That's one of the reasons I brought 'em here. Figured they might have some

information Lord Takaun could use."

Shizuka sighed and ran a hand through her raven's-wing hair. "We must bring this to him immediately."

She wheeled and began walking swiftly toward the end of the dock. "Follow me."

"What about our possessions?" Brigid called after her.

Shizuka spoke a few words to Shoki, who glowered in response but bowed deferentially as she passed by. "Shoki will be happy to bring them to the castle," she announced breezily.

Brigid, Kane and Grant fell into step behind her. Dubois elected to remain with his boat. Shizuka

didn't mount her horse but led it by the reins along the cobblestoned path.

Grant caught up to her. "What's Shoki's problem?"

She tried to shrug but it wasn't easy beneath her shoulder epaulets. "Besides being young and headstrong, he is committed to Lord Takaun's isolationist viewpoint. When we brought the survivors from the Port Morninglight massacre, he objected strenuously. He, like many others, feels that offering sanctuary to gaijin will only bring disaster down on us."

Grant pitched his voice low so Kane and Brigid couldn't hear over the clapping of the horse's hooves. "Seems like he has a personal problem with me."

Shizuka nodded, a faint smile playing over her beautifully shaped lips. "Shoki claims to be in love with me, the differences in our ages and rank notwithstanding. I fear he took the news very hard when I told him my heart was pledged to another."

Grant felt his stomach muscles jerk in reaction to her words. Disappointment felt like a knife turning in his guts, but he didn't allow it to show on his face. In a studiedly noncommittal tone, he asked, "Who is that? Another Tiger?"

"In a way." Shizuka raised her gaze, staring into his face directly and boldly. "A black tiger."

Chapter 20

The cobblestoned road wound up and around a series of gently rolling hills, all with green rich grass. Cattle grazed inside split-rail fences. Cultivated fields made a patchwork pattern over the terrain.

Gravel-covered footpaths branched off from the main thoroughfare, leading to modest single-level homes made primarily of carpentered driftwood.

Kane was struck by the overall cleanliness of the village. He saw no litter anywhere, and all the shrubbery and undergrowth was trimmed back neatly. Some of the hedgerows had been clipped into interesting shapes resembling cranes and snakes. The few people they encountered stared at them and bowed whenever eye contact was made.

They didn't whisper among themselves about the strangers, which Kane found a little strange. Other than the refugees from Port Morninglight, he doubted the New Edoans had seen so many gaijin that the

novelty had worn off. The tense silence that hung over the houses and paths was more nerve-racking than people talking and pointing at them.

At the top of a hill, Shizuka gestured and said, "There is the castle of our daimyo and the seat of New Edo government."

The fortress of Lord Takaun stretched like a slumbering animal among garden terraces. It was not particularly tall, but it sprawled out with many windows, balconies and carved frames. The columns supporting the many porches and loggias were made of lengths of thick bamboo, bent into unusual shapes. The upcurving roof arches and interlocking shingles all seemed to be made of lacquered wood. To Kane's eye, it was well laid out with deep moats on three sides and cliffs on the other. At the top of the walls were parapets and protected positions for archers and blastermen.

Kane was deeply impressed not just with the size of the fortress and its architecture, but the knowledge Takaun's people had accomplished so much in only eight years. Most of the Oudand settlements he had seen, even those that had existed for decades, generally resembled the temporary camps of nomads. An image of Domi's squalid settlement on the Snake River drifted through his mind, and he deliberately quashed the memory.

He recalled what Kiyomasa had said about their first few years on the island. He described the many problems that had to be overcome, referring to demons and monsters that haunted the craggy coves and inland forests. Kiyomasa claimed they possessed a malevolent intelligence and cruel sense of humor and would creep into the camp at night to urinate in the well water or defecate in the gardens. The House of Mashashige not only persevered, but it also thrived,

hacking out first a settlement then an entire city from the wilderness.

When they reached an outer gate of the castle, Shi-zuka handed the reins of her horse to a man wearing a black kimono and proceeded under the archway. A short bridge spanned one of the moats, leading to a cobblestoned footpath. The cobbled walk began to narrow as it became flanked by twenty-foot-high walls of highly polished bamboo without handholds. On either side of the fortress rose two corner towers, which Shizuka called *yagura*, that overlooked the road and the lagoon. Armed men stood atop the towers and patrolled the walls. Kane suspected there were others out of sight in the garden terraces and lowlands around the castle.

There was definitely something going on. The castle was on a battle alert, and the tension in the air was thick and palpable. Shizuka was greeted at the portal leading to the inner gate by a woman richly dressed in many layers of smoothly woven silk. Her face was whitened by powder and her cheeks rouged. She looked with a certain distaste at Kane and Grant but bowed to them anyway. She smiled at Brigid as she bowed.

Shizuka led her three guests down a passageway made of highly polished panels of wood. She said, "That was Yoshika, my sister. She decided to become a geisha rather than a samurai."

"It's nice to learn women in your society are given the choice," Brigid said dryly.

"Our society was changing even before skydark," Shizuka retorted a bit peevishly.

She stopped in front of a door made of opaque oiled paper and laths, guarded by a samurai. The man bowed to Shizuka and spoke softly to her. She turned to Kane and Grant. "I'm afraid you must give up your weapons if you wish an audience with the daimyo. It's palace etiquette and a security measure."

Kane and Grant exchanged long looks, then with shrugs, they undid the buckles and Velcro tabs on their forearm holsters and handed the Sin Eaters over to the guard. The man examined them curiously.

"Tell him not to fool around with them," Grant advised. "They're damn dangerous for a novice."

Shizuka repeated Grant's instructions in Japanese, but the samurai only smiled in response. He opened the door a crack and whispered to someone on the other side. A moment passed before a voice whispered back. The doors began to slide open, pulled by an attendant wearing a bright blue kimono. In the room beyond, seated cross-legged on the center of a long low dais and flanked by Captain Kiyomasa on his left, was Lord Takaun, daimyo of the House of Mashashige and ruler of New Edo.

Kane, Grant and Brigid kept their eyes on Shizuka and tried to emulate every movement. Shizuka entered first, bowing her head toward the tatami on the floor. Slightly behind her, the three guests did the same.

Takaun wasn't quite the impressive physical specimen they had expected, certainly not looking at all

like a man who commanded such respect and had forced the wild environment of the island to his will. He was slender and of medium height. He wore an unadorned black kimono, and the sword hilt protruding from his blue sash bore no ornamentation at all. His clean-shaved face was narrow, with heavy eyebrows above hooded eyes. His long black hair, shot through with silvery threads, was knotted at his nape by a coil of silver.

Except for eye and hair color, Kiyomasa was almost his exact opposite. His features were full fleshed with a sharp hooked nose set between and below heavy eyebrows. His eyes were very thin slits with no emotion in them. A thin mustache drooped at the corners of the grim, unsmiling slash of a mouth. There were faint hairline scars on his face and neck. He, too, carried a *katana*, and Kane took this to mean that despite their differences Takaun trusted him and was showing him respect by permitting him to have his weapon in his presence.

Lord Takaun motioned for them to come closer, but he did not invite them to sit on the floor mats. He studied all of their faces for a silent, tense tick of time. Kane became very aware of how unwashed and un-shaved he and Grant were. Even Brigid was unusually untidy.

Quietly, Takaun said, "Captain Kiyomasa has told me of your service to him, and through him, to me. He told me that you have slain the killers of our friends on the mainland."

Kane waited for Brigid or Grant to say something

in response. When they didn't, he murmured, "There is nothing like spilling the blood of a mutual enemy to make new friends."

The phrase was one Kiyomasa had employed upon their initial meeting, and he saw the samurai captain's eyes flicker briefly in appreciation. Lord Takaun acted as if he hadn't heard.

"Unfortunately," he continued in that same soft, apologetic tone, "it is with great regret and a certain degree of shame that I cannot offer you the welcome warriors such as yourselves deserve. I will permit you to remain here for the day, but you must leave by dawn tomorrow."

"That may not be wise," Grant rumbled.

Takaun raised a challenging eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"We didn't come here to freeload off you—we came to warn you. Patrol boats sent out from Baron Snakefish are scouring these waters. His Magistrates caught one of the survivors from Port Morninglight and he talked about you. They may not know the exact location of this island, but they have a good idea of New Edo's general vicinity. They'll reconce—reconnoiter—every island in this part of the Cific if they have to. It's only a matter of time before they find you."

Takaun clenched his jaws tightly. Scowling, he turned to Kiyomasa. "This is exactly what I feared would happen if we engaged in trade on the mainland. Now we must contend with threats from within, as well as without."

Kiyomasa grunted before he replied. "We don't know if we face an actual threat from either quarter as of yet."

"What kind of threat are you talking about?" Bri-gid asked.

Lord Takaun scrutinized her. "Are you the scholar my captain and his lieutenant spoke of?"

With a wan smile, Brigid answered, "I've been called that, yes."

"Then perhaps you may be of some further service to us other than acting as a portent of doom."

Brigid wasn't sure if the daimyo was being sarcastic or melodramatic, so she opted to remain silent. Takaun and Kiyomasa arose together, uncrossing their ankles, rocking forward on their knees and then on their heels. They came to their feet in one smooth, flowing motion. The two men strode across the room, Takaun gesturing for them to follow. Grant and Kane hesitated, but Shizuka whispered, "It's all right."

They joined the two men in an adjoining room with a balcony overlooking craggy rocks and a small bay. The rocks thrust up out of the foaming surf like the blunt fangs and led in an irregular path to a small islet. At the balcony's railing stood a tripod-mounted telescope. On a bookcase built into one wall was a curious collection of artifacts, all of which were out of place in the castle. Resting on one shelf, dented and dull, was a metal casque from the days of the conquistadores. On another was a crude knife made from a flake of flint, the handle wrapped with leather thongs. The blade was shaped somewhat like a laurel

leaf with deep lengthwise grooves on either side. A rusty flintlock pistol lay beside it. There were other items less recognizable.

Takaun directed his attention to a long, low table. Upon it lay an object covered in canvas. He said, "That thing was killed last night in bur rice fields. The farmer who killed it brought it here this morning. Captain Kiyomasa and I were discussing the implications of its discovery when you arrived."

Brigid stepped close as the daimyo whipped the stiff cloth aside in a theatrical gesture. She bit back a cry of surprise mixed in with incredulity. A long-necked and long-legged creature lay dead on the ta-bletop. From the tip of its whiplike tail to its blunt, scaled snout, she estimated it was about eight feet long. Clawed forelegs were drawn up to its chest, and its thickly muscled hind legs were equipped with three hooked talons. The legs were bent at the knee, so it looked smaller than it actually was.

Grant and Kane moved to either side of her, eyeing the mottled, red-striped scaly hide. Its open eyes were piercing black, holding a glassy sheen in death. The long underjaw gaped open slightly, revealing rows of needlelike fangs thrusting up from purple gums. A small bleeding hole showed in its chest, obviously made by an arrow that had penetrated its heart.

"What the hell is it?" Grant demanded. "Some kind of mutie?"

Brigid shook her head. In an enthralled half whisper she declared, "Not a mutie unless radiation can reverse the process of evolution. Paleontology isn't

my favorite field, but I know this is a dinosaur—a Dryosaurus...from the Jurassic period, I believe."

She poked its pebbled hide with a forefinger. "It's real."

Takaun snapped gruffly, "Of course it is."

Kane said skeptically, "That thing didn't come from the Jurassic period."

"No," Kiyomasa stated stolidly. He waved an arm toward the balcony. "It came from that little island."

Brigid swiveled her head toward him, lines of confused consternation creasing her forehead. "What?"

Lord Takaun nodded grimly. "When we first arrived here, we became aware of a cyclical phenomenon occurring on that isle."

"What kind of phenomenon?" she asked, her eyes glinting with interest.

"Lightning that seemed to strike up," the daimyo answered. "Or that's what it looked like. Sounds like thunder always came with it, that's why we named it Ikazuchi Kojima—Thunder Isle. We never knew if it really was thunder or what caused it. What we do know is that shortly thereafter, demons would make incursions here—or so some of my people claimed." He nodded toward Kiyomasa.

"There was evidence," the samurai commander bit out.

"Yes, there was evidence," Takaun agreed. "Footprints in our fields, signs that our food stores had been raided. Even animal spoor that could not be identified." He gestured toward the odd collection of artifacts on the shelves. "I sent an expedition to the isle,

and they brought those items back. I'm not a scholar like you, but I know that helmet comes from an era six hundred or more years in the past. And that knife from an even earlier time."

Brigid glanced at the knife and said, "It resembles a Folsom point, so named for Folsom, New Mexico, the archaeological site where the first one was found. It was evidence of a prehistoric culture, many thousands of years old."

"What the hell has a knife got to do with a dinosaur?" Grant demanded.

Takaun said, "I ask that same question and receive no answers. For the past five years, the phenomena have been very sporadic, occurring only a few times. Now a new cycle has begun, and it's happening far more regularly." He walked to the balcony and adjusted the telescope. "Take a look."

Brigid leaned down and squinted through the eyepiece. All she saw was an islet that resembled a saucer crafted from volcanic rock. It was almost bare of vegetation. "What am I looking for?" she asked.

"Keep watching," Takaun said.

Then light flickered and flashed somewhere on the surface of the black saucer. It wasn't an optical illusion. Squinting through the eyepiece, she tightened the focus. Light flickered again, white and bright, far too bright to be a reflection. Or if it was, the reflecting surface had to be gigantic. The flare had to have been blinding on the island. In the distance she heard a rumble. At first she thought it was thunder, but it was far too brief. It sounded more like a handclap.

She straightened, rubbing the flash-induced spots

from her eye. "Something's going on over there, but I'm afraid I can't offer even a provisional hypothesis without making a hands-on recce."

Kiyomasa declared, "We've sent our people over. Some found nothing, some never came back." He drew an index finger across his throat. "And some were found decapitated."

Grant remarked, "I recollect you mentioning that. I thought you were just being colorful."

Kiyomasa's lips twitched in an effort to repress either a smile or a frown. "Hardly, Grant-san."

"It seems to me," ventured Kane, "that the threat of Mags storming New Edo is a bit more immediate than a light show on that island and an overgrown lizard in your rice paddies."

Takaun cast him a glare. "Who is to say, gaijin? I know one thing for certain—your presence here will only serve to inflame the passions of my people who share my attitude toward contact with foreigners. I will treat you as guests for this day only. If you remain I'll treat you as prisoners. If you return, I'll have no choice but to treat you like invaders."

Brigid said icily, "You have some very peculiar notions of gratitude. We came here to warn you and offer our help."

"And you may have drawn to our shores the very forces for which we would need your help." Takaun's thick eyebrows drew down over the bridge of his nose. "Did Shizuka or the captain happen to mention the Black Dragon Society to you?"

When the daimyo received headshakes from the three outlanders, he planted his hands on his hips and

stated, "Not everything we brought from our homeland is good. Three centuries or so ago, when the old feudal system of Nippon ended, a group of *ronin*, masterless and unemployed samurai, formed an organization to fight the spread of Western influence. They were terrorists of the most extreme kind, rabidly xenophobic. It has been revived here."

' In New Edo?' Brigid inquired suspiciously. "Af-ter all this time?"

"Sects of that nature never die out completely. There are always messianic fanatics to breathe new life into them."

"This just gets better and better." Kane didn't even try to disguise the sarcasm in his voice. "New Edo

isn't so big they can stay hidden from the Tigers of Heaven."

Takaun nodded in sour agreement. "They can hide in plain sight, since most of the Black Dragons are drawn from the ranks of the samurai trainees. They are young and are utterly devoted to *otoko ni michi*, the manly and honorable samurai tradition. That's why I cannot afford to imprison, execute or exile any of them I suspect of being a member. Unlike my captain here, I am not willing to alienate the samurai. Therefore, though I wish it were otherwise, I won't countenance any further trade with the mainland peoples. If I do so, I risk a rebellion, perhaps even a coup."

He passed a weary hand over his forehead and added sadly, "I hope you understand my position."

Without waiting for a response, the daimyo pushed past them and returned to the audience chamber.

Kane, Brigid, Grant and Kiyomasa followed him. As they entered, they saw the attendant pull open the door, allowing Shoki to come in. He carried their packs of armor and equipment. Takaun spoke to him impatiently, and Shoki immediately backed out with the packs.

Kane made a motion to go after him, but Kiyomasa caught his eye and shook his head. Turning to Takaun, Kane said, "With all respect, we'd prefer to have our weapons, especially after what you just told us about these Black Dragons of yours."

Lord Takaun reseated himself at the dais. "If the Black Dragons learn I allow you to stay here in the palace bearing weapons, then your safety most certainly will be in question."

"In that case," Kane said, a steel edge in his voice, "we won't stay in the palace. Give us back our possessions and we'll leave right now."

Takaun shook his head. "Not during daylight hours. You could be spotted by patrol boats. No, you will remain here at least until after dark. I will provide you with food, quarters and even baths if you so desire."

He spoke so tersely and flatly, everyone knew he was signifying that the audience and the conversation were over. Both Kane and Grant stared at him with narrowed eyes, but Shizuka stepped up between them. "Come with me." In a whisper, she said, "There's no point in arguing. So please, come with me."

Chapter 21

The room Kane was given was small, with a futon and wooden pillow for sleeping and a few scraps of furniture. Before he was allowed to enter it, Shizuka bade him to take off his shoes and socks. He did so, noting that she didn't so much as wrinkle her nose at the ripe odor. Once the door was closed, he removed the nickel-plated Mustang .380 from beneath his shirt where he had stuck it in his waistband before disembarking from Dubois's fishing boat. He hid it beneath the futon mattress.

A few minutes later, a small girl barely into her teens brought him a covered dish of warm bean curd and rice with a little ceramic pot of tea. She seemed afraid of him and wasn't inclined to linger. He ate and drank without tasting the food and then lay on the futon, staring up at the accordion-like paper lantern hanging from a roof beam. He was so tired even the square block of wood serving as a pillow felt as soft as a mass of cotton wadding.

He hungered for a cigar, but Grant had neglected to bring any along from Cerberus. Dreamland had

apparently been a nosmoking facility, since he hadn't seen or smelled any tobacco there.

Kane tried very hard to think of anything but Domi,

but the treacherous human mind always zeroed in on the most painful subject. He had no trouble admitting to himself that not only had he yet to come to terms with her death, but also he couldn't even grasp the concept except in the most abstract way. The very notion slipped through the fingers of his mind like a wisp of smoke.

It wasn't as if he didn't recognize the inevitability of death. He was accustomed to a lot of inevitables—loneliness, pain, fear, the emptiness of dreams. He had accepted all of them with equanimity, yet he couldn't accept the fact Domi was truly dead. Something inside of him, almost instinctual, refused to acknowledge it. He knew his denial was due in part to his ingrained opposition to blindly embracing the superficial. Although he wasn't an expert on explosives, he was fairly certain imploding grenades couldn't vaporize targets without leaving some trace—a spattering of blood, a scrap of bone, a hank of hair.

A suspicion lurked at the very back of his mind that what he had seen, what all of them had seen, wasn't Domi dying. A subliminal afterimage of an object or movement at the very instant of detonation bobbed at the fringes of his memory, but his conscious mind couldn't analyze it.

On a more visceral level, Domi's death simply *felt* wrong, as if it weren't supposed to have happened. It was an error, a miscalculation like the alternate event horizon Lakesh postulated that had set into motion the events leading to the nukocaust.

There was more to it than that, of course. He hadn't

known Domi, not really. The compassion she'd displayed for the dying hybrid babies had profoundly shaken him. He closed his eyes and tried to work up a bitter laugh at his ridiculous theorizing. He recognized the symptoms of shock and tension. His aching muscles screamed at him to be allowed to relax, and his mind begged him to go to sleep. But every time he closed his eyes, the vision of Domi being swallowed by a blaze of light crowded into his mind, pushing aside all other thoughts. He had been trained to catch sleep whenever he could, so as to build up a reserve, in case he had to go for long periods without it. He began a relaxation exercise, regulating his breathing. By degrees he allowed the waves of sleep to wash over him. Just as he drifted off, he heard his own voice whisper, "She's not dead."

His sleep was fitful, disturbed by the choppy fragments of dreams and none of the pieces made any sense. He heard someone from far, far away calling his name, asking him if he was all right. He realized the voice was not wafting from a dream but from somewhere above him.

With great effort, Kane forced his eyes to open. The room was dim and all he could see for a moment was a blurred halo of gold falling in waves around a pale, indistinct face. He blinked repeatedly, and Brigid Baptiste's face came into focus and sharpened into clarity.

She knelt on the floor beside the futon, her emerald eyes intense and worried. "Kane—answer me. Are you all right?"

Knuckling his eyes, he pushed himself up to his

elbows and looked around. Diffuse late-afternoon sunlight slanted in through the opaque paper and wood door, casting golden highlights in Brigid's mane of hair. He saw she was wearing a sky-blue

kimono with a heron embroidered on the left breast in red thread. She looked very clean, and he caught a delightful whiff of sandalwood and soap.

"Yeah," he grunted, clearing a dry-as-dust throat. "Why wouldn't I be all right?"

"I heard you out in the hallway. You were moaning, talking in your sleep."

Kane hiked up to a sitting position, dry-scrubbing his itchy scalp with his fingers. Embarrassed but refusing to show it, he asked, "Did you hear anything you can use against me?"

Brigid didn't answer immediately. When she did, her voice was pitched low to disguise the tremor in her voice. "It sounded like you were saying 'she's not dead.'"

Kane reached for the ceramic pot on the little table. It still held a couple of mouthfuls of tea, and though it was cold and bitter, he gulped it down.

"But she is, Kane." Brigid spoke barely above a whisper. "None of us have had the time to deal with what happened to Domi, but all of us have to accept it. She's gone."

"We didn't see a body." He spoke more harshly than he intended.

A line of worry creased Brigid's high forehead. "Is that what it'll take to convince you—a maimed corpse?"

"It would be more convincing than *not* seeing any corpse at all, maimed or otherwise."

Testily, she said, "Kane, her body was probably drawn into the vacuum and completely compressed. After the effect passed, it was scattered all over the hangar."

Kane angled an eyebrow at her. "When did you become an expert on implode greys?"

"I'm not. But I've become something of an expert on you over the past year or so. Something happened to you in Area 51, something you don't want to talk about or even want to remember. I sense it—I can see it in your eyes."

Trying but failing to squash a rise of annoyance, he demanded, "What makes you so sure?"

Calmly, Brigid replied, "Simple logic, for one thing. If Baron Cobalt occupied the place, he wouldn't have been content to simply toss you in a cell and keep you a prisoner. He would've devised some kind of torture but one that served his interests, too. I don't see any marks on your body, so whatever he did to you wasn't primarily physical. Whatever he did to you, maybe even to Domi, is something you're loath to tell me or even Grant about."

Kane glared at her, opening his mouth, closing it, then shaking his head in resignation. A profanity-salted sigh issued from between his lips. "Baptiste, if I told you about it, you'd be very sorry that I did. It's over now. What we should concern ourselves with is a war between the barons and this so-called im-

perator. We've got to get back to Cerberus as soon as possible. Lakesh can—"

"You're obfuscating," she snapped.

"Fluently. And I'm hungry as hell, too. And I've got to pee. So what's your point?"

She only stared at him steadily.

Kane inhaled a deep breath. "Baptiste, do you remember when you learned you were barren?"

She jerked slightly in reaction to his question, but she nodded.

"I learned about it, too, but I didn't ask you about it. I waited until you were ready to tell me. I respected your privacy. I'm asking you to show me that same kind of consideration."

Brigid nodded again. "Understood. So when you're ready, you'll talk about it?"

He forced a smile. "You'll be the first to know."

She tried to match his smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. "That might offend Grant."

"He offends too easy nowadays as it is. Where is he, anyway?"

She gestured toward the wall. "He woke up a while ago and went to the bathhouse." Her smile widened. "You could probably benefit from a visit yourself."

Kane ran a hand over his jawline, producing a sound like sandpaper being drawn over a rasp. He sniffed the collar of his shirt and murmured in horror, "Almighty God."

Brigid laughed, and the chain of tension stretched between them relaxed. She rose to her feet and offered him a hand. He took it and she helped him to

his feet. He stumbled slightly, and she reached out to steady him. For an instant they stood very close together.

Gazing into the jade depths of her eyes, he said falteringly, "I want to thank you again for—"

The black-robed-and-hooded man chose that instant to slash through the rear wall with a *katana*.

THE BATHHOUSE WAS at the rear of the palace and was surrounded by tidily trimmed thickets and little rock gardens. From the exterior, it looked like a storage building made of stone and wood. Grant entered, ducking his head beneath the low doorway, and saw polished wood floors, benches and a large above-ground tub. The far wall was made of the oiled paper and laths he had seen in the other parts of the fortress.

The circular tub was about ten feet in diameter with a bench running around the inside, all of it made of planks of seasoned hardwood and sealed with pitch. It rose three feet above the floor. As Grant entered, he saw that it was already three-quarters full. Two girls poured buckets of steaming water into it. They were small and petite, wearing loosely woven shifts that left their arms and most of their legs bare.

They bowed to him as he entered and, by hand gestures, indicated he should disrobe. He unlaced his boots and stepped out of them. After he shrugged out of his shirt, he stood and waited as one of the girls topped off the tub with a final bucket of water. The other one tugged at his pants. Grant glowered down

at her and held her small hand where it was. She looked up at him and said a few words in an exasperated tone, gesturing to the tub with her other hand.

Grant told himself he wasn't the first naked man they'd ever seen and probably wouldn't be the last. Reluctantly, he unbuckled his belt, undid the snaps on his trousers and dropped them, as well as his underwear. Both girls gazed at him for a long silent moment, their dark eyes widening as far as the epicanthic folds allowed.

They quickly averted their faces, giggling into their hands. Grant felt a hot flush of irritation and embarrassment spread up his neck. Then the truth dawned on him. The girls had never seen a gaijin male unclothed before, and he guessed that the average penile size of their men was more than likely in direct proportion to their bodies. Grant wasn't a small man regardless of how he was measured, either in height, breadth, length or thickness. To them he must have seemed like a giant out of one of their legends—in more ways than one.

He climbed into the tub and sat on the bench, making shooing motions with his hands. Rather reluctantly, the two girls left the room. He splashed water over his face and chest. His joints were stiff, his muscles aching. A dull headache throbbed at the back of his skull. Leaning over the edge of the tub, he removed his straight razor from the kit bag.

After a few minutes of insistent arguing earlier in the day, Shizuka had arranged for the return of his bag. It was waiting for him when he awoke from his

day-long slumber. When he passed Brigid on the way back from the bathhouse they spoke for a couple of minutes, both of them hoping that when and if dinner was served, it would be a bit more substantial than bean curd and rice.

Covering his face with soap suds, he shaved away more than a week's worth of whiskers from his face. He rarely used the razor as a personal grooming tool. He usually carried it out in the field as a hideout weapon, a way to cut and slash high odds down to his favor.

He rinsed his face and filled a bucketful of water and let it trickle across the back of his neck, the muscles of which felt like clenched fists. Even sleeping for nearly eight hours hadn't relaxed him. He poured more water over his head, hoping it would wash away the residue of his dreams.

He couldn't really remember them, but he knew Domi figured in them prominently. Although Grant had witnessed the deaths of many people, he still would not have been surprised if she popped her white-haired head up above the rim of the tub and chirped, "Had you big-time fooled, didn't I?"

He told himself she never would. The dead never returned to life like that. Leaning back, arms propped on the edge of the tub, he was content to soak and doze for what seemed like an hour. When fingers touched the back of his neck, his body snapped taut like a bowstring and he spun on the bench, sloshing water out of the tub.

"Do you wish me to massage you?"

Grant expected to see one of the serving girls. His mouth gaped open when he saw Shizuka standing there, backlit by the lantern. She was dressed in the same short white linen shift as the female attendants, and with her raven hair hanging loose and free she was heart-wrenchingly lovely. His blood seemed to race through his arteries like stampeding horses.

Grant tried to sound casual, but knew he failed at it when he replied, "If you have nothing better to do..."

Shizuka chuckled. "I don't. I can make it as prolonged or as delightful as you wish."

"Let's just see how it goes."

Grant put his back against the wall of the tub, and she leaned into him, working at the thick muscles of his neck and shoulders with surprisingly strong, practiced fingers. As she kneaded the tendons, he felt the soft brush of her hair against his bare shoulder. Within minutes, the pressure of her fingertips pushed out the stiffness and undid the knots in his muscles. He noticed his headache was receding, as well.

He felt the gentle touch of her soft, budlike lips as Shizuka kissed the side of his neck. Her hands went around him to his chest, and he felt the teasing pressure of her breasts pressing against his back. Her hands trailed across his chest, one sharp nail tracing a thin line over his belly.

Grant caught his breath sharply, and her hand paused. "What is it?"

Although he felt his muscles tightening under her touch, he husked out, "It's been a long time for me,

Shizuka. A very long time. And I don't know if this is the right time—".

Her dark eyes looked liquid. "You feel you would be unfaithful to your little ghost girl?"

"No—yes. No. There was nothing like this between us."

Shizuka kissed the side of his face. "What was between you, then?"

Grant shifted uncomfortably on the bench as his penis engorged and thickened. He tried to ignore it as he began to talk. He rarely spoke of his past, of personal matters, but now he told her of his life.

He spoke of his youth in Cobaltville, of his heritage as a Magistrate and how he abided by the family tradition to become one himself. He told her of his many long years as a spiritually and legally sanctioned killer, using only violence to impose order on the baron's definition of chaos.

His voice low, he described some of his bloody deeds as a Mag and the wounds he incurred, not only of body but of soul. When he spoke of Olivia, he cursed the slight quaver in his voice, and he noticed how Shizuka's lips pursed momentarily.

He told her of his many uncertainties in life but revealed to her the one thing he was certain of— sooner or later, pain or death or both came to all who got too close to him.

Shizuka shook her head and pressed her cheek against the side of his face. "A sad tale, Grant-san."

He forced a lopsided grin. "Compared to some of the suffering I've seen, it's not sad at all."

Shizuka kissed him, her lips moving from his cheek to his lips. "But still your warrior's heart suffers. Let me ease it a bit."

Shizuka's fingers trailed down his belly again to his groin. They found his erection, and she let out a brief, startled murmur. Her hand encircled his shaft, hefting him, measuring him with curious but gentle fingers. Shizuka undid the drawstrings on her shift and gracefully slid out of it at the same time she slid over the

rim of the tub.

"Is this part of the samurai code?" Grant muttered.

She laughed melodiously and caught his hand. "I'm amending it just this once."

Shizuka guided his hand to the firm swell of her small but perfectly shaped breast. He felt the gem-hard nipple pressing against his callused palm. Leaning forward, he kissed her yielding mouth as he ran his free hand over the smooth, taut skin of her shoulders.

Then the same mad passion that had consumed him on the night they had first met after the battle with the Cobaltville Magistrates engulfed him again. He showered her face, throat and breasts with kisses.

Panting, Shizuka straddled his thighs, putting her knees on the bench. Claspng her hands at the back of his neck, her forearms resting on the broad yoke of his shoulders, she began lowering herself on him. When he felt her velvety warmth on the swollen tip of his shaft, he couldn't repress a groan.

Shizuka groaned, too, as she worked his rock-hard

length into her. Her hips moved back and forth. She bit her lower lip, her face a mask of concentration.

When he was fully embedded within the heat of her, Grant cradled her buttocks with his big hands and set a steady rhythm, lifting her up to him while he lunged upward with his hips. Voicing a keening cry, Shizuka thrust up and down, gasping, whimpering and moaning. She clutched at his biceps, her fingernails digging into the flesh.

Steam and lust and sweat blinded him. He tongued the desire-hard nipples of her breasts, and her body suddenly stiffened. Back arching, she convulsed and shuddered in a spasming orgasm so fierce and unrestrained that Grant began trembling in a contraction. Gripping her tightly by the waist, he burst deep inside her, an eruption of liquid fire that seemed to last forever.

Grant embraced her while both of them trembled through the aftermath of their mutual release. His senses slowly returned to him and Shizuka breathed a long, final sigh of satisfaction. Her liquid brown eyes gazed steadily into his and she whispered, "Grant-san, I am so glad the winds of fate blew you here."

He smiled. "Me, too, even if I didn't have anything in mind except to get a bath."

Shizuka stared at him, puzzled, then she threw her head back and laughed in genuine amusement. She pulled away from him and leaned against the side of the tub, her head tilted back, eyes closed. "I think I'll rest for a minute or ten."

Grant waited until his respiration had returned to normal, then climbed out of the tub. He took a towel from a bench and rubbed his chest and shoulders dry. As he turned to hand the towel to her, Shoki came through the door in a lunge.

Chapter 22

Kane straight-armed Brigid out of the path of the black-garbed man. He dived for the futon and the blaster hidden beneath it.

The swordsman launched himself forward, the long, slightly curved blade cutting a whipping path through the air toward his head.

Kane managed to drop to a half-crouch and duck as the *katana* slashed over his head. Snatching at the futon, he yanked it from the floor and flung it at the hooded assassin. The sword edge hacked through it, sending up a spray of chicken feathers. He stabbed his hand out for the Mustang .380, but the *katana* chopped into the floor a quarter of an inch from his middle finger.

As Kane threw himself backward, the man kicked out with a slippered foot and sent the blaster skittering across the room. Kane managed to grab the wooden-block pillow, and he held it before him between both hands. A snarling, contemptuous laugh issued from beneath the black hood. The *katana* rose and fell in a lightning-quick motion, and the pillow fell from Kane's hands, sliced neatly in two. The assassin spun gracefully on the ball of one foot and thrust the sword at Kane's midsection.

Kane sidestepped, feeling the blade cut through his shirt right over his left ribs. As the blade cut a flat arc toward his throat, Kane flung himself across the room in a backward somersault, rolling into a ball to make himself a smaller target. Then muzzle-flashes strobed in the gathering shadows of the room and three shots cracked, one following the other so closely they sounded like a single report. The thunder of the gunfire was deafening. The flimsy walls of the room beat it back and magnified it.

The swordsman jerked and doubled over, bleeding from three wounds in his belly. He fell facedown barely two feet from Kane's position on the floor, rendered unconscious by the shock of the triple shots fired at such close quarters.

Brigid, holding the Mustang in a double-handed grip, her legs spread wide in a combat stance, intoned, "So you smuggled in a blaster."

Kane rose to his feet and fanned away a wisp of cordite smoke. "Good thing, too. Looks like the Black Dragons weren't so much offended by the idea of gaijin carrying weapons in the palace as encouraged by the fact we weren't."

Brigid eyed the pistol curiously. "Where'd you get this?"

Kane picked up the dead man's sword and hefted it, testing its balance. "A small memento of Area 51. Did you say Grant was in the bathhouse?"

She nodded tensely. "If the Black Dragons are planning to sweep all foreigners from New Edo, they'll be after him, too."

Kane didn't waste time putting on his boots. He opened the door a crack and peered out into the dimly lit corridor. It appeared empty and sepulchrally quiet. It was still early evening, and all the lamps had yet to be lit. In a whisper, he said, "We don't know if Takaun himself is behind this. Regardless, we've got to find where they're keeping our weapons."

Brigid took up position on the other side of the door. "We'd better find Grant first."

Kane nodded, slid the door open and stepped out into the hallway. He took the point, padding along barefoot with Brigid bringing up the rear, blaster held with its barrel pointed toward the ceiling. They had progressed less than a dozen yards when a side door opened and a black-kimonoed figure stepped out into the hallway. Light glinted along the length of his sword.

Kane and Brigid halted as the figure moved gracefully toward him. "Want me to plug him?" she asked.

He didn't show his surprise at Brigid's sudden willingness to employ violence. "No," he side mouthed to her. "At least, not now. We may need all the rounds later." Raising his voice, he said, "Do you speak English?"

"*Hai*," came the response, sounding as if a teenager had spoken. "I know your vile tongue, *gaijin*. We Black Dragons can barely speak a word of it without vomiting."

"Then you don't have to say anything. Just listen.

I don't want any trouble with your society. Let me pass and we'll leave New Edo right now."

The Black Dragon eased closer, and Kane saw he looked to be about seventeen years old. His face was smooth and unlined, but his dark eyes glinted with a fanatic's fervor. "It's too late for that. We must send a message, not just to other *gaijin*-lovers on our island but to the *daimyo* himself."

He said nothing more. Kane set himself, and his youthful opponent moved immediately to the attack. His blade work was fast, but his technique was not as good or clever as other samurai he had seen. Still it required all of Kane's speed and reflexes to keep the Black Dragon's glittering blade from breaking through his guard.

"This isn't necessary," Kane grated between his clenched teeth.

The Black Dragon paid no attention to him. He made a sideways slice that Kane blocked, then he stepped in close, his *katana* locking against the other man's blade, freezing it in position. His opponent's face was a mask of complete strain as he strove to break contact, but Kane didn't relent with the pressure. The young man was faster than him but he was by far the stronger.

Kane shoved him backward down the hallway and then stepped back. The unexpected release of resistance caused the young man to stumble, and as he regained his balance and made a clumsy thrust with his blade, Kane dropped to one knee and plunged his *katana* into the Black Dragon's lower belly.

He set himself to take the man's weight as he impaled himself on the sword. The Black Dragon screamed, his face a mask of rage and agony. Then he simply shuddered and died. Kane stood, and the young man's body slid wetly down his blade.

Without looking at Brigid, he started down the hallway again. As he reached the door leading to the outside, he saw three dark shapes creeping across the lawn. One turned toward him and he heard a semi-musical twang. He dropped into a crouch just in time to avoid an arrow that whistled over his head. Brigid fired the Mustang through one of the paper panels, and Kane saw one of the shadow-shapes clutch himself and fall heavily.

Kane made a move to step outside again, but a man standing just outside the door reacted to the rustle of his clothes and slashed out with a *katana*. Kane kicked himself backward as Brigid leveled the blaster.

The round took the man in the right shoulder. The sound of the steel-jacketed slug smacking into flesh was ugly, but the awful animal howl he uttered was worse. The wounded man lurched across the lawn, wild with pain, dazed from the shock of impact. He screamed a long string of indecipherable words.

A dozen helmeted men in body armor and armed with *katanas* came running through the open gate. Black-robed figures, long blades glittering in the last rays of daylight, rushed to intercept them. Then figures were shouting and swearing and running all across the lawn.

The Black Dragons attacked the Tigers of Heaven,

fighting stubbornly and skillfully, for they had nothing to lose, and therefore everything to fight for.

SHORTS SLIPPED FEET WERE silent against the polished cedar floor. Grant caught only a whisper of sound, a glimpse of a flitting shadow. He rolled away, flinging himself clear as Shoki hurtled through the air, driving down with his *naginata*. The curved blade buried itself in the edge of the tub, inches from Grant's right arm.

In that peculiar slowing of time perception in combat, Grant saw everything at once. Shoki's face was twisted with savage anger. Shizuka pressed against the wall of the tub, her eyes wide in shock. The flame of the lantern flickered in the breeze wafting in through the open door.

Grant saw it all in a single shaved sliver of a second. While his mind registered it, his body reacted to the attack. As Shoki tried to free his blade from the tub, Grant punched him with his right fist on the point of the samurai's chin.

The idea was to break his damn neck with one blow, but Shoki released the long handle of the *naginata* and rolled with the blow. He staggered half the length of the room but managed to retain his balance. Grant coiled the muscles in his legs and bounded forward^ his broad bare chest colliding violently with that of the Japanese man.

Arms windmilling, Shoki was catapulted backward through the rear wall, taking laths and oiled-paper squares with him in a loud, clattering crash. The air

was nearly driven from his lungs, but he got to his feet again, kicking and tearing his way through the wreckage to renew the attack. Shizuka shouted shrill words at him, but the man paid her no attention.

He launched a straight leg kick at Grant's exposed genitals, but Grant turned sideways and the foot landed on his upper thigh not his groin. Still the impact hurt and in response, he hooked a punishing right fist into the samurai's ribs. He heard the crunch of bone, and the Japanese staggered back with a grunt of pained surprise.

Grant moved after him, not wanting to let the man regain his balance or find a new weapon. Shoki kicked out at his groin again and then at his kneecaps. Grant sidestepped the first kick but the second one landed on his shin, peeling the flesh up over the bone.

"You little prick!" Grant growled between clenched teeth. Angrily, he kicked out himself, but Shoki dived aside. His dive brought him back to the tub, where he closed his hands around the handle of his *naginata*.

He wrenched the blade loose from the wood, but Grant leaped on him like a black panther. His right hand encircled Shoki's wrist, and he put his left arm around the man's neck, as he drove his knee into the base of the samurai's spine. Shoki screamed in pain but managed to slam the blunt butt end of his weapon hard into Grant's lower belly.

Air left Grant's lungs in an agonized grunt and his grip loosened. Shoki wriggled free and spun, raising the *naginata* for an overhead blow in order to split Grant's skull like a melon.

Shizuka chose that instant to vault over the edge of the tub, water trailing from her naked limbs. Both of her feet struck Shoki between his shoulder blades, and he stumbled forward, his back arched. The blade hissed down and chopped into the floor barely a finger's width from the tip of Grant's big toe.

Shoki pulled it free and began circling Grant slowly. To Shizuka, he growled, "Stay back."

Grant couldn't afford to have his attention divided. One wrong move, one misstep and he was dead—or at the very least, grievously wounded by a castrating scythelike sweep of the *naginata*.

When Shoki feinted, pretending to slash at Grant's groin, the big man took the feint and cursed himself an instant later when the samurai shifted in midmotion and hacked at his throat. Grant ducked but he felt the passage of the blade over his head, so close he wouldn't have been surprised if it shaved off a few twists of his hair.

From between clenched teeth, Shoki hissed, "*Hi-retsukan!*"

Grant didn't know what it meant, but he assumed it wasn't an endearment. Shoki crab-stepped forward, trying a different tactic, whipping the blunt end of the *naginata* toward Grant's throat. Lifting his hands, he crossed his wrists and caught the end of the wooden shaft between them. Grasping it tightly, he pivoted and yanked the weapon from Shoki's grasp. He

howled as the pole slid through his hands, inflicting painful friction burns on both palms.

He tossed it aside and advanced on the samurai, half expecting him to flee. Instead he leaped forward, bending diagonally at the waist. He extended his leg straight out, and the sole of his foot thudded solidly into Grant's midsection. Air left his lungs in a loud whoosh, and he stumbled, off balance. Shoki followed through with his leap, chopping with the edge of his hand at the base of Grant's neck.

Although his hand rebounded from the thick ropes of neck muscle, the impact caused little pinwheels to ignite behind Grant's eyes. Before they stopped whirling, Shoki secured a stranglehold.

Fingers like flexible iron bands locked around Grant's throat, the thumbs pressing against his larynx. A grin of triumph and exertion creased his face, and Grant growled from deep in his chest. The samurai had a great deal of experience in hand-to-hand fighting, but he hadn't ever pitted himself against someone like Grant.

He brought up his forearms and knocked the samurai's hands away. At the same time he drove a knee into Shoki's groin and, as he doubled over, folding in the direction of the pain, Grant brought his right fist down like a piledriver on the back of the man's neck. His face hit the floor first, followed a second later by his knees, then the rest of his body.

Grant stood over him, panting and massaging his hand. He had broken a few knuckles before and he was pretty sure he had done it again. Shizuka came

to his side, her dark eyes wide with worry and a flickering gleam of anger. "Are you all right?"

He shook his aching right hand and said, "You'd think after all this time I'd have learned to hit the soft

parts."

Shizuka didn't laugh. She bent and wrestled Shoki onto his back. He wasn't a pretty sight. One eye was swollen shut and his mouth and nostrils leaked blood. A couple of teeth lay on the floor in a little puddle of crimson. She jerked open his robe, lifted his left arm and pointed to a tiny black figure tattooed in his armpit.

"A Black Dragon!" she spit out. "I knew he was hotheaded, but I never dreamed he would—"

From somewhere in the vicinity of the palace, three gunshots cracked, sounding like firecrackers going off under a tin can. Wordlessly, Grant and Shizuka threw on their clothes.

She took less time than he did, and he simply stuffed his feet into his boots without putting on socks or lacing his boots. Carrying the *naginata*, Grant followed Shizuka out of the bathhouse. They did not leave its shadow, because Shizuka suddenly went on one knee and gestured for Grant to do the same. They sidled up to a sculpted corner hedge and hazarded a quick look around it.

In the gathering gloom, they saw many dark figures flitting across the lawn, moving in on the rear wall of the castle. "What the hell is going on?" he whispered into her ear.

"The Black Dragons are staging a coup," she re-

sponded angrily. "I don't know if they intend to overthrow Lord Takaun or merely bend him to their will, but the Tigers of Heaven can't allow either one to happen."

Grimly, Grant said, "If you can take me to where you stored our weapons, I think we may be able to tip the scales in your favor."

She shook her head in frustration. "The room is all the way on the other side of the fortress. It would be the miracle of miracles if we could reach it undetected."

Another cracking gunshot split the sunset. Grant craned to see around the corner of the bathhouse. "Somebody's got a working blaster in there," he murmured. "One guess who."

Shizuka regarded him with a searching stare. "Kane-san?"

He smiled bleakly. "He'd be my first choice."

Sounding scandalized, Shizuka demanded in a fierce whisper, "You mean he smuggled a firearm into the palace?"

"Yeah. I wish I'd thought of that."

Shizuka's rejoinder clogged in her throat as one more snapping report sounded. This one was followed by howls of pain. They eased closer and saw a man reeling across the lawn, clutching at his shoulder. Through an open gate came a surge of Tigers of Heaven, their armor glinting in the sunset.

From almost every shadowed point on the lawn between the bathhouse and the castle rushed a horde of black-garbed Dragons wielding swords and lances.

They struck the Tigers from both flanks, pushing them toward the rear of the fortress. A resounding roar

arose from the ranks of the Black Dragons: "*Banzai, banzai!*"

There was almost no room to maneuver, and the *katanas* of the Black Dragons penetrated chinks in the Tigers' armor and sank deep into eyes through the slits in the visors. Screams blended in with the clash of steel on steel. The gloom lit up with little flares as blue sparks flew from impact points.

Then, over the clash and clamor of battle, a new sound floated in on the warm sea breeze. It was the brazen tolling of a bell. It rang in a three-one pattern and then repeated. Shizuka stiffened and stood, wheeling around to face the direction of the tolling.

Grant tugged at her hand. "Get down, goddammit! They'll see you."

Shizuka struggled, wresting away from his grip. "No," she said in a strained, hoarse whisper. "The watchman—he's ringing the signal for *raikou!*"

"Who's that?" Grant demanded.

Voice trembling, eyes suddenly wide and wild with terror, Shizuka cried, "Not who—a what. *Invasion!*"

Chapter 23

Lakesh gazed in awed fascination at the transparent sphere. Six feet in diameter, it occupied the center of the room from floor to ceiling—at least, Lakesh assumed the room had a floor and ceiling even if he couldn't see them. He had jumped from the Cerberus redoubt with Erica and Sam without knowing their destination. The walls, ceiling and floor of the room were such a total black they seemed to absorb all light like a vast ebony sponge. It was a blackness usually associated with the gulfs of deep space and gave no clue of their location.

Within the suspended globe glittered thousands of pinpoints of light, scattered seemingly at random, but all connected by glowing lines similar to the redoubt's Mercator relief map that delineated all the functioning gateway units of the Cerberus network. But the map had never gripped his imagination like the sphere.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from the flashing splendor, recalling how Plato had looked up at the stars and dreamed that each one made its own glorious, heavenly music. It was as though he stood before the whole blazing, wheeling galaxy in miniature. He felt as if he were a disembodied spirit flying through interstellar space rather than standing in a room look-

ing at a three-dimensional representation of the electromagnetic power grid of the planet.

Erica van Sloan sidled up from the blackness, her satiny blouse rustling softly. In a voice no less soft and rustling, she said, "Impressive, isn't it? I thought at first it was a work of art."

Lakesh nodded distractedly. "In a way it is. It's not just a geomantic map of Earth, but it's my entire field of study condensed and captured."

He gestured to the flickering points of light. "The power points of the planet, places that naturally generate specific types of energy. Some have positive and projective frequencies, others are negative and receptive. There are funnel-type vortices, cylindrical and even beacon types."

Pointing to one glowing speck, brighter than the rest, he said, "Chomolungma in the Himalayas—Mount Everest. According to ancient lore, that vortex is the single most powerful point on the planet. The energy it radiates sustains life and spreads prana all over the globe."

She cocked her raven-tressed head quizzically. "Prana?"

"An old Sanskrit term, meaning in a general way the world soul."

"Was that what you were you trying to spread with your quantum interphase mat-trans inducers?"

Lakesh chuckled self-consciously. "I was just trying to make quota. At the time I didn't know I was going over ground already broken millennia before."

Lakesh had achieved his breakthrough in the Pro-

ject Cerberus researches only by coming to the conclusion that matter transmission was absolutely impossible through the employment of Einsteinian physics. Only quantum physics, coupled with quantum mechanics, had made it work.

But he was by no means the first to make this discovery. The forebears of Balam's people possessed the knowledge of hyperdimensional physics. The so-called Archons shared this knowledge in piecemeal fashion with the scientists of the Totality Concept. But they had kept to themselves the knowledge that the gateways could accomplish far more than linear travel from point to point along a quantum channel.

Project Cerberus and Operation Chronos were all aspects of the same mechanism, only the applications of the principle differed. It had occurred to Lakesh that perhaps the entire undertaking had been code-named the Totality Concept because it encompassed the totality of everything, the entire workings of the universe.

Of course, the human scientists and military officials involved in the endeavor were too fixated on reaching short-term goals, making quota and earning bonuses to devote much thought to the workings of the universe or even where the basic components to build the first mat-trans unit had come from. Lakesh included himself in this number, although he hadn't been so much fixated as blinded to the disastrous consequences that could result from the Totality Concept's myriad divisions.

"I was attached to Operation Chronos, remem-

ber?" Erica reminded him. "It was your first successes with the mat-trans inducers that allowed us to pierce the chronon stream."

"I know," replied Lakesh. "But every bit of Totality Concept technology was only a synthetic imitation of the power Balam's folk tapped into and wielded." He smiled bitterly. "We were all frauds, you know."

Lakesh still remembered his dismay and outright shock when, in his position of Project Cerberus overseer he had learned that quantum scientific principles by which the gateways operated were not a form of new physics at all, but a rediscovery of ancient knowledge.

Before and after the nukocaust, he had studied the body of scientific theory that claimed megalithic structures such as the dolmens of Newgrange in Ireland and Stonehenge in England were expressions of an old, long-forgotten system of physics. The theory, based on hyperdimensional mathematics, provided a fundamental connection between the four forces of nature, an up-and-down link with invisible higher

dimensions. Evidence indicated there were many natural vortex points, centers of intense energy on Earth and even other celestial bodies in the solar system.

Lakesh became convinced that some ancient peoples were aware of this, and could manipulate these symmetrical earth energies to open portals not just for linear travel like the gateways but perhaps into other realms of existence. He suspected the knowledge was suppressed over the centuries, an act of repression he

believed was the responsibility of the Archons or the secret societies in their service.

To test the theory, Lakesh saw to the construction of a miniaturized version of a mat-trans unit, utilizing much of the same hardware and operating principles. He called it an interphaser and like the gateways, the interphaser functioned by tapping into the quantum stream. Although the interphaser opened dimensional rifts as did the gateways, he envisioned using the gaps as a transit tunnel through the gaps in normal space-time.

The instrument was designed to interact with a natural vortex's quantum energy and create an intersection point, a discontinuous quantum jump. The device worked, but in ways he hadn't dreamed*. Lakesh had always wanted to discuss the phenomenon with Balam, but the entity had refused to reveal any of his people's secrets outright. When Balam left his custody, he had despaired of ever learning anything more. Now it appeared he had a second chance.

Erica took his hand. "They're ready for you."

"Who?" he asked, resisting a moment, surprised by how strong she was. "Sam or Balam?"

She smiled seductively. "Come with me and find out."

Reluctantly, Lakesh allowed himself to be led away from the map of the global energy grid. He figured he had studied it for long enough. More than half an hour before he, Sam and Erica materialized in a gateway unit with rich, golden walls, as if ingots had been

melted down and applied to the armaglass like molten paint.

Outside the chamber was a stone-block-walled, low-ceilinged corridor. Lakesh had no idea where they were. When he asked if they were in Agartha, where Kane and Brigid had left Balam, neither of his companions gave him a definite answer. Regardless, he sensed they were deep underground, beneath inestimable tons of rock.

The location was of secondary importance as far as Lakesh was concerned. If Erica and Sam had wanted to kill him, they could've done so during the many hours he spent alone with them in the Cerberus redoubt. They certainly would not have had to cajole, argue and finally plead with him to accompany them on a mat-trans jaunt.

Most of his questions about Balam, Sam's origins and particularly Erica's restored youth had been neatly deflected. Both Sam and Erica were adept at teasing him with hints and inferences about an undertaking that would forever change the nuke-scarred face of the planet. They wanted his involvement, but they refused to reveal anything but tantalizing scraps of information.

Lakesh couldn't help but be intrigued. He was suspicious of both of them, especially Erica, but she answered all of his questions about the inner workings of the Totality Concept and the personnel

involved without hesitation. At length he accepted she was who she claimed to be and he agreed to accompany them to their unnamed destination, where not only Balam

awaited him but also where he would find answers to his questions.

Over the strenuous and profane objections put forth by DeFore, Bry and even Banks, Lakesh entered a set of coordinates provided by Erica in the gateway's keypad and away they went. He felt a little guilty about leaving Cerberus while the fates of Domi and Kane were still unknown, but both Erica and Sam vowed to return him in twelve hours. He believed them, and he didn't know why.

Although he experienced a strong physical attraction for the woman, he found it required a great deal of mental effort to refuse Sam anything or question anything he said. The boy possessed exceptionally strong powers of persuasion and whether it was just charisma or something else, Lakesh was completely charmed by him. Actually, he was more than charmed—he trusted him and felt protective of him in a paternal way.

To his everlasting regret, Lakesh had never married or fathered children. The closest he came to producing offspring was when he rifled the ville's genetic records to find desirable qualifications in order to build a covert resistance movement against the baronies. He used the baron's own fixation with purity control against them. By his own confession, he was a physicist cast in the role of an archivist, pretending to be a geneticist, manipulating a political system that was still in a state of flux. Kane was one such example of that political and genetic manipulation.

Erica van Sloan strode purposefully down the pas-

sageway, taking long-legged strides, her boot heels clacking in a steady rhythm against the stone floor. Lakesh could not reconcile his memories of the withered, crippled old hag with the tall, vibrant and beautiful woman he followed. He shook his head a little remorsefully as he watched the sensuous twitch of her buttocks beneath the tight jodhpurs. She had a body built for sex and if she was attempting to entice him with her restored youth and vitality, it was a cruel game.

Erica stepped through an open doorway. Lakesh followed her and came to a halt, blinking owlishly at the furnishings of the room. It wasn't so much the lavish appointments that startled him as the sensation of stepping back in time several thousand years into a central clearinghouse of several ancient cultures.

A tall, round sandstone pillar bearing ornate carvings of birds and animal heads was bracketed by two large sculptures, one a feathered jaguar and the other a serpent with wings. Silken tapestries depicting Asian ideographs hung from the walls. There were other tapestries, all bearing flowing geometric designs.

Suspended from the ceiling by thin steel wires was a huge gold disk in the form of the Re-Horakhte falcon. The upcurving wings were inlaid with colored glass. The sun disk atop the beaked head was a cab-ochon-cut carnelian.

Ceramic effigy jars and elegantly crafted vessels depicting animal-headed gods and goddesses from the Egyptian pantheon were stacked in neat pyramids. Ar-

rayed on a long shelf on the opposite wall were a dozen ushabtis figures, small statuettes representing laborers in the Land of the Dead. Against the right wall was a granite twelve-foot-tall replica of the seated figure of Ramses III. It towered over a cluster of dark basalt blocks inscribed with deep rune markings.

A huge, gilt-framed mirror, at least ten feet tall and five wide, stood amid stacks of weaponry—swords, shields and lances. A spearhead with a single drop of blood on its nicked point rested on a table.

The center and corners of the floor were crammed with artifacts from every possible time, every culture—Inca, Maya, China, Egypt and others Lakesh could not quickly identify. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to, since he had believed some the relics were pure myth, such as the mirror of Prester John and the Spear of Destiny.

Each and every item appeared to be in perfect condition. The huge room was an archaeologist's paradise. Lakesh struggled to comprehend the enormity of the collection and why it was here. Finally, he realized it was a representative sampling from every human culture ever influenced by the race he knew as Archons.

He looked around, trying to find Balam in the collection. For an instant he thought he spotted him, then realized it was only a statue that closely resembled him. Standing in an erect position, less than five feet tall, the sculpture represented a humanoid creature with a slender, gracile build draped in robes. The fea-

tures were sharp, the domed head disproportionately large and hairless. The eyes were huge, slanted and fathomless. Cradled in its six-fingered hands was what appeared to be a human infant.

Lakesh repressed a shudder and nearly jumped straight up when he felt a light touch on his arm. He spun clumsily to see Sam beaming up at him. Forcing an aggrieved note into his voice, he said, "You took ten years off my life, and at my age I can ill afford to squander even an hour of it."

Sam's cherubic smile broadened. "Perhaps we'll do something about that, Mohandas."

Lakesh felt a distant unease at the comfortable way the boy called him by his first name, but he didn't comment on it. "Where is Balam?"

"You'll see him once you're convinced."

"Convinced of what, young man?" Lakesh demanded in his best authoritarian tone.

"Of who I am," Sam answered blandly. "Of the energies flowing through me."

Erica stepped up to Lakesh and caressed his deeply seamed cheek with cool, soft fingers. Teasingly, she said, "You've been consumed with curiosity about how Sam restored me, haven't you?"

"Among other things," Lakesh retorted gruffly. "Least of all why you refer to him as your son."

Erica chuckled. "First things first, Mohandas. Secrets must be revealed in the order of their importance."

"Secrets?"

"The first secret is energy," Sam stated. "It always

has been, always will be. The science of moving it in precise harmony and in perfect balance,

harmonizing it with other forms of energy."

Lakesh bobbed his head in irritated impatience. "You're not telling me anything I haven't spent my entire adult life studying."

'Perhaps," Sam replied calmly.' "But studying and understanding all the principles and applications are often very different things."

Lakesh bristled at the boy's patronizing tone. He drew on an untapped reservoir of strength and managed to work himself up to a high state of annoyance, despite Sam's powers of persuasion. "Demonstrate what you mean or I'm leaving."

The corners of Sam's mouth turned down in a frown. "You've come too far to dictate terms, Mohandas. I want you to understand what I am. I am an avatar."

Chill fingers of dread stroked the buttons of Lakesh's spine. "An avatar of what?"

"There must be an order to things. If war is necessary for that order to be established, then I am willing to wage it. But you must teach me certain things, make me more than I am."

"I know nothing of war."

"But you know deception, do you not? Is not all war based on deception, on misdirection and misinformation?"

Lakesh dredged his memory and came up with a quote from Sun Tzu. "Use deception when you have not the power to win in open battle," he said quietly.

Sam nodded. "Exactly. You have followed that philosophy in your war against the baronies. I can learn much from you."

"And if you win your war, what kind of order do you intend to build?"

"One where the old humans and the new humans rally around me, the bridge between both, and coexist peacefully."

Lakesh gazed into the boy's eyes of many colors and felt a little ill and frightened. He sensed the king's robes around the child even if he could not see them. But he also sensed Sam was either cursed or blessed with something outside the pale of normal humanity—or inhumanity. Hoarsely, he inquired, "Coexist under your single authority?"

Sam's frown deepened as if he were irritated by Lakesh stating the obvious. "Of course. I thought you understood that."

Lakesh exhaled a weary breath. "I understand, Sam. You're just another damn megalomaniac, another mutie with an attitude." He turned toward the door. "I don't know what powers you have, but it's obvious you lured me here under the pretense of a meeting with Balam. He's not and probably never has been here. You disappoint me."

Lakesh caught only a glimpse of Sam making a flicking hand gesture, then Erica van Sloan was on him,

securing a hammerlock on his right arm and wrenching it up between his shoulder blades. She

kicked the backs of his knees and his legs buckled. Crying out in pain and outrage, Lakesh collapsed. Only Erica's surprising strength prevented him from falling on his face. Into his ear she murmured, "I'm sorry about this, Mohandas, but you'll thank me when it's over."

He struggled, but she cinched down even tighter on his captured arm, "When what is over?" he brayed.

Sam stepped toward him, pulling back the belled right sleeve of his robe. In a very soft, sympathetic tone he said, "When I'm finished moving energy in precise harmony and perfect balance."

Sam spread his right hand wide and laid it against Lakesh's midriff. From it seeped a tingling warmth. Ice seemed to melt his body and he felt painfully searing heat, like liquid fire, rippling through his veins and arteries. His heartbeat picked up in tempo, seeming to spread the heart through the rest of his body, a pulsing web of energy suffusing every separate cell and organ. He squeezed his eyes shut.

Lakesh's lungs gave a jerking, labored spasm as they sucked in air involuntarily, expanding so much in his chest he feared his ribs would break. His mouth opened and a scream came forth, but his voice was not reedy or strained. The cry was a full-bodied utterance of pain. He was aflame with it, the same kind of agony a man feels when circulation is suddenly restored to a numb limb. His back arched, and for the first time in more than fifty years, he felt a stirring in his loins. His entire metabolism seemed to awaken to

furious life from a long slumber, as if it had been jump-started by a powerful battery.

The heat faded from his body, and he sagged within Erica's grip, panting and sweating. She released him and he caught himself on his hands. Slowly, Lakesh opened his eyes. They burned slightly, feeling somewhat sticky, but his vision was not blurred or fogged. He tried to push himself up, but his body felt like a foreign thing, and it moved sluggishly.

Erica said softly, "Careful now, Mohandas. Take it easy at first."

Carefully, she helped him to his feet. His legs wobbled like those of a newborn foal. When he raised a hand to wipe away the film of perspiration on his face, he realized two things more or less simultaneously—he wasn't wearing his glasses but he could see his hand perfectly. By that perfect vision, he saw the flesh of his hand was smooth, the prominent veins having sunk back into firm flesh. The liver spots faded away even as he watched.

Wildly, Lakesh stumbled toward the huge mirror. He nearly fell twice, but Erica helped him along. He stood before it, stupefied into silence. The face reflected in its glossy surface bore little resemblance to the one that looked as if he had borrowed it from a cadaver. His hair, though still thin, was not ash gray, but an iron color. It seemed to darken with every passing second. Uttering a wordless cry of wonder, Lakesh brought his hands up to his cheeks, his fingertips exploring the smooth, unseamed cheeks.

A voice spoke from behind him, hoarse, faint and

scratchy. "Now we will speak of the future, Mohandas Lakesh Singh."

The familiar voice sent cold prickles up and down his backbone. Slowly, he turned, keeping his expression as neutral and composed as possible.

A figure stood beside Sam, dressed in a similar robe. Lakesh gazed without blinking at the high, domed

cranium that narrowed to an elongated chin. The faint grayish-pink skin was stretched drum tight over a structure of facial bones that seemed all cheek and brow, with little in between but two great up-slanting eyes like black pools. The slit of a mouth held the faintest suggestion of a smile.

"Yes, Balam," said Lakesh gravely. "We must speak of the future and my place in it."