

Silver Tiger



Duncan Long

In the near future when artificial intelligence makes computers nearly as intelligent as human beings, and where the rule of law is determined by the dollar sign, Native American searcher Diane Death Song takes on a job that puts her skills to the test. She believes she's been hired by a large corporation to track down a genetically altered "Silver Tiger" which a rival company has stolen. But soon the searcher is involved in something much more sinister, and considerably more dangerous.

As Death Song's life unravels, she finds that no one can be trusted, including those who hired her. With memories of the past that she discovers are most likely fabrications, she seeks the Silver Tiger, the creature that holds the key to the truth.

And the key to her survival.

**SILVER
TIGER**

DUNCAN LONG

Story Copyright © 1996, 2003, 2004 by Duncan Long. All rights reserved. Cover Illustration © 2003 by Duncan Long. All rights reserved.

For more information and free access to short stories, artwork, music and articles by Duncan Long, visit: <http://duncanlong.com/>

All rights on both text and cover artwork reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by US and international copyright laws. Any resemblance between characters in this book and those living or dead is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER 1

Diane Death Song realized she was making a mistake when she took the I-35 exit. But she didn't have any choice.

A cherry red Two-Teo muscle car had her boxed in from behind with a double semi-trailer flanking her in the left lane. When the Federal train truck plowed into what had been an old Volvo seconds before, the only opening she had was the exit ramp. The wreckage of the Volvo cartwheeled directly into Diane's path; the collision warning beeper shattered the silence inside her Eldorado.

She ignored the admonitions of the automap, cranking the wheel and shooting toward the off ramp to avoid a bumper somersaulting in front of her car. A bouncing hubcap crashed on the hood leaving a deep gash in its mirrored finish.

"It is highly recommended that you navigate across the intersection and take the on ramp back to I-35," the automap advised her as she skidded down the steep incline, dodging an old crate that lay in the middle of the lane. "PD warnings report the street ahead to be in a plague area," the machine added as she braked frantically to avoid scrapping the

guardrail.

Finally at the bottom of the ramp, Diane closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she removed the tint from the side windows and glanced up and down the avenue, squinting in the sunlight before muting the windows and checking the video display. The streets looked safe. Behind her the muscle car came to a halt, having no doubt followed her evasive actions to avoid the pileup that was destined to occur.

Beyond the muscle car, up the ramp and back on the interstate, she watched as the twisting wall of dented vehicles grew, writhing with each new impact from the heavy rush-hour traffic streaming toward it. Within seconds a giant ball of fire leaped from the plastic and steel rubble and climbed skyward as the propane, alcohol, and gasoline that had powered the wrecks ignited.

Turning her attention back to the street in front of her, she saw that the on ramp leading back to the interstate was totally blocked with rusted car bodies, apparently piled up to keep anyone from getting back onto I-35 from Union Street.

She eyed the bullet-pocked stop sign and the lone drunk dancing along the littered street to be sure there was nothing that posed any immediate danger. Satisfied she was safe for the moment, Diane leaned over and hit the "Alternate" button on the automap mounted in the dashboard.

"Turn right; travel one dot seven five kilometers; turn left on State Line Road and continue on to I-35 South."

"Okay," Diane said, running a hand through her

jet-black hair. She powered up the Eldorado's engine and shot across the nearly empty street with a whining of rubber on concrete.

The driver of the muscle car behind her hesitated a few seconds and then followed her lead, taking care not to crowd her as the two vehicles picked up speed, weaving in and out of the rusty wrecks that littered the route.

At first the ragged bundles on the sidewalk escaped Diane's attention. Then she realized that they were actually bodies, littering either side of the avenue. "Cleanup rats haven't gone through here yet." Must not have been through for days from the look of it. She wondered if she was being exposed to the plague and nervously glanced at the filtration system on her car. With relief she saw its green light glowing reassuringly.

Kan-Topeka City. Between the epidemics and the violence, the crews were getting behind. It would just be a matter of time before some serious diseases got into the water system with this many dead left on the streets. One good rain was all that was needed. Then things would get really serious.

She reminded herself that she had to escape the metropolis. City life was getting too hectic.

"Time is seven PM," her clock announced.

"Going to be late, besides everything else," she muttered, dodging a corpse that lay in the street. She glanced down to locate her comphone, then forgot it when she glanced back toward the street. A mob spilled onto the narrow avenue a block ahead of her, shoving two cars ahead of them as they came, their forms silhouetted in the sun that was now nearly at

the horizon.

She eyed the muscle car following her to be sure she wouldn't be rear ended, then slammed on her brakes, screeching to a stop that left her car sideways in the street. The muscle car stormed past, its driver seemingly oblivious to the trouble ahead. Diane watched, as if the scene in front of her was on the 3D rather than real.

The polished muscle car pummeled three of the rioters, throwing them aside as it bumped over a fourth with a sickening bounce. Then, as the numbers of people ahead of the car grew and the two derelict cars were pushed into his path, the driver lost his nerve and slammed on his brakes. The moment he stopped, a hail of bottles and rocks pounded the car's skin.

The driver jerked the vehicle into reverse and attempted a bootleg turn. The molotov hit halfway through the turn; flames splattered across the windshield and dripped in a waterfall of fire onto the tires, a cloud of black smoke rising into the Spring air.

"Stay in the car," Diane whispered, willing the driver to stay inside the relatively safety of his vehicle.

But her hushed warning did no good. The driver and passenger released the wing doors that flipped open on their hydraulic lifts and then the two leaped in panic from the flaming car. The driver only managed two steps before the crowd was on top of him, ripping his leather jacket off before attacking him with the long machetes they carried.

The woman got five meters before she was thrown to the pavement and her clothes ripped off.

Diane didn't wait to see more. There were too many of them and nothing she could do, even though she was armed. Shifting into first gear, she floored the accelerator, her Eldorado screeching around with tires smoking.

Then she slammed on her brakes.

The National Guard APC that blocked her path had its 25mm and .30-caliber coaxial guns leveled at her windshield. She wondered how close she'd come to being snuffed by the most-likely edgy crew inside the tank-like vehicle.

Foot soldiers accompanying the APC jogged into a flanking position next to her car and motioned her to sit still. Beads of sweat formed on her face as she sat motionless, knowing better than to ignore their orders. Most of the troopers turned their attention to the crowd running toward them, raising their baton guns and firing short bursts of plastic bullets toward the mob.

A sergeant motioned to Diane, his pistol pointed at the driver's door as he held up an ID reader with his free hand. "I need your number," his helmet-amplified voice told her over the noise around him.

Diane reached to the dashboard and turned a control knob, lightening the Eldorado's windows, transforming them from their thickly smoked gray to fully transparent. She held her national ID number, tattooed to the back of her hand, to the window. The sergeant scanned her hand and then waited for confirmation.

"How long does it take you guys to check an ID?" Diane wondered aloud, knowing the soldier couldn't hear because of the din of guns and crashing bottles

outside. She eyed the rear view in the CRT display.

The crowd was within fifty meters of the troops who were very slowly retreating toward the APC as bottles and stones rained around them. Diane put her left foot down firm on the brake and then throttled the accelerator with her right toes, revving the motor slightly to be sure it didn't die when she sped off. "Come on," she whispered. *Should I wait for the ID to be okayed or make a move? Get shot up by the APC or chopped up by the mod?* She glanced at the rear view.

The crowd was almost on top of them. It was almost time to move whether the sergeant gave her the okay or not.

As if anticipating her actions, the twin guns on the APC opened fire. The moment she saw its barrel light up with the first projectile, Diane threw herself to the floor of her car. The Eldorado's armor might stop pistol bullets, but the 25mm projectiles would make mincemeat of the vehicle.

The impacts she'd expected didn't come. Instead there was a tap at the window.

Diane looked up to see the plastic face plate of a sergeant. "Your ID's okay," his voice said through the helmet speaker. He waved her past him. "Hurry up. Go on, get out of here."

Sitting up, Diane eyed the dead and dying behind her where the APC's explosive barrage had struck. Beyond the carnage was the smoking remains of the muscle car that had been following her only minutes before. She ignored all of it and shoved down on the accelerator, leaving with a whine of burning rubber on the hot pavement.

The staccato of fire erupting from the APC echoed up and down the street. Tracer-lit bullets streaked past her, slamming into another small knot of people who had appeared in the alley opposite the soldiers. The grim-faced driver of the APC eyed the Eldorado from his hatch, the sunset glistened blood red in his goggles. Then he turned his attention back toward the street as another salvo of gunfire pounded the last of the rioters.

Diane sped along, placing more space between herself and the soldiers. When she was finally at a safe distance, she lifted her comphone in shaking fingers and spoke into its mike. "Last number," she told the machine and waited for it to dial.

The number rang twice and then a mechanical voice answered. "Message," it demanded.

"Tell Mr. Moton I'm going to be about fifteen minutes late to our meeting," Diane said. "Nothing serious. Just the usual traffic snarls."

"Message recorded."

She put the comphone into its cradle and hit the alternate button on the dash board once more to find another route to the interstate.

CHAPTER 2

" **W**e break in the old fashioned way," Nathan Smiley whispered his unblinking snake eyes glistening in the streetlight. "Now give the door your code, Janet." He shoved the muzzle of his pistol into the small of her back. "Hurry up."

"Don't hurt me," she pleaded.

"Punch in the code."

Janet hesitated a moment and then tapped the glowing keyboard. Smiley watched carefully over her shoulder, memorizing the twelve number sequence.

"Code correct. Enter," the door said.

The two of them stepped into the black hallway whose lights activated when they sensed their presence.

Smiley listened intently. All he heard was the gentle blowing of the heating system and the labored breathing of the woman whose arm he gripped. "Are there any more locks?" Smiley demanded of her.

"No — yes."

"Make up your mind. Which is it?"

"Each lab door has a keyed lock."

"No keypads or electronics?"

"No. They all need keys."

"Step in here," Smiley ordered, motioning toward an open doorway with his pistol.

"You aren't going to hurt me, are you?"

"Hey, it's only me, Janet. The guy who's been waking up with you the last few weeks. Don't worry so much. It isn't good for you."

Janet's expression softened and she sighed. "You're crazy, you know it?"

"I don't suppose you can forgive me for taking advantage of our friendship like this."

A brief grin flickered over her face. "You're a real bastard. But I can see why I fell for you."

"It was a two-way street, babe. I only wish I could stick around. But I can't. Now get on in."

She backed into the darkened room. "I don't know what you're up to, but I half way hope you get away with it," she told him. And then a look of terror covered her face.

Smiley tapped the trigger of his pistol three times and she dropped to the floor. He stepped into the room and put another bullet in the back of her head. Then he left, closing the door behind him and pocketing the pistol. He whistled as he checked the door numbers, searching for the room containing his treasure.

One thing was sure: The locks on the inner doors were a joke. "If this is the best it can do, Biotech Universal deserves to loose the animal," Smiley told himself. "Here we go," he said, pausing at a door and running his fingers over its number. "Now let's see

what's behind door number four."

He took a crowbar from his belt and placed its edge into the space between the frame and the door. *To bad there isn't more time; a guy could make a fortune with security like this.* He yanked back with all his weight and the door popped open.

A musty smell greeted him as he stepped into the dark room. A rumbling growl burst forth from the blackness, making Smiley cower; the noise seemed to shake the floor beneath him. Nervously he flipped on the light switch next to the doorway and looked around, for a terrible moment wondering if the animal was not in its cage the way he'd been told it would.

"There you are," Smiley said, relief showing in his voice. He studied the creature pacing behind the bars, its fur glistening in the light, displaying a subtle pattern of silver and black tiger stripes. Finally the thief spoke. "Man, oh, man. You're one magnificent animal. Tiger, tiger shining bright... No wonder everyone was ready to pay a bundle for you." *And you're going to be my last caper. My ticket to retirement.*

The thief stood silent for a moment, then visually searched the room. He spied what he was looking for: The surveillance camera, camouflaged as an air duct. "Naughty, naughty." A single crack of the pistol shattered the camera's lens.

Another savage growl came from the tiger as he battered against the cage before retreating back into the shadows.

"It's okay," Smiley told the animal that paced back and forth nervously in its cage. *Is this thing as*

smart as they say? He was beginning to have his doubts. It didn't look much different that any other caged animal.

The animal closed its eyes, threw back its head, and roared again.

"It's okay," Smiley said. "Calm down. I didn't mean to scare you. Here, I've got something for you."

He took a bundle from under his jacket and slapped it onto the desk beside the tiger's cage. "You'll like this," he said, flicking his switchblade open and cutting through the string. He shut and pocketed the knife, then unwrapped the thick, bloody steak. "Smell it? Know that smell, don't you, boy?" Smiley bent over and shoved the meat toward the opening at the bottom of the cage bars. "Here you go. Careful of my fingers. I might be needing them again some day."

The tiger growled softly and, for just a moment, Smiley thought it sounded remarkably like, "Thank you." He laughed at his mistake as the creature grabbed the beef in its mouth and retreated to the back of its cage where it held the food between its two giant paws and tore off chunks which it swallowed whole.

"Just enjoy it. You'll be getting sleepy in a bit. Nice dreams. Then I'll have you to your new home."

Waiting for the drugged meat to take effect, Smiley carefully collected all the data discs on the desk and placed them into his pockets.

Fifteen minutes later, Smiley straightened up, flexing his back. "Man, I'm going to have to shell out money for a hernia operation after this." Straining to

get the unconscious tiger onto the gurney had been a monumental effort. He checked his watch. *At least we're still right on schedule.*

He shoved the gurney through the doorway and down the hall. At the door leading outside, he punched in the sequence of numbers he'd memorized when Janet had opened the door.

"Code correct. Exit," the door said, clicking open.

Smiley eased the gurney through the doorway and followed it into the cool nighttime air. Then he pulled out his night vision goggles and put them on, flicking their infrared light source: One long burst followed by two shorts.

The van parked in the shadows at the end of the complex started and drove forward, stopping at the door where his hired thugs, assisted by an industrial bot, helped him load the sleeping cat into the vehicle. Three minutes later the van was gone and the alarm system reactivated without any hint they had been there.

Five minutes later, Smiley had walked two blocks from the main gate. He stopped next to a rusty truck and, after satisfying himself that no one other than a group of snappers playing below a distant street lamp might see him, opened the door of the vehicle and he gave the computer connected to the engine and steering system its order: "Go to your destination."

The turbo engine cranked up and then transmission made a grinding as the computer shifted it into first gear. The truck rumbled forward, its powerful engine gradually picking up speed as it

shifted to a higher gear. On it continued, gradually accelerating as it headed for the lab complex at the end of the street.

Smiley stepped to the curb and crossed to stand in the shadows where he had a clear view of the compound two blocks away.

"Hey buddy," his slurred voice whined. "Could you spare a few bucks for an old timer down on his luck?"

Smiley turned and faced the junkie staggering down the sidewalk.

"Get lost," Smiley replied.

"Come on fellow, give me a break."

"I guess I do have something for you." Smiley reached under his jacket and brought out his switchblade which he shoved precisely between the man's ribs, piercing his heart. He stepped away with practiced precision to avoid the spurting blood from the puncture wound, expertly wiping his blade on the back of the falling corpse. The weapon vanished under Smiley's clothing as he turned his attention back to his target.

The truck had accelerated beyond the legal limits, continuing to gain speed as it flattened a bicyclist and grazed a horseman. Now reaching the end of the street, it leaped over the curb and then burst through the chain fence and ribbon wire, setting off clanging alarm bells.

The automated guns at the corners of the fence opened fire the same moment an explosion ripped through the back of the truck, rupturing the propane storage tank hidden inside. Gas erupted from the container as the guns continued to fire.

Three seconds later a second explosion, this time from the cab of the truck, ignited the cloud of gas, creating a ragging inferno that swept through the area, its heat searing the oxygen from the atmosphere as the tongues of fire licked across the buildings. The hot vapor expanded violently and then imploded as it rose, sucking in more air to fill the vacuum. This was followed by a re-igniting of the fuel, creating an even more massive conflagration that quickly encompassed the entire complex.

Smiley stepped back into the doorway where he stood, holding his breath as he shielded his face with the flame-proof jacket he wore. The blast of superheated gas approached him, the pressure wave shattering windows as it traveled down the street. It passed, leaving an eerie silence.

Stepping from his shelter, Smiley eyed the blazing bodies where the snappers had stood. Secondary explosions of chemicals in the lab's storage canisters rocked the street, momentarily drowning the roar of the inferno that marked the spot where the Biotech Universal Laboratories research center had been.

After admiring the smoldering block at the end of the avenue for thirty seconds, Smiley dusted the ash from his clothing and headed for the getaway car he'd parked around the corner. By the time the first of the looters arrived four minutes later, he was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER 3

Moton had set up the exchange in the rain forest. The location Damocles as far as Diane was concerned. She cautiously stopped her car in the nearly empty parking lot. The street lights had been shot out, leaving the area unlit.

Diane flicked on the sensors on the exterior of her Eldorado. No signs of life on the infrared band. She switched to the electromagnetic band; a moment later there was an all-clear beep signaling a lack of laser and microwave activity.

So far so good, she told herself, snapping open the door. "Self defense," she ordered her car. After looking around to be sure there was no sign of trouble, she reached back into the vehicle and retrieved a large, sealed envelop, a small plastic box, and a night vision monacle. Then she slammed the door shut and pocketed the envelop and box and pulled the monacle over her eye, lighting up the darkness in green and white. The vehicle beeped its "alarm armed" signal.

Two minutes later Diane had traveled the trail leading to the domed rain forest exhibit. The door was unlocked so she sauntered through the air lock and pushed through the second set of doors leading to the riot of foliage and animals inside. She blinked at the bright electric lights filtering through the trees, the humid air assaulting her nose with foreign smells of damp earth and rotting vegetation.

She sidestepped a lizard that went chasing down the path and started down the curving walkway that wound through the broad-leafed rubber plants and sawtooth palms. She'd only gone twenty yards when a whistle sounded.

"Up here, babe," a voice growled from above.

Diane glanced upward toward the voice and spied Moton and his two bodyguards standing on the high viewing cliff at the center of the rain forest. Turning down the path, she discovered the up ramp a short distance ahead. She carefully paced toward the incline, inspecting the forest around her, trying to see if Moton had any other henchmen hidden in the thick growth.

"Have you got the information?" Moton asked her when she finally stepped onto the man-made ridge.

Diane held up the envelope. "It took some extra work. But it's all here."

Moton held out his hand.

Diane made no move to give him the envelope. "Before you get this, I need the other half of my payment."

"I want to check your data first." Moton snapped his finger and both henchmen drew their automatics.

"You've done a good job training them," Diane

quipped. "Have you taught them to speak?"

Moton held out his hand again. "The envelope."

Diane handed it to the nearest henchman who stepped forward and snatched it from her hand. The burley man then ripped the envelope open and passed it and the sheet inside to his boss. Moton took the sheet and looked around for a moment, then handed the empty envelope to his other bodyguard who took it and stuffed it into his baggy pants for safe keeping.

Moton studied the sheet for only a second and then hissed, "It's coded."

"PGP-10. No breaking that, even if you had access to a DNA supercomputer — which you don't. You'll get the key to the code when I get my payment."

"You searchers all think you're so smart. Maybe I'll just have my men beat the key out of you."

The two bodyguards stepped forward, anticipating the order.

Diane smiled. "I think you should reconsider. Did you notice the powder on the paper?"

Moton rubbed his fingers on the sheet and the henchman who'd opened the envelope unconsciously looked at his hand. The other bodyguard patted his pocket where he'd put the empty envelope

"That dust on your hands is S-5 spores. Do know what that means?"

"That new bug?" Moton asked, his voice having a notable quiver to it as he wiped his hand on his pants.

Diane nodded. "One of my clients was a little short of cash so we struck a deal. The dust on that envelop is safe now that it's been exposed to the air

for a few minutes. But when you opened the envelope and got it on you, the spores started tunneling into your skin. By now they're starting to grow and multiply."

Both Moton's bodyguards glanced toward their boss from the corners of their eyes and stepped away from him when they saw that his face had become noticeably pale.

"You can't do this," Moton sputtered. "You've got to help us. I was going to pay — I was only kidding. We were just having a little fun." He forced a toothy grin on his face and motioned to his men who holstered their firearms.

"The antidote is here in this building," Diane told them. "But you'll never get it in time unless I tell you where it is. I'd say you have about one minute left to pay up before the point of no return. Or else I'll have to search what's left of your corpses on my own for the money."

Moton swore loudly, his cry scaring the bats hanging on the high curved ceiling over his head. Their leathery wings rustled in the still air and then the jungle was quiet again. Diane remained silent, standing with her legs slightly spread, waiting to see if they were going to become violent; Moton glared at her and then beckoned to the henchman on his left. "Pay the... Pay the *lady*."

The man stepped forward quickly, pulling a thick envelope from his pocket and handing the package to the searcher.

Diane shook the envelope, testing its weight. "Feels a little light to me. You're not trying to short me, are you?"

"It's all there," Moton whined. "I swear it. Have a little mercy. I can feel it working on my insides. The money's all there."

"Call me sentimental; I'm going to trust you this time." Diane stuck the envelope into her inside jacket pocket and fished out the plastic case she'd picked up earlier. She held up the black box at eye level. "Listen up, boys and girls. There're five vials in this case. All you need to do is drink the contents of one — and only one — to counteract the S-5. Drink two of the vials and you'll be about as bad off as you would be without it. Any questions?"

"Give it to me before the spores jelly our insides," Moton demanded, holding out a fat paw.

Diane tossed the box into the vegetation behind Moton.

"You bitch," Moton growled before turning around and diving into the brush.

"I'll send the key to the PGP-10 by e-mail," Diane called after Moton and his bodyguards who were plowing through the thick bamboo. *Unlike some of us, I keep my half of a deal*, she added to herself, watching the three men thrashing madly through the bush, looking for the plastic box.

Satisfied they weren't going to try anything else, she turned and left before they found the five vials. *One thing's sure*, Diane told herself, *they'd have sweet-smelling breath once they take the "antidote."*

It was surprising what a little talcum powder and a packet of perfume samples could achieve after some creative story telling.

Three minutes later, Diane stepped over the

unconscious body of a would-be car thief and placed her thumb on the lock of her Eldorado. "Deactivate defense and alarm," she told the car.

The lock clicked open and the door swiveled around. She slipped into the vehicle and slammed the door behind her. "Report," she ordered the car.

"One attempted break-in. One thief downed, three fled. Should I file a report with the authorities?"

"No. We'll let him sleep it off to rob another day. I don't have time to file a report and do a bunch of paper work. Erase the record from your memory."

"Record erased," the security system told her.

Diane removed her comphone from its cradle, opened it into its phone configuration, and spoke into its mouthpiece. "E-mail, to."

"E-mail ready."

"Send packet *morton.key* to its address."

"Packet sent."

Job done, she thought, folding the comphone. Now Moton would be able to decode the material he'd paid her to find.

Diane started her Eldorado and drove away.

The two men stood in the alley, nearly hidden in the shadows. In the distance a siren faded into the night, lost in the cacophony of the city.

"You've put the girl's name at the *top* of the list?" Ziggler asked, his unblinking eyes locked on those of the data manager.

"Yes, sir. It's a done deal. I modified the data so Deathsong was first choice. Puffed a little here and there in her résumé and then made the others seem

less than —”

“So she’ll get the searcher job?”

“Yeah. Ranbaugh’s slated to talk to her tomorrow. And she’d have to be crazy to turn down the deal with the amount of money Biotech is willing to pay to get their cat back.”

Ziggler reached into his jacket pocket and removed a small packet. “Look’s like a job well done. There are ten platinum bars in here. When she’s hired, I’ll give you the other half of your fee.” He passed the packet to the data manager who looked up and down the alley to be sure no one had seen the transaction.

“In the meantime,” Ziggler said. “I don’t want anyone — *anyone* — to know about our little deal. I don’t want to be linked to this in any way. Understand?”

Nate licked his lips before speaking. “Don’t worry. No one will hear about it from me. If anyone knew, it would cost me my job.”

“Your job?” Ziggler said, flashing a toothy smile that looked out of place below his cold eyes. He stepped forward so his face was only four inches from that of the data manager and whispered, “The loss will be one of your *life* if I have any reason to think you’ve told, or might tell, anyone.”

CHAPTER 4

Kosner studied the waves of heat rising off the Kansas desert, then fastened the helmet strap under his chin and checked his mask. Satisfied his equipment was working, he waving off his flight assistant and climbed the rusty ladder into the cockpit of his ancient Harrier jet. Minutes later, the aircraft's tired engines had whirled to a fever pitch and lifted him from the ground.

The grizzly pilot let the plane hang in the air above the Border Patrol landing pad for a few extra seconds, savoring the power under his command. Once again he marveled at the raw power the old plane exuded. Finally he wheeled the aircraft around and eased the throttle forward, slowly picking up forward speed as the blast from the jet's engines was diverted from the underside to the rear of the plane.

The radio headset crackled in Kosner's ears. "Captain, we have a report of Mex intruders four clicks south of us."

"Better check it out then, hadn't we?" he replied with a sneer. Things had been heating up along the

border. He figured it was only a matter of time before Mexican raiders came across again.

Glancing at his radar to be sure nothing was near him, the pilot throttled the engine to a higher pitch and raced away from the airfield, watching his instruments to be sure there were no malfunctions. "John, are you going to guide me or do I have to fly by Braille?" he finally grumbled.

"Sorry, Captain Kosner," the voice of his ground control officer replied. "I keep forgetting you don't have an on-board link. The satellite's a little fuzzy today. Here, it's coming up now. You got it?"

"Yeah," the pilot answered, watching the monitor that had been jury rigged into his console. "Just so it doesn't go off-line like last night," he added, adjusting his course so it was the proper angle from the beacon behind him.

Four minutes later Kosner was almost to his target area.

"Can you see them?" John asked over the radio.

"Negative," Kosner replied, his tired eyes squinting at the dust clouds that rolled across the sand and scrub below him. "You sure the satellite doesn't have me chasing a heat echo again?"

"Pretty sure, Captain. The target's been traveling on a straight course counter to the prevailing wind — it's definitely not a heat echo. I think you've got a real unidentified."

"Then I guess I'd better wheel around for another look." The pilot kicked his pedals and brought the stick around, swooping in a large circle over the ocean of sand below him. His eyes narrowed. "I think

I have them. Got a faint trail in the sand. What's their barring?"

"They're heading southwest from you."

"I think I've found their tracks." Kosner continued his course, watching the faint tread marks. Then he had them, trying to hide under a dead tree, their armored vehicle almost hidden in the brush.

"No wonder I didn't see them," Kosner mumbled, half to himself. "John, the vehicle must have had an environmental shield. It's a close match to the desert – almost invisible to my infrared DS. Definitely Mexs – Bet they've come North to try an' derail some more trains."

"I copy you," John finally answered.

"I'm requesting permission to engage."

"Just a minute, I'll enter the code," John's voice came back, it's pitch climbing as the hot desert air distorted the radio waves.

Ten seconds later the message came through. "Master control has given you a go ahead."

"Request a repeat of the last message," Kosner said, making sure that his flight recorder would capture the clearance in case he ran into trouble with the brass later on. He didn't want any unrighteous shoot records in his files.

"Master control gives permission to attack as necessary."

"Thanks. I'm getting into position now. They seem to have spotted me."

"Be careful, Kos."

"Hey, kid, I was being careful when you were in diapers." The pilot armed his weapons systems and matched his speed and course with the now-moving

six wheeler that bounced over the sand below him. Then he eased his plane ahead and fired his machine guns, raising plumes of dust ahead of the vehicle.

"I've fired my warning shots," Kosner reported. "Hopefully they'll take the hint and surrender."

The driver of the armored car slammed on his brakes and Kosner thought he was about to surrender. But then the vehicle on the ground kicked up a thick cloud of dust, its wheels spinning as the driver changed course so the jet overhead hurtled past him.

"Nice maneuver," Kosner said, half in admiration. "Should have been ready for that. I'm getting too complacent." He slammed his Harrier to the left, anticipating the next move of the Mexican soldiers behind him. A stream of tracer bullets passed through the space his jet had occupied just seconds before.

Kosner thumbed the radio switch again. "They're firing on me and have ignored my warning shots. I am now arming my ATG missiles and preparing for attack."

"That's a roger," John's voice replied.

Kosner took his jet behind a hill for shelter as he stroked the four buttons on his armrest, arming the guided missiles that road under the planes wings. He kept the plane low as he brought it into a hover, then gently lifted it so he could peek over the hill between him and the speeding armored car without unnecessarily exposing himself to enemy fire.

Good, he told himself when he spied the armored car. He was well out of range from his target that was now nearly a mile away — but still well within the range of his missiles. He finger hesitated over the

launch button as he locked the brackets of the head-up display on the vehicle speeding away from him.

For a moment he had a mental picture of the men that were bouncing inside the hot interior of the armored car, terrified that any moment they would be killed, yet hoping that somehow they would achieve the impossible and escape the plane pursuing them.

Kosner pushed the vision from his mind; his finger stabbed the button.

The first missile below the jet's wings hissed away on a tail of fire, dropping before its main engines kicked in, taking it toward the target in a brilliant rush of speed.

Five seconds clicked away with the rocket twisting in the sky, homing in on the vehicle whose driver frantically tried to elude it. Almost invisible in the distance, the weapon connected with its target.

There was a flash and then the armored car disintegrated. A fraction of a second later, the fuel in its gas tank ignited and sent an angry black cloud skyward, peppered with flashing explosions as rounds of ammunition burst in the heat.

Kosner didn't bother to check the wreckage. There was little need to do so. The desert would make sure there were no survivors. And as far as Kosner was concerned, anyone invading his country deserved a slow and miserable death, anyway.

CHAPTER 5

“Warning. You have twenty seconds to identify yourself or leave,” the thick metal door announced. “After that we will take terminal action. We do not call the police.”

Diane eyed the snub barrel of the door gun which trained itself on her. She held up her hand so the door could scan her ID. “Diane Death Song. I have an appointment to see Mr. Ranbaugh.”

The door was silent for ten seconds, then spoke, whisking open. “Identification confirmed. You may enter. Welcome to Biotech Universal Incorporated’s headquarters, Ms. Death Song. Mr. Ranbaugh is in the third door on your left.”

Diane strolled down the wide marble hallway, her leather boots echoing as she went. The door indicated dilated open as she approached.

“Ms. Death Song. Come in.” The pale man behind the huge oak desk flashed a condescending smile and motioned toward the plastifoam chair. “Sit down. You’ll have to excuse me. I’ve got a meeting coming up so I must be brief.”

Diane settled into the chair and crossed her legs, smoothing fabric of her jump suit. Her face a mask, she waited for Ranbaugh to speak.

He pyramided his fingers and then spoke. "Biotech Universal needs to have an object recovered that has been stolen from us. It's too sensitive for the police and beyond our own rent-a-cops. Our sources say you're both good and discrete."

"I think there's been some sort of misunderstanding. I don't do recoveries. I'm a searcher. I normally track down goods and my customers take it from there."

"No misunderstanding. We understand your standard operating procedure. But we need a minimum of involvement with outside help. And we're willing to pay double your usual price — and throw in an extra — if you do it all for us."

"Extra?"

"Like an absolute transfer pass for one person." Ranbaugh laughed. "I can see by your face you're surprised at how thorough a background check we've done on you."

"I'm glad you're not in the blackmail business."

Ranbaugh said nothing, an amused smirk on his face.

"I'd like to hear what the job is before I declare myself," Diane said.

"Fair enough." Ranbaugh hit a button on the desk and a large 3-D lit up on the wall beside him. A silver tiger with black stripes materialized in the air beside his desk. "This is our Project 41. He's a beauty, isn't he? We've been working toward reviving several extinct species — a very lucrative business as you can

imagine with the recent exotic pet craze, despite the high taxes involved in owning one. A few of our creations for use as smart weapons, this being one that we've altered, as you can see by its coloration. But someone has stolen this first clone breeder."

"Someone stole this cat?"

"Right. And our data files that go with it. It's called a Tiger — that's T-Y-G-E-R. Trademark thing, you know. It represents ten years of work that can't be easily duplicated, not without a lot of time and expense. The same people also destroyed our research complex last night. Burned it to the ground."

"And you know that the tiger wasn't lost in the fire?"

"Yes. Whoever started the fire tried to use it to cover their theft of our animal. But this bit of video was relayed from an outside camera *before* the fire started." A new picture appeared, showing a group of men pushing a large dolly with the Silver Tiger draped over it. "Let me enhance this," Ranbaugh said, zeroing the picture in on the face of one of the men. "We were able to identify this man through a computer search."

"I don't see how I could handle a cat that size," Diane protested. "I think perhaps an animal handler would be in order."

"He isn't dangerous. We bred it as a fighter — it obeys orders. And he's nearly as intelligent as the average person — though that may not be saying much these days. He's capable of reasoning and — once he knows you're bringing him back — he will be easy for you to handle."

Diane raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Ranbaugh continued, "You should look at this as more of a kidnapping victim rescue rather than the retrieval of a wild animal." He studied her eyes a moment and then hit another button, changing the display. "Before you make up your mind, you might be interested in knowing that this is the gentleman that we believed stole our cat."

Diane leaned forward, her eyes narrowing at the lean face that became visible in the display. His face was familiar, yet she didn't know him.

"Don't recognize him?" Ranbaugh asked. "Well, guess you don't watch enough of the tubes. He's a frequent 'guest' on the World's Most Wanted – if you know what I mean. Even with the long bangs and ear rings, there's no mistaking Nathan Smiley. He's the other reason why we chose you for this job. Our source said you'd be able to handle a nut case like this guy if you had to."

"I don't work for free. You know my terms for something like this?"

Ranbaugh nodded. "Due to the added danger, we're doubling your standard fee: Two hundred gold kodos up front and two hundred on completion of the job. Off the record we will give you the universal transfer pass once the job's completed – that cost us about as much as the rest.

Ranbaugh paused to flash a grin. "We also have a termination authorization on Smiley and anyone helping him so you won't run into hassles with the authorities should you need to, uh, handle things. And I've also secured a multinational weapons permit for you in case you need to follow him past the frontier.

Finally, we'll pay all your travel expenses. What do you say? Does it sound like we can reach an agreement here?"

"I'm not an assassin."

Ranbaugh laughed. "Of course not. The termination authorization is just to protect us and you should you run into some unexpected trouble. If you want to scalp him and leave him in an ant hill, that's up to you. We just want our cat back."

Ranbaugh scooted a data dot across the table. "I have everything you need to know here. I don't think you'll have much trouble. We wouldn't have hired you if we'd thought you couldn't do it. The bottom line is we need that cat back and we think you're the one that can do it for us."

"Let me be sure we agree on this. I track the stolen animal down, get it from Smiley, and then bring it back? " Diane shook her head. "We're not talking house cat here. That thing must weigh, what? A hundred forty kilos?"

"More like two hundred forty. But you mustn't think of him as an animal. He's intelligent and highly trained. He's been conditioned."

Diane raised an eyebrow.

"Trust me," Ranbaugh said. "We wouldn't spend this much capital if we didn't know you would gain control once you had him. When you find him, just tell him you're taking him home and have him to sit in the back seat of your car or hop onto public transport and head back here. Piece of cake. We were tempted to do it in-house but didn't have anyone who could track down Smiley. That's the only part you'll really need to worry about."

Diane picked up the data dot and inserted it into a belt pouch. She needed the money but could live without it if she had to. There was another reason to take the work: The universal pass. Someone at the company had done a good work-up on her if they knew that she needed it.

"All right," she finally said, rising to her feet. "But you understand that the advance goes to me even if I can't deliver the animal back to you. If the job's harder than you say, you'll be out of the advance. No refunds."

"I understand," Ranbaugh said, rising to his feet. He came around the desk and shook Diane's with a limp-handed grip. "I have to leave now. My secretary will pay your advance and answer any further questions you have. Here's my card. You can reach me at those numbers day or night. Don't hesitate to call immediately when you have the animal."

With that, Ranbaugh checked his watch and left without another word.

"I've got her," Zigler told himself. Dressed in black and hidden in the shadows, he knew he was almost impossible to see from the street level. *Two bad the bug we put in her wasn't equipped with quality batteries*, he thought. Then he wouldn't have to be doing his high wire routine in an effort to keep track of her.

But he was beginning to think his luck was turning. He'd managed to discover the link between her and the Silver Tiger by sheer chance — or close to it. If he hadn't dusted off the old instruments to test them, he would never have stumbled on the

connection between the two. And with just a little more luck, he would be able to maneuver all the players together so he could exploit their untapped potential.

Time to move, he told himself. She was getting into her car. Snapping the micro-cable to his harness, Ziggler stepped off the ledge of the ten-story building and dropped rapidly toward the street.

CHAPTER 6

"Come on in," the balding man behind the counter said, a crooked smile crossing his face. "What brings you —"

With forefinger still at her lips as she entered the smoky store, Diane shoved a slip of paper across the counter top.

The storekeeper squinted, adding more wrinkles to his face as pulled down the visor-like magnifier so he could read the message, a worried frown replacing his smile. Without a word, he dropped the paper into his shredder where it vanished in a cloud of dust. He turned and pointed toward her comphone.

Diane removed her comphone from her utility belt pouch and handed it to him.

Louis hooked a cable into its input jack, placed the unit into a metal box, and punched a string of code into keyboard on the countertop beside him. A low hum filled the dusty shop and then climbed in frequency until it could no longer be heard.

Diane raised her eyebrow.

"Clean," Louis mouthed, taking the phone from the box and placing it on the counter. He turned his computer screen toward Diane and typed. "I'LL SCAN YOU NEXT. IS THAT OKAY?"

Diane nodded, crossing her fingers and closing her eyes as he rounded the counter with a telescoping metal rod in his hand. There was another hum that rattled her teeth and made the old scars on each side of her temple ache. Then the rod moved over the back of her skull and down her neck.

There was a beep, followed by a low, "Humrumpf," from Louis. Then he continued his search until he'd waved the rod over every inch of her body.

Louis put down the detector, a grimace on his face.

Diane again raised an eyebrow.

Louis nodded, holding up his index finger.

One. He'd found one bug.

A sick feeling boiled in Diane's stomach and her knees threatened to buckle. She had tried to tell herself it was impossible. But he had found one.

Retreating behind his counter, Louis tapped on the keyboard with the screen still pointed toward the searcher. "Burn it under your skin or remove it?"

"Remove it," Diane whispered. She didn't want to live with the thought of something left in her, violating the privacy of her own body.

Louis scowled, started to type something more, then thought better of it. He tugged at his lip, then turned and opened one of hundreds of storage bins lining the wall and rummaged around in the plastic drawer. Finally he produced a stainless steel box that

bore all the ear marks of a home-made piece of equipment. He gently placed the box on the counter.

He turned to the computer keyboard and typed. "It's here." He tapped the nape of her neck. Then he pressed a button hidden from view behind the counter. A panel hissed open on the counter top, causing Diane to blink in surprise. Inside was an electric pistol and a first aid kit. He broke the latter open and produced what the searcher recognized as a pain killer tube.

Diane held up her hand and shook her head. She couldn't afford to be groggy; there wasn't time to recover from any drugs.

"Sure? This is going to hurt."

She nodded, closing her eyes.

He replaced the tube into the kit and tapped the hidden button. The panel vanished, becoming part of the counter top once again.

Taking a small scalpel from its sealed packet, he sprayed antiseptic on her neck. "Ready?"

Diane nodded, taking a deep breath as she released her consciousness. She felt her spirit leave the room, rising upward at the speed of thought, fluttering on thick feathers. For a moment she felt dizzy, and then relaxed, wheeling westward on her strong raptor wings.

She felt the air whistle past the soft feathers of her face as she glided through the air, lifted skyward by the warm air lifting from the rolling plains below. Wheeling, she cocked her head and studied the ground passing below. Then she spied herself in the green field, years ago.

"Let's pick the black-eyed Susans," her young

sister had said, shading her eyes from the bright sunlight, oblivious to the Mississippi kite gliding overhead.

"No." Diane grabbed Karen's hand before she could pluck the flower. "They deserve to be left alone. Once they're picked they'll wither and die."

"They can't feel anything, can they?"

The wind ruffled the sea of prairie grass, sending a wave racing across the earth and mussing the two girls' raven hair as Diane groped for an answer. "No. They feel no pain."

"Then why not pick it?" Karen asked.

The Mississippi Kite above made a plaintive cry.

"It's hard to explain, little one," Diane said. "They are part of the earth, part of what makes it great. Part of the beauty that belongs to life."

"I don't see why picking one would make any difference."

How could she explain such a concept to a child? Diane wondered. A concept that was more feeling and wisdom than one of knowledge — and a concept she didn't fully understand herself. She started to speak again, but was distracted by the insect that hummed angrily, buzzing past her face as she tried to shoo it away. *You don't belong in this memory*, she thought.

The bee settled on the back of Diane's neck, its tiny claws scratching at her skin as it gained a foothold. Before she could flick it off, the searing pain of its sting spread through her body causing her to gasp as she was transported backward in time.

What happened?

For a moment she felt disoriented. Then, still in

confusion, her spirit tried to leap skyward and once again. But she was bound to the table, in the place she had forced herself to forget.

Outside the beam of light that enveloped her, one of the Dark Ones stood, his features hidden in the shadows. But Diane knew what he was all the same. An evil man with the tool that caused the searing pain. He stepped toward her. There was no escape. The rod touched her skin and a fiery agony coursed through her young body, causing her back to arch as she writhed against the straps, trying to escape.

There was another rustling of feathers.

She was free!

"I'm almost finished," Louis said, his distant voice drifting into her thoughts as she wheeled through the air, free once again.

And then she was back in the shop.

Diane caught herself, holding onto the edge of the counter, feeling disoriented and confused.

"There," the shopkeeper said. "We're all done. I don't know how you pulled off that parlor trick you just did. If someone had been digging that out of my neck, I'd have screamed like a banshee. It was like you weren't here, like you were somewhere else."

Diane said nothing, glancing around the dingy shop, half surprised to be where she was. There was a cool spray on the back of her neck and the pain that had slowly inched its way into her consciousness receded to a dull throbbing

"Be sure to change this plas-dress tomorrow," Louis admonished her, slipping the bandage on her neck. "And for goodness sakes, don't get it wet."

"What can you tell me about the bug you found?"

Diane asked, ignoring her pain.

Louis retrieved a projectoscope from under the counter and blew the dust off it. Then he flicked on its switch and placed a tiny BB-sized object on its stage. He focused the machine on the tiny object and then turned the screen so Diane could see.

"Looks like a military job," he mumbled. "See the barbs? Designed to dig into your skin and then stay in place once it gets under the surface. Nasty. Who'd you cross anyway, the gov?"

"Still transmitting?" Diane whispered.

"No. It's dead. Hard to say *when* it quit. Might have been a day ago, might have been a minute — when was the last time you were checked?"

"Capabilities?" she asked, ignoring his question.

Louis took the bug off the stage and transferred it to another instrument, then tapped his keyboard and waited a few moments. The computer made a belching noise and the shopkeeper studied the display a moment before speaking. "Homing circuit. And a mike for transmission of sounds. Probably only forty meters or less."

"Whoever was using this had to be pretty close?"

Louis nodded. "To get the audio transmission. The homer probably ranges up to a kilometer. So you've noticed anybody following you lately? Or seen any drones?"

Diane shook her head. "Just had a feeling I was being watched — they were good. So they must have been using a secondary to re-transmit the audio?"

"That's how I'd do it. How about your car?"

"I don't think so. Probably somewhere by my apartment."

"More than likely. That'd let them relay it to a satellite link and — who you been crossing lately, young lady?"

"I'm not sure. Quite a few people, really."

"You remember when this thing was implanted? I mean, it would have hurt to get that inserted under your skin without a pain killer. Any medical work lately?"

"No." Diane was silent a moment, then snapped her fingers. The memory of being stung hadn't been caused only by Louis's removal of the bug. Among the flowers, lost in thought. "A bee sting. Last week, in Central Gardens. I was in the Wild Plants of the Plains exhibit and—"

"Must have been fired from an air gun."

"No. It really was a bee. I killed it after it stung me. It flew around me, landed on my neck, and stung me."

"Wish you'd saved its little carcass. I would have liked to have seen it. Must have been one piece of engineering."

"Can you give me a scanner upgrade so I can locate the relay myself? I've checked every morning and every night since I don't know when. But didn't detect anything."

Louis rubbed his bristly chin. "This operates on low sideband from the looks of it. A detector'll cost you. The new stuff's hard to catch — you pay through the nose for the equipment. And believe me, anyone that can do this is going to have the very best bugs you've ever seen."

"Two gold kodos?"

Louis laughed as he removed the keyboard from

her comphone and then cracked open its access panel. "Two koos will *more* than cover it. OK. And you just have enough room to squeeze in another memory upgrade and the scanner in your system. I'll mount them and then load in the newest virus software, too. That should make us even. But you'll have to promise not to let anyone know where you 'found' the detection grid. It's a little, uh— Shall we say 'hot'? I don't want someone panting down my neck and asking where it came from."

"If anyone puts a gun to my head and asks where I got the gear, I'll remember I bought it on the street from the trunk of a nondescript guy's car on the other side of town."

Louis chuckled as he installed the upgrade and new chips.

CHAPTER 7

Smiley sat in the pilots seat of the stolen H-2000 helicopter he guided westward, hugging the dry bed of the Arkansas River that carved its way through the no man's land of the Great Kansas Desert. The sky ahead was inky black laced with an occasional lightning flash that was amplified daylight bright by the night vision goggles he wore.

The auto pilot altered the control column, as if an unseen ghost was flying the chopper, taking them on a winding course over the silicon sea below, staying in the ground clutter so the border-patrol radar would be less likely to detect his presence. The computer eased the H-2000 toward the right in a gentle turn that followed the snaking sand below

"Doc, how's the cat doing?" Smiley asked over the intercom, his cold eyes scanning the horizon.

"Tiger's okay," reported the veterinarian. "Sleeping like a kitten. It's got the prettiest fur."

"Just take care of the cat. Don't drool on it. Remember we're going to be trading it for some cold, hard platinum."

"Right, boss."

Smiley shook his head as he double-checked their course; the auto pilot was right on the money. Leaning back in his seat, he glanced toward the left where the black silhouette of the weapons pod hung on the port side of the chopper. A flash of distant lightning momentarily illuminated the pod, revealing the antique .30-caliber machine guns next to the scarred 70mm Hydra rocket pod. Ancient but lethal, the armament waited patiently for a battle Smiley hoped wouldn't come.

The helicopter hauled itself into a tight climb over an island of dead cottonwoods whose skeletal branches glowed white with another lightning flash. The chopper leapfrogged the dead trees in a giddy jump and then the dead vegetation vanished behind them and they dropped in an exhilarating dive to follow the wider opening that skirted a second diminutive island of scrub brush.

"Radar alert," the console reported, bringing a cathode ray display to life in front of Smiley.

"Report," the pilot ordered.

"Traces from a long-range system."

The pilot swore under his breath as he leaned forward to study the array. "Still pretty far away," he muttered to himself, studying the screen. *Probably just a pleasure balloon off course.*

But then again it might be a National Guard or Border Patrol plane. Since the recent forays of the Mexican infiltrators the Kansas/Mexico border, everything had been tense in the area since the war had gone from cold to hot between the two countries after the peace talks had broken down a

week ago — something that now threatened to throw a money wrench into Smiley's carefully laid-out plans.

Time to put whatever's out there to the test, Smiley told himself. "Auto pilot, alter course 14 degrees North and maintain heading."

"Course change 14 degrees, north," the auto pilot said. The chopper banked to the right in a weaving turn that took advantage of the bend in the dry river of sand racing past below them.

Smiley watched the scope.

The radar traces from the blip altered its course to match the new heading. A subscreen popped up on the display and the computer spoke. "Probable aircraft: US military scout or mini-gunship."

The pilot swore under his breath, then adjusted the mike on his helmet and spoke to his crew. "Look's like trouble. Some kind of military craft is shadowing us. I'll try to bluff our way out of it. But everyone get strapped in, in case we need to make a run for it."

"Will do," Frank's gruff voice replied from the passenger compartment.

No rest for the wicked, Smiley thought, locating the switch that would take him from auto pilot to manual control. The switch to manual flight would prevent the short-range terrain following/terrain avoidance radar from giving them away if the approaching aircraft hadn't yet spotted them. If things got sticky, he might be able to hide — provided the other aircraft didn't have a radar signature coming from their auto pilot to spot. Smiley grasped the control column. "Auto pilot,

disengage."

"Warning: Auto pilot is disengaging."

There was a slight shudder in the control stick in Smiley's hand as the computer transferred to manual control. Taking control of the aircraft, the pilot dropped the H-2000 slightly to adhere to a nap-of-the-earth flight that held them three to five meters above the tree tops, in an effort to get off the approaching aircraft's radar. Then he shoved the control column to the left, angling his helicopter along a thin beach that cut through parched river banks. The pink sand raced past below him, the faint whooping of its composite blades throwing tiny dust waves in the wake of the down blast.

Smiley glanced toward the radar screen. The blip had altered course again.

They're getting ready to cut us off, Smiley thought. "Doc, is the cat tied down, I may have to do some fancy maneuvers."

"It's strapped down."

Smiley lifted the covers on the control panel of the weapons module, then tapped the exposed buttons to arm his weapons pods. The panel glowed green and, with a series of tapes from the pilot's thin fingers, transformed itself into an angry red. Smiley swiveled the control switch on the side of his helmet and the weapons display appeared in the right eyepiece of his night vision goggles, painting a ruby ring over the green and white display.

"OK," the pilot said to the blip on the screen. "Now we try to lose you." He shoved down on the collective pitch lever to skim the dry bank, attempting to retain the radar cover offered by the

sand hill beyond.

For a moment the blip was lost in the ground clutter. Then it resurfaced on the scope.

And it had altered course. Now it was heading straight for them.

Must be using look-down radar from a satellite, Smiley thought. There was no way the pilot could have tracked them through the last maneuver. If that was the case, it was probably a US military aircraft. He would have to either shake it or knock it from the air before the interceptor could call in more muscle. "Looks like we're going to have some trouble," Smiley warned his crew. "But I'm going to set us down and see if we can tough it out."

The pilot drew back on the control column, decreasing the pitch of the four main blades, slowing their air speed; simultaneously he lowered the collective pitch lever with his left hand, plunging the helicopter toward the sand below them.

"Approaching TF/TA radar detected," the computer announced. "Aircraft will intercept our position in fifteen seconds."

Smiley ignored the warning and continued lowering the chopper earthward toward the shadowy clearing below.

"Interception in ten seconds," the computer warned.

The advancing aircraft was quite close. The warning beeps from the approaching plane's radar grew louder as the helicopter's computer intercepted them, the noise bleeping faster as it overtook them.

A thundering roar passed over the helicopter.

He might not have seen us, Smiley told himself. But as he watched the screen, he saw the radar image created by the output of the high-tech jet's narrow its pattern, focusing on their position as the pilot started a wide, banking turn. There was no doubt they'd been spotted.

"OK," Smiley said. "We're going to have to take him on. He probably won't fire until he has a positive ID on us. Everyone just sit tight and let me handle this." He thumbed on a fake IFF signaler, hoping to fool the approaching pilot into thinking he was dealing with a lost amateur pilot rather than a stolen military helicopter.

The radio crackled with the voice of Captain Kosner. "Unidentified helicopter, this is Military One Zero Two Fiver. I'm reading an outdated IFF from you. I need to have your identity. You're been flying too low and have not logged your flight plans on the national system. If it weren't for the fact that the Mexs don't have any whirligigs like yours, I would have shot you down already."

Smiley lifted the helicopter back into the air, then spun adjusted the radio frequency so it was slightly off that of the approaching jet's. "This is uh, AM 205," Smiley said, giving the fake ID his IFF was also sending. "Sorry we're in the wrong spot. We're lost. We were headed for Kan-Topeka."

"Stay right where you are," Kosner warned. "If you try to escape, I'll be forced to attack. I need your personal ID code for verification."

"Hang on a second, it's here somewhere," Smiley lied, his thumb inching toward the launch

button on his control stick.

The hovering jet ahead of him was just out of range. It wasn't all bad, though. While the National Guard pilot had claimed to have weapons trained on them, in fact Smiley's computer showed that the jet's targeting radar had not yet been activated. Most likely his weapons were cold as well. That meant he must think they were just civilians off course.

A big mistake if I can get you into range, Smiley thought, centering the crimson sighting ring in his goggles over the hovering aircraft in front of him. "Come a little closer said the spider to the fly," he whispered.

As if complying to the killer's thoughts, the border patrol pilot eased the Harrier forward, its down-blast kicking up a sandstorm below as it came closer. He halted, just inside the effective range of the helicopters unguided rockets. "AM 205, what in the world have you got on your wing? If I didn't know better, I'd say you were armed."

"Exactly right!" Smiley replied, thumbing the launch button. The rocket hissed from its tube, lighting the side of the helicopter.

The pilot of the Harrier attempted to escape the rocket, but reacted too slowly and his jet, too sluggishly. The rocket smashed into the wing of the jet and ignited, the fiery blast turning the night into day. As the debris dropped earthward, a secondary explosion of the jet's fuel shattered the plane and scoured the ground with flames.

Smiley circled the fireball that rose from the wreckage, his helicopter's down-blast whirling the

smoke into huge spirals as they passed. "Anyone see a survivor?" he asked his crew.

"I thought maybe I saw the pilot eject, but I'm not sure," Doc called from the back.

"Yeah," Frank agreed. "I saw a chute. Off to the right."

"Ahead of us?" Smiley asked.

"Yeah. Ahead and to the right."

Captain Kosner staggered to his feet, ripping at the release on his harness to free himself from the chute that threatened to drag him along the desert floor as it billowed in the wind. Finally he was free and the webbing fell away from his shoulders.

He got to his feet and jerked off his helmet, tossing it to the ground. Then the Harrier pilot stood motionless in the darkness, his ears straining for the faint whooping of the blades from the chopper that had attacked him. The sound became louder, echoing through the dead cottonwoods making it hard to locate.

There, he warned himself. To the left and coming closer.

Kosner spun in the sand and raced in the opposite direction. With any luck they hadn't yet spotted him. He might still escape and hide until the rescue planes came to see what had happened to him.

The pilot dashed toward the top of the hill ahead of him, his feet slipping in the sand with each step. If he could get the hill between himself and the helicopter, he had a chance of remaining unseen, even if the pilot of the chopper had an

infrared viewer.

But the chopper had altered its course to follow, closing the distance between them.

They've seen me, Kosner warned himself. He dived over the ridge ahead of him and rolled downward into the pitch black valley below, scrub brush cutting his face and hands as he rolled blindly in the darkness. Finally he reached the bottom where he lay still for a moment, his breath whistling from his throat.

At first he thought he saw another flash of lightning in the distance, followed by a ripping of thunder. Then, when the bullets pounded the sand around him, he realized that he was being fired upon.

He jumped to his feet as the helicopter circled for another pass, running in the opposite direction of its turn in order to maximize the distance between the chopper and himself. Knowing that hiding from the infrared viewer the pilot chasing him must be wearing was impossible, Kosner concentrated on running, hoping his pursuer would decide to leave him in the desert to die rather than try to track him down. If that happened, then there was a chance that he would be found by those searching for the Border Patrol pilot when he failed to return to base.

He figured any chance, however slim, was better than standing still to be slaughtered. So he charged blindly through the darkness for all he was worth, hoping somehow to survive.

He thought he'd made it when suddenly the chopper sprang over the hill behind him and

descended with a long burst of fire that raised plumes of dirt all around him. Abruptly Kosner found he could no longer run; he tumbled to the ground, rolling in the fine sand until he came to rest on his back as the helicopter thundered overhead.

He pushed himself up on his elbows, trying to rise, then realized he couldn't move his legs. A dull throbbing climbed up his back as he dropped back into the fine sand that was sliding down from the hill, settling in around him.

The helicopter came to a stop and slowly turned back around, training its guns on him as he lay in the sandstorm the blades were generating. A second salvo from the guns chewed up the earth around him.

And then there was blackness.

"Nice shooting, boss," Frank said over the intercom as the chopper circled the still form below them.

"I've had lots of practice," Smiley replied. Satisfied there were no other survivors, he wheeled the helicopter back toward the river valley, cut nearly a hundred years earlier when water had flowed in the now-dry river bed. Guiding the H-2000 back onto their original course, he prepared to resume his journey.

The computer plotted a secondary course; Smiley switched back to auto pilot. After studying the console a few moments to be sure there were no signs of any other Border Patrol jets, he leaned back in his seat and almost instantly fell asleep, the satisfied grin on his face barely visible in the glow

from the instruments.

CHAPTER 8

Diana armed her car as she entered the parking lot, slowing so she could carefully inspect the lot both visually as well as in the vehicles detection displays. Easing her car into a parking space and stopping it, she pulled out the H&K MP-5Z machine pistol that she kept below the front seat on the driver's side. Watching the street, she unfastened her comphone from her utility belt. "Dial Tim Mann."

"Connecting," the phone said.

"Hello — that you Diane?" a mechanical voice on the other end asked.

"Ready to come in," she answered. "How do things look from up there."

"Let me jack into the outside cameras and check things out. Ummm... You at the South entrance — yeah, I see your car. New armor on the grill?"

"Is the path clear?" Diane asked, trying to keep her impatience in check. Sometimes Tim acted like time had no meaning — which it probably didn't for

him.

"Looks like you might encounter an ambush about midway down the East wall. Big goon and the two little pigs, judging from the heat signatures; hiding in the brush at the last corner before the main door. Looks like five bangers at the front entrance just inside the gate. But they've already hit someone and are drugged out of their minds from the look of them. But you might want to keep an eye on them when you pass."

"Anybody else you can see." "That's a negative. Slow night in Goonsville, I guess. Come by when you get in?"

"I will. Got a job for you."

"I'll be waiting with baited breath."

Diane clicked off her comphone, folded it, and dropped it into its belt pouch, fastening the cover over it in case she had to move quickly. "Self defense," she ordered her car. "And auto destruct," she added, deciding she'd rather see her vehicle destroyed than let some young thug have it if he somehow managed to circumvent its defenses.

Checking the street again, she cycled a 10mm cartridge into her MP-5Z, looping the submachine gun's sling over her shoulder. She brought her night vision monocle down over her right eye and activated the infrared aiming laser on her gun as she opened the door and slid out. The laser beam cut through the night, more as a warning to anyone that might be watching her with night vision goggles than anything else.

She slammed the car door shut. The Eldorado beeped its "alarm armed" signal. Swallowing, she

broke into a run, sprinting toward the front gate.

If I ever get a little spare cash, I've got to move to a better neighborhood, she thought. The apartment building whose courtyard she raced for was a windowless, high-rise fortress, created nearly two decades earlier during the flurry of bombing attacks from the Peace through Pieces movement. Unfortunately the design dictated a large courtyard to prevent car bombings. And that courtyard, with the passage of 20 years, had become a small, overgrown jungle of brush and ever malfunctioning flood lights. Now it was infested with beggars and thieves intent on robbing those who lived in the apartments beyond.

The bangers at the front gate ignored her as she went past them. Ordinarily she would have at least fired toward them, leaving any she had chanced to hit for a clean-up rats that passed through each morning; but tonight the thugs lucked out because she didn't want to alert the ambushers near the main door that she was armed and dangerous. Otherwise they might start shooting first, trying to take her by superior firepower as she approached them.

She rounded a thick pine and could just barely discern the heat signatures of the three criminals between her and the front door of the apartment complex. She slowed her pace and placed her thumb on the selector of the MP-5Z.

A giant punk with a Nazi helmet stepped onto the path ahead of her. She flicked her laser sight across his eyes but got no reaction. "No night vision gear," she whispered. That was a plus in her favor.

Must be low-tech brooders.

"Hold it right there," the giant bellowed.

Diane ignored him, watching the heat signatures from the other two that were still behind the hedge row, circling around behind her. Then she slowed to a stop and spoke. "Let me pass and I won't have to kill you and your friends." Her thumb clicked the selector on her gun into its burst position as she brought the weapon into firing position.

"You going to stop me with that pea shooter?" the giant asked. "Haven't you ever heard of ballistic vests? We're armored, baby." He threw back his head and howled just as his two accomplices burst through the foliage next to her.

Without thinking, Diane tightened her finger on the trigger the moment the aiming dot of the laser passed over the chest of the attacker nearest her. She dodged the machete he swung as he fell. Before he fell at her feet, three more bullets exploded from her submachine gun, downing her second opponent. He dropped to his knees, keeping a grip on the butcher knife.

"Drop the knife," Diane ordered.

He struggled to rise. Another burst from the MP-5K ended his efforts, causing him to collapse over his fallen comrade.

Diane turned back toward the giant who was now trying frantically to get through the brush. "Guess you guys haven't ever heard that armor-piercing bullets pierce ballistic vests."

"Lady, take it easy," the giant yelled, clawing at the thick brush that formed an unyielding wall of thorns that prevented his escape. "We didn't mean

you any harm." He flashed a smile that exposed sharpened teeth. "Lady, we were just trying to have a little bit of fun. It was just a joke."

Diane hesitated only a moment, remembering the bloody body of Mrs. Goldberg who had lived down the hall from her.

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

Three times.

The riddled body of the giant drooped, hanging in the thorns that had prevented his escape. His helmet bounced onto the sidewalk, spinning like a wobbly top as Diane dashed toward the main door.

"That's for Mrs. Goldberg," she whispered to the corpse as you passed it. It might not do the departed neighbor any good. *It's impossible to help the dead*, Diane reflected. And chances were good the three thugs lying behind her weren't involved in butchering Mrs. Goldberg.

All the same, it gave the searcher a good feeling in the pit of her stomach to think she'd evened up the scales of justice just a bit. Little by little, she and her MP-5Z were making the world a better place.

She smiled grimly, placing her hand on the scanner that opened the heavily armored door to the apartment complex.

CHAPTER 9

Diana stared at the muzzle of the autogun in Tim's door. "Tell your door to lighten up," she said over her phone after dialing his number.

"Don't get into a panic," Tim's voice answered. "It must have mistook you for a door-to-door salesman."

The gun abruptly swiveled away from her and the door popped open a crack.

Diane pushed her way through the opening, closing it behind her and listening to be certain the electric locks latched securely. "You need to check your defense program. I could hear the safety on the gun disengage and the trigger linkage tighten. Some day you're going to ace a friend if that thing malfunctions."

"Maybe," Tim answered, his face a motionless mask of stainless steel. He rose from his chair with a clank and turned toward her as she entered his apartment. Although only his hands and face had actually been replaced with metal parts, he had

added enough armor and cyborgic modules to his anatomy to give the impression to a casual observer that he was all metal — a misconception he enjoyed exploiting from time to time.

"Your door can't have a *legal* defensive program in it," Diane said, unslinging her submachine gun and laying it on a table piled high with old computer manuals and a slice of fossilized pizza.

"I'll admit I tweaked the program a bit. But I figure better safe than sorry. If anything goes wrong, I can always get new friends should I fry one by mistake."

"Very funny," Diane said. "When your gun malfunctions, leaving my corpse in the hall, you'll have a lot of lonesome nights with only your ethereal cyber babes to keep you company. I'm not sure who else would want to be a friend to a rust bucket like you."

"Stainless steel and copper doesn't rust. What you're mistaking for corrosion is an attractive patina. Like an ancient statue of a Greek god." He struck a pose and stood completely motionless in front of the massive table containing his computer and meter-wide flat screen.

"Cut it out. You know it gives me the creeps when you do your statue routine."

"Listen," Tim said, abruptly coming back to life. "Did you come here to make jests at your faithful bionic friend's expense or did you need something?"

"I need information." She laid fishing the data dot from a belt pocket. She handed the chip to him. "But first we need to do some house cleaning." She retrieved her comphone and switched on its new

circuits, extending the extra long antenna. Stepping over a partially dismantled sweeper-bot lying on the floor, she initiated her electronic sweep of the room.

"What?" Tim asked. "You're not going to rearrange everything so I can't find it, are you. You remember how that messed me up last time." Then he saw what she was doing. He turned to one of the keyboards on the desk behind him and typed, then cleared his throat to get her attention.

Diane turned glanced toward him and read the meter-high letters that had appeared on the giant monitor.

"Bugs?" he had typed in neon pink fonts that jumped from the screen.

She nodded, thankful he had the good sense not to say anything that might tip a listener off so he could shut down any of the electronic listening devices that might be present, making them harder to find.

The display on the comphone lit up. "*Detection — 1 circuit.*" Diane turned the tiny screen so Tim could see.

He retrieved a screwdriver from his desk and plugged it into the end of one of his metal fingers. "I'll handle this part," he whispered, reaching to take the phone from her.

She shook her head. "It doesn't rain but it pours."

"More?"

"Probably." She picked up a pen from his desk and circled the spot the bug was embedded in the wall. Then she continued the sweep of the room.

Five minutes later, she was finished. "That makes

three all together," she said, smashing a cockroach under her boot. She studied the smashed creature a moment. "Now we're down to two."

"You didn't have to smash the cockroach," Tim protested. "I could have used the transmitter it had glued to its back."

"We don't have time to capture bugged bugs so you can dissect them. Besides, you can play with the two mechanicals we found in your walls. Let's dig them out."

They spent the next three minutes retrieving the twin transmitters embedded in the walls of the room.

"Of course you'll need to pay me for destroying my expensive décor," Tim said, extracting the last from the sheet rock.

"Loss of yellowed wallpaper isn't covered in our contracted expenses." Diane smiled. "And the dead cockroach spot on the carpet will never be noticed among all the grease stains. Besides, if you'd been on the ball, no one would have been able to plant these in here. Don't tell me you actually left your apartment long enough for someone to get in here."

"I haven't." Tim held one of the tiny units under a magnifier. "But I think I know how they did it with me here. I opened the door for a delivery man a couple of days ago — he supposedly had a wrong address. I was suspicious at the time, but didn't think about the possibility I had let in some bugs."

"Surprised your door didn't fry him before he could get your attention."

"Very funny. I bet when I opened the door to talk to him, the cockroach hopped in and the mechanicals flew in as well. Look," he said, stepping back from

the magnifier. "See the tiny engines? These are the new self-propelled units. They use a ram jet engine and a couple of drops of fuel for a short burst of power, then settle into the woodwork and operate on batteries." He leaned back over the magnifier. "Hey, wait a minute. These are only relays. There must be a miked transmitter somewhere, too."

"Already found it."

"Where?"

"In my neck. Louis removed it a little while ago."

"Your neck?" Tim said, jumping to his feet so fast he clanked. "And you were brow-beating me for letting these sneak in. Can't imagine how someone could plant a bug under your skin without being noticed."

"I thought it was a bee sting."

He tapped his fingers on his skull for a moment. "These guys are crafty. Hey, do mind if I keep these? Might be some circuits I could use. They look expensive."

"I can't use them — they're yours."

"So now that the bug hunt is over, what else can I do for you?" Tim asked, settling back into his antique office chair. He opened a steel box and carefully deposited the bugs into it.

Diane cleared a stack of data storage cubes off a chair and sat down. "I need a bio rundown on the guy listed on the data dot. Most of what you'll find about him is probably already on the data dot. But I'm hoping you can create a profile on him and then give me some clues as to where he is right now."

Tim dropped the dot into the reader of a computer that looked as cobbled together as its

owner.

"You should probably start by checking into the break-in at the Biotech Universal Incorporated labs over on 14th and Anderson last night. I don't think the company reported the break-in to the police, but you might check for reports."

"You're willing to pay me enough to break into the police comps?" he asked, turning back toward her. His metal finger tips tapped at the steel plate over his skull, making a faint pinging. "Somebody must be paying you pretty well on this job."

"Yeah. You can splurge a little tonight if you need to in order to get what I need. Just keep it in bounds."

"Time frame?"

"I need the data yesterday," she said, getting back to her feet. "Early tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Don't hold your breath on yesterday. But you're in luck. My hot date called while ago to cancel, so my usually full schedule has an opening tonight. Want me to check to see if there're any unusual reports from the neighborhood around the lab?"

"Good idea. And while you're searching for leads, watch for any missing large vans or aircraft. Better check the veterinarians around the city, too. Missing supplies – stuff like that."

"What exactly are we looking for? An animal of some kind?"

"A large tiger. A silver tiger."

"Is this a Native American thing – like that sacred albino buffalo myth?"

Diane started to make a flippant answer, and

then stopped. "Hadn't thought about that, Tim. It is sort of odd, isn't it, that I'd be searching for something like this. But the cat's purely manmade, I'm afraid. And the name is a trademark. Silver Tiger. Tiger being spelled with a y instead of an *i* in this case."

"Hey, no problem. That's how I *always* spell tiger. Good spelling's a prime asset for a professional researcher like myself."

"When you're finished, PGP your report and relay it to my comphone ASAP, okay? By morning, perhaps."

"Will do, but it might be a big data dump. You got that new memory chip I told you, you needed?"

"Yeah. Got it today from Louis."

"You must have struck pay dirt today. But just wait 'til you see my bill. I have a feeling tonight is going to be very expensive."

"Lucky your scalp is already missing or I'd make a counter threat. I've got to go now. See you later."

Tim made no movement but the door behind Diane cycled open at his mental command. "See you later," he said, his molded face as expressionless as ever.

She retrieved her gun from the table and turned to go, then looked back over her shoulder where her friend sat motionless, the cable he'd plugged into his neck carrying commands to his computer, directly from his brain. "I appreciate all you do for me, Tim," she said. "You're a good friend."

"You're a good friend, too," he replied, turning his head toward her as he spoke. "Now get out of here. I've got work to do and can't risk getting sentimental. Tears make me rust."

CHAPTER 10

Karren Deathsong pushed her way through the animated Cigar Indians who were hocking their drugs and bodies to any tourist willing to pay for their ware. Throngs of Hispanics and Whites flowed in drunken clots along the wide plaza, looking for action in the form of gambling or legalized perversions. Those willing to search long enough could find everything from a bingo game to a small covey of whores available for the right price. The reservation was lawless and dangerous, attracting thrill seekers the way a flame draws a moth to its fiery destruction.

“What’s more disgusting?” Karen’s sister, Diane, had asked her. “The outsiders who created the reservation and come to spend their money, or our people who have prostituted their heritage in exchange for the cash?”

“Tradition is for squares,” Karen had answered. “Ripping off the Europeans is our way of getting ahead. It evens the score for what they’ve done to

our people.”

Now, studying the gaudy Native American shops and booths along the walkway, Karen had little doubt that many of her own people were being captured in their own traps. The tar they had smeared to trap the invaders had snared them as well. The leaders of the reservation, and many of those around her, had become just as depraved as those they sought to fleece. In feeding the perversions and vices of their customers, they had become just like what they hated.

“We have girls, girls, girls,” a barker with a huge headdress that looked like something from a Hollywood movie yelled as Karen passed. “We have topless,” the barker cried, “we have bottomless, we have legless, and we have armless. Hey buddy, you like animals? We have those, too. We have goats, we have...”

Karen held her hands over her ears, trying to block the amplified insanity swirling around her. The tribal leaders had sold their souls for the interlopers’ cash. Of course they liked to blame the government that created the opportunity by ruling that the UN laws didn’t apply to the Native American reservations. But Karen knew her own tribe had made the conscious decision to squander their birth right for cars, jewelry, and drugs. The Uttawa tribe that had once prided itself with being at one with their land were now only at one with e-cash and the mad money-making schemes concocted by the Grand Chief of the Americas.

Stepping around a group of snake eaters, Karen found her way blocked by a emaciated woman with

her head in a cybervise; she cackled insanely, blood oozing from her ears as she stood in Karen's path. "Come into the shadows and play with me," she blubbered.

"Get out of the way," Karen yelled.

"Come into the shadows," the woman cried. Her claw-like fingers grasping at Karen's wrist.

For a moment Karen felt that she was looking into a warped funhouse mirror, staring through time and viewing herself. She stood frozen by a confusing notion that the face hidden by the cybervise was her. With near panic she shook herself free of the scrawny grip. "Let go of me, you fool."

The woman released her grip and staggered on, oblivious to her surroundings, a crooked smile showing beneath the deadly helmet she wore.

No! Karen told herself. *I will never sink that low.*

Yet she knew that perhaps, just perhaps, one day she would get that desperate. Some day, when the craving for some electronic pleasure overcame the need for self preservation, she might give in and take the risk. And take it again and again until the life started oozing out of her.

She battled the thought, increasing the speed of her gait as she jostled through the tourists; she nervously fingered the small pill in her pocket that argued against her resolve. *No, I'll never sink that low,* she promised herself. Yet the tiny white tablet under her fingertips disputed her promise.

She shoved the thought from her mind, turning down the side street where there were fewer people. After going twenty meters, she had escaped

the chase lights and noise. She paused and then pushed her way through a plastic panel in a holographic sign advertising Tribal Beer.

As she crept down the dark, narrow corridor, she whispered. "Diane, I miss you." Her footsteps echoed off the brick walls around her as she traced the path toward her apartment. "You were the only one who understood our need to leave this hellhole."

How I wish I'd left with you when I had the chance.

But she hadn't.

Now she was trapped, unable to pay the price required to buy back her freedom. What she had seen as an opportunity to get rich from the squandered money of the Gringos and Hispanics was now a trap that held her as tightly as anything that had ever been fabricated from spring steel.

The lid from a garbage can clattered on the concrete next to her, bringing her thoughts back to the present.

"Hey, chick," a slurred voice called from the shadows. "How about giving me a little?" A hand snatched at her sleeve.

"Let go," she ordered.

"I can pay you. You don't mind rough stuff, do you?" His grip tightened on her arm, the other hand hovering over her breast.

"Get your hands off me. Now!"

"Playin' hard to get, huh?"

She placed her free hand over the claw holding her arm, securing it against her flesh as she twisted and leaned forward.

There was a gasp of surprise from the stranger, followed by a dry snapping of bone muffled under torn flesh. The stranger dropped and writhed on the cement, holding his broken wrist. "I'll kill you," he hissed.

"Not tonight." She stared hard at him.

He started to rise, then moan and fell to the ground, unconscious. After looking around to be sure no one could see her, Karen knelt and patted the stranger down, checking first one pocket and then the next, until finally she felt what she was searching for.

She fished the e-card from the stranger's pants and quickly slipped it under her blouse. Glancing around again to be sure no one was watching, she unconsciously wiped her hands on the front of her micro-mini skirt as she left the stranger to sleep off his stupor.

Minutes later Karen was safe inside her armored apartment, pouring a bowl of milk for the beat-up Tomcat she kept for company. Her hands shook as she remembered her encounter with the drunk. The savagery of her response to his attack didn't bother her as much as the fact of how, without thinking about it, she'd stolen his money.

I'm not any better than the others, she reflected, stroking her stripped pet's back as he attempted to purr and slurp milk at the same time. A thief, even one who simply steals from surly drunks, is only a notch above those who sell their bodies or fleece the marks in the rigged games of chance.

I've sold out, just like the others. She had

become what she hated, had become what she had vowed never to become. And she didn't even have anything to show for it, because now she spent all her money for the pills like the one clinched in her fist.

Diane had been right. She should have left when she'd had the chance to go. Having nothing but being free was worth more than all the empty promises of quick and easy wealth.

Karen stroked the cat once more, then rose and crossed to the center of the tiny room where she settled into the thread-worn easy chair that, along with a sleeping bag and old mattress, comprised the sum total of furniture in her apartment. She gulped down the pill she had purchased, pulled a video mask over her face, and escaped into the imaginary world she had created for herself in an effort to escape the horror of reality.

The coolness flowed through her body. In her mind she spread her wings and leaped into the air, wheeling northward in the darkness to leave the soiled streets of the reservation far behind her.

CHAPTER 11

Diane sleep fitfully. Only when morning approached did she finally sleep, reliving a time of her childhood, altered by the illusory imagery of her dream.

Ravenfoot sat behind the smoky campfire, stirring it with a green stick. Karen and Diane sat across from the medicine man, listening to the crickets. The old shaman poked the red embers, freeing glowing sparks ascend into the night air, mixing with the cold blue and white points of light which blazed, brighter and more vivid than ever before in the sky.

"I know you two are star dancers," the patriarch said evenly, his wrinkled features augmented by the cavorting flames. "You have the powers of the ancient ones. For many generations these skills have been lost. It has been hidden from your tribe and now only return in our time of great need."

Diane said nothing, wondering if the great need had something to do with the fighting that had been going on between the tribal leaders. *And the visits of*

the Dark Ones, she thought with a shudder.

"Star dancing is just pretend," Karen protested, breaking her sister's line of thought. "Our mother says that your stories are just make believe and that you are—" She stopped with a gasp as her older sister's elbow caught her in the ribs. She fought back tears rather than continue.

The medicine man pointed his smoking stick toward Diane. "You had no need to hurt your sister for speaking the truth. There is nothing wrong in telling the facts. It wasn't that long ago that I, too, believed the same thing your mother does. But I've been watching you two and I know." He paused and stirred the embers, raising another storm of sparks that flew skyward, dying as they rose.

Diane held their breath, wondering if he really knew about what they had been doing. So far she'd been able to keep it hidden from everyone. Even Karen didn't realize what had been happening, even though she was a part of the whole thing. Karen thought she had only been dreaming, not that the two were actually traveling while they slept.

"I've seen you two in the fields when you thought no one was watching. You can do things others can't. And you've been invading my dreams with regularity now — yes, that hidden lodge with the ancient tools where you two like to venture. It's right here." He tapped his head. "And I know about the flint knife — and how you, Diane, cut your finger in the dream. You were star dancing."

Diane gasped at the revelation that exposed her secret. There was only one way he could have known about the razor-sharp obsidian that she had foolishly

grasped by the blade.

"That's right," he said, reading her thoughts. "You and your sister were careless. You played with something you knew nothing about and you got hurt. And I know the wound emerged not only in your sleep but in your waking as well, didn't it?"

Diane held her finger behind her back, as if trying to hide the truth.

"In fact we are all in one dream now," Ravenfoot continued. "Don't look so surprised. Each time the dreams contain more and more that is real. One day soon, you two will star dance when you're awake — if you don't continue to repress your skills."

"And if we can keep you hidden from the Dark Ones," Ravenfoot added, poking at the last smoldering fire. The crickets around them grew silent as if terrified at the mention of those that Diane tried not to think about. A cloud blotted the stars from the sky.

"I only hope you remember to help your people and not just yourselves," Ravenfoot added as the last of the embers sputtered into blackness. "If you let me, I can help you learn the ways of our ancestors."

There was a snap of dry leaves behind Diane. She turned saw the form moving through the shadows. She tried to warn the others, but her voice was trapped in her chest; she wanted to get up and run, but was paralyzed. She turned toward the campfire. Its flame was extinguished and the shaman and Karen were gone.

Then she was lying on the white sheet, strapped to the table, the leather belts preventing her from escaping as the shade stepped toward her. Diane

screamed, fighting her bonds.

Then she was suddenly free. She sat up in her bed, throwing off the covers. *Only a dream*, she reassured herself, catching her breath. She glanced toward the clock in her windowless bedroom.

Five thirty. It was still too early to rise. She needed her rest for the task that was coming up.

It never happened. Only a dream. She was a searcher, not a star dancer. Yet somehow she wasn't so sure. The Dark Ones had never been a part of her childhood. At least she didn't remember that they had. And she and her sister had never gone anywhere with Ravenfoot.

Becoming conscious of the pain in her finger, she snapped on the light next to her narrow bed, and examined the digit.

"What?" she asked. She rubbed the wound in disbelief. There was the open cut that Ravenfoot had seen. Only now it was new, as if it had just occurred. *I must have cut it earlier in the day*, she told herself. A lot had happened. It would have been easy to miss in the excitement of her race for the front door of the apartment.

Yes, that has to be it. She switched the light off and turned over, snuggling her head against the pillow while trying to force the troubling thoughts from her mind.

CHAPTER 12

The golden rim of the rising sun sent crimson light streaming across the mountain peaks and glimmered off the glaciers as Smiley brought the M-2000 in low, skimming up the southern slope of the new Kansas Mountain range. Moist air rising from the Colorado plains to the west was suddenly cooled as it reached the summit, creating tiny ice crystals of angel dust that shimmered and pranced in the air around the chopper, flashing tiny rainbows at the pilot's eyes.

The newly formed volcanic craters ranging northward through the western boarder of Kansas created the perfect hideaway. Not only was the terrain inhospitable, the threat posed by the scattered radioactive waste the volcanoes had haphazardly strewn across the area years before, as well as the random eruptions of the active region, posed too great a threat for even Mexican infiltration operations. That meant the criminals should have the peak all to themselves.

Smiley circled the crater once more, inspecting the area just the same. He hadn't stayed alive and free by being careless. He never took chances if he didn't have to. "Anyone see anything," he asked over the intercom. "I don't want to land and discover some fool *bandito* band has decided to set up camp down there."

"Looks clear from back here."

"All right then. We're going in." He brought the control column back to the left to straighten his course, then drew back on the control column, simultaneously lowering the collective pitch lever with his left hand, dropping them toward the rocky slope below. With a bump of the landing gear, they were down. Smiley quickly shut down the engine. Thirty seconds later he was back in the passenger compartment as the blades above them whirred to a stop. "How's the cat doing, Doc?"

"Still asleep." The veterinarian stroked the animal's fur.

"You sure?" the pilot asked. "I thought you said it'd be awake by now?"

"It's asleep. Breathing and pulse rates are normal."

"You didn't give it another shot, did you?"

"No. It's been out longer than I thought it would be, but seems fine. No adverse reactions to the drugs or anything like that."

"Okay," Smiley said, picking up a large tube from the rear of the cabin along with his gear bag. "Keep the straps on it just to be sure. I don't want it waking up unexpectedly." He turned toward his two henchmen, "Frank, help the Doc get it ready to

move the cat into the Viper. Joe, get our wheels from the cave. And be sure all the ammunition we've been storing is loaded into it. We might need to use the Minigun along the way."

Smiley leaped from the open side door of the chopper, shivering in the cold mountain air as he stretched tired muscles.

The rock and gravel of the peak had no vegetation on it and only pockets of volcanic dust. They wouldn't leave behind tracks. With a little luck, whoever might discover the chopper would assume it had crashed, bringing an end to those who had stolen the machine and brought it into the wilderness. Smiley had pitted his skills against law enforcement officials long enough to know how quickly they'd jump to believe any facts that meant a quick and speedy solution to a crime. He aimed to leave just the right clues behind for them to find.

The earth shook under his feet with a minor tremor as Joe turned the engine of the Viper turned over and the motor sputtered to life. Satisfied that their transportation was functioning properly, Smiley turned his attention back toward Doc and Frank.

And froze in his tracks. "Doc, don't do that!"

"What?" The veterinarian turned around toward Smiley, a loose leather strap in his hand.

"Don't loosen the restraints."

"It's okay," the veterinarian said with a dismissive wave. "The cat's still out cold. We'll have it in the Viper by the time it—"

Before he could complete his sentence, the tiger sprang to life, claws racking down the doctor's side.

The doctor stood for a moment, a stunned look

on his face as blood spurted from a severed vein, then he dropped to his knees. A second swipe of the cat's massive paw threw him aside into the gravel.

Smiley fumbled with the tube he held, dropping his bag as he struggled to tear away the wrapping to expose an electronic firing pad. At the same time the tiger tore at the last strap constraining her hind legs, ripping it with sharp claws as if it were constructed of cardboard. Freed, the animal leaped into the air, its rear feet kicking at Frank as he turned to run. The claws slashed open his shirt; his intestines fell to the earth and trailed after him for the two steps he took before dropping.

The animal turned toward Smiley as he raised the tube and set the selector to fire position. "If you are as smart as they say, you'll know I can down you before you can reach me," he warned, bracketing the aiming dot of the pop-up scope on the face of the savage creature he faced.

The Silver Tiger answered with a low growl. And then it spoke in a raspy voice that Smiley could understand, even though his brain almost refused to comprehend the message. "You are slow," the tiger said. "Soon you will be dead."

The cat leaped.

CHAPTER 13

Karen startled herself awake with a jerk of her leg muscles. For a moment she couldn't remember where she was; she clawed off the metal helmet, aware of the terrible taste in her mouth. She swallowed, shaking her head. The dream had been more real than what was surrounding her now.

She opened her eyes once more and looked at her surroundings in disbelief, as if seeing them for the first time. In her dream she had known heaven; now she'd been cast back into hell. Yet she knew, from the dream, that her time of redemption would soon come to pass. If she was ready for it.

"Time to clean up your act," she whispered. She stood, stretching tired and abused muscles. "Past time." There wasn't any time to waste. Ravenfoot had made that clear in her dream.

Time to straighten things out and get yourself straight. She studied the helmet in her hand for a moment, then dropped it onto the floor and crushed

its electric circuits beneath her heel before she had time to think about it twice. She next trekked to the bathroom and retrieved all the bottles from the medicine cabinet, opening them one at a time and emptying the colored pills in each into the stool. When the cabinet was empty, she carefully flushed the stool, watching her past whirlpool away into the sewer.

She turned to leave; the mirror caught her reflection as she closed the medicine cabinet. A haircut would be in order. And a shower. And then some makeup — she had some somewhere from before.

“Time to get straight,” she repeated to herself, studying the crow’s feet that had crept into the corners of her eyes and which had gone unnoticed until today.

She had to get ready. Ravenfoot had told her in her dream: *Diane is coming soon to take you away.*

She shook her head in disbelief that she’d put much stock in a helmet-induced dream involving the imaginary childhood creation she hadn’t thought about for at least ten years. But somehow she knew Ravenfoot had become real. As real as what she was experiencing now.

And he had told her Diane was coming soon.

Just as the tiger leaped toward Smiley, the criminal thumbed the fire button on the goop tube he held. The front of the cylinder erupted, throwing expanding streamers of foam into the air, hurtling directly at the cat that was now flashing toward the source of its wrath.

The ooze and the cat collided in mid-air. Although the volume of the sticky mass was as great as that of the tiger, its mass wasn't. So sticky slime and growling cat tumbled toward Smiley who leaped aside, narrowly avoiding becoming enmeshed in the two hundred forty kilograms of snarling claws and teeth that hissed past him.

The cat continued to growl and struggle, rolling on the ground as it attempted to free itself from the glue-like goop that had nearly immobilized it as it rapidly hardened into a rubber-like mass.

Smiley watched for a moment and then turned from the animal, satisfied that it wasn't capable of getting free.

Joe came running up behind him and slid to a stop next to his boss, drawing his pistol. He took a careful bead on the tiger and was squeezing the trigger just as Smiley hit his hand with the empty launch tube, causing the bullet to go wide of its mark and ricochet with a whine off the boulder it hit instead.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Smiley screamed. "I've half a mind to kill you."

"It ripped Doc and Frank to shreds," Joe sputtered, glancing toward the two bloody corpses and turning white as he looked away. The gulped and then continued. "I thought we'd better—"

"Killing it won't bring them back. Besides, that animal you were so casually going to shoot is worth more than you've ever even dreamed of. Even if were sitting on me and chewing off an arm, I wouldn't want you doing anything to hurt it on the off chance I might somehow survive the attack and

still be able to sell it. Do you get my drift?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, let's see if our friends are as dead as they look."

They were. Despite muscle twitches, they were very dead from wounds that had efficiently severed major veins and arteries, causing them to bleed to death in a matter of moments.

"Can't fault that cat for being unskilled," Smiley said evenly, his hands still shaking from the adrenaline rush of facing the four-legged killer. "Couldn't have done better myself. And I guess it saved me a little work — and you your life," he added, glancing toward Joe.

"What do you mean?"

"I'd planned on leaving two corpses behind for the authorities to find. Since Doc was supposed to continue caring for the cat, that left you and Frank to play the part of the corpses."

Joe swallowed hard. "You're kidding, aren't you?"

Smiley grinned a wicked smile. "Why don't you collect Franks guts and help me drag him into the chopper. I replaced my dental records with his, so he gets to sit in the pilot's seat. Come on, we don't have much time. The sun's up and the Tell-All satellite will be covering this section in a half hour."

Minutes later they'd positioned the Doc and Frank in the chopper. While Joe struggled to get the gurney pulled from the passenger compartment and positioned near the cat, Smiley went to the back of the cabin, flicked open his switchblade, and commenced sawing at the thick rubber fuel line

exposed in the back of the compartment.

Although the original military tanks had been designed to prevent catching on fire when a leak or puncture occurred, he'd had them replaced with standard tanks — hoping investigators would mistake the modification for an amateur attempt to extend the range of the helicopter. An attempt that led to a fatal accident that killed all aboard, including the stolen tiger.

Gasoline started to spurt from the cut line. Smiley flicked shut the knife and turned toward Joe. "Now help me with this bag."

The two pulled the heavy plastic pouch over and carefully opened it. Joe swore loudly, "What's in there — how long's it been dead?"

"That rotten corpse is the most expensive part of our escapade," Smiley answered, grimacing at the smell as he took the bottom of the bag and lifted to spill out the mess of bones and decaying pelt onto the floor of the cabin. "You'd be surprised how much a dead tiger commands these days. But the expense — and nausea — is necessary to complete the effect we need to achieve." He straightened and tossed the empty bag into the front of the chopper where it lay over Frank's upturned face. "Now let's get the real Silver Tiger loaded into the Viper."

Fifteen minutes later the two had managed to get the still struggling beast into the back of the eight-wheeled Viper. After Joe had driven the vehicle as safe distance, Smiley climbed from the vehicle, aimed a flare gun at the H-2000, and pulled the trigger.

The white hot projectile of flaming magnesium

arched toward the open side door and ignited the fumes, throwing a fireball upward into the sky, followed by a column of black smoke that rose into the frosty air above amber flames. The fire in the cabin spread, the aluminum beams on the door sagged and popped in the heat, the flesh of the dead crackling in counterpoint.

Smiley watched the inferno for a moment, his face expressionless. Then he chuckled and climbed back into the Viper. "Let's get out of here," he said, settling into the passenger seat and slamming the door shut.

"E-talk message #25126-2349718," the comphone said. Karen watched the screen as the recorded communication came through.

Diane's face materialized on the screen. "Hi, Karen. Sorry I keep missing you. I have some good news and a proposal that I'm hoping you'll think over carefully.

"I have a client that has offered me a Universal Pass in partial payment for a job I'm doing for him. What I'd like to do is use it to get you off the reservation — if you want to leave. I don't want to pressure you. If you want to stay where you are, that's up to you. But if you'd like a chance to get away, I'd be happy to help you. You could even camp out in my apartment for a while. In fact, you could probably help with my business if you wanted — at least until you find something better to do.

Diane shook her head. "I guess I'm getting ahead of myself here. Just let me know if you want to use the Universal Pass or not. If you don't, then I can sell

it for some cash. Either way is fine so do what *you* want to do.

"I've got to go now. I really miss you. Stay in touch."

"End message," the comphone announced.

Karen wiped the tears from her eyes and switched off the screen.

CHAPTER 14

Diane opened her eyes, glanced toward the clock, and groaned when she saw the readout. It was past time to get going, but she felt far from rested.

For a moment she mulled over her dream of the night before.

Ravenfoot.

She shook her head and smiled. The name *sounded* like a Native American's. But she'd never known anybody by that name. As for the idea of star dancing... She shook her head as she sat up in bed.

The Dark Ones was a different story, she thought, as she climbed from bed and donned a housecoat over her nude body. She remembered sitting around a campfire and hearing tales about those who came to steal children from their parents, taking them into the wilderness for hideous rites. But there had never been any sign that stories were more than camp tales told to frighten the uninitiated.

"Screen on," she ordered the house computer.

The far wall transformed itself from a painting of an Indian on a pony to a view of the outside courtyard. Despite the fact that it was nearly seven o'clock, the courtyard and buildings around her were still in the shadows. Yet it wasn't cloudy; in the distance, the sun glistened off the American Brokerage needle.

"Damned advertising blimp is blotting out the sun again," she whispered, heading for the bathroom. The eyesore of an airship had positioned itself over the buildings in the neighborhood for nearly a week now, the holographic screens on its sides telling anyone who looked up at it the latest consumer product information. It seemed immoral to keep the sun from shining on her apartment, but there was nothing she could do about it, short of going up the roof and blast the thing from the air.

Of course having that much tonnage drop on the apartment complex would be far from pleasant, she reflected. She'd have to put up with the nuisance.

After finishing in the bathroom, she popped a mind enhancement pill into her mouth and swallowed it as she headed for the kitchen. "Breakfast," she told the house computer as she settled down at the worn walnut table.

"Usual?" the machine asked.

"Yeah. Skip the news reports and let's see any messages from Tim."

"You have one multimedia e-talk message from Tim."

"I'll take it in the living room," she said, picking up the steaming mug of coffee and hot, buttered bran muffins that popped from food dispenser on the

stove. Carefully balancing the cup, she settled into an easy chair as the far wall transformed itself into a view screen.

"Well, good morning beautiful," Tim said, his face magnified so it was five feet tall and warped into a globe by the nearness to the lens. "By the time you get this you'll probably have put in a fitful night's sleep, knowing you. Can't ever relax while you're waiting to get to the chase, can you—"

"Forward," Diane ordered. Tim got carried away sometimes and it was too early in the morning for her to put up with his verbose nonsense. After fast forwarding to what he had actually discovered, she restarted the e-talk message and watched, sipping her coffee.

As she continued through the report, she could see that the researcher had come through for her again. He'd found a record of several stolen military vehicles, including a helicopter. "And if you look at Smiley's records," Tim's off screen voice said as a set of documents appeared on the screen, "you'll see that he used this same model helicopter in a bank robbery four years ago."

"Now here's where I've really earned my money," Tim continued. "While I was rooting through the police computer system, I discovered these noise complaints at the western end of town early last night. Low flying helicopter which the police and military couldn't account for. Then this report: a Border Patrol jet shot down last night."

A map came into view on the screen. "Now, if we plot these two events, I'm taking the liberty of assuming they're related and that might be a

mistake, but that's my working hypothesis — then we can plot a path from here toward the Kansas Mountain Range. Which, as you know, would be an ideal hideout for—"

The picture froze as the computer interrupted. "Incoming message of extreme urgency from Tim."

"Let's have it," Diane said.

The steel head of her friend appeared on the screen. "I think I've found your guy," he said.

"What have you got?" Diane asked.

"I figured there was an outside chance they might be captured on the Tell-All satellite. It passed over the Kansas Mountains ten minutes ago so I charged for the latest download and then searched through it with a template that — "

"What'd you find?"

Tim laughed. "Sorry. Here's what I found." A high-altitude photo filled the screen. "Now I'm going to zoom in on the area that has changed since the last pass of the satellite over the area." There was a giddy increase in the size of the mountain and then a dark blotch in a rocky crater showed in the center of the screen.

"I know that doesn't look like much," Tim said. "But look at it with some computer enhancement."

Diane leaned forward as the next picture appeared. "A helicopter?"

"Definitely. The bad news is it looks like it has sustained some major damage. A crash and maybe a fire from the looks of it. The wreckage is new. It doesn't show on yesterdays fly over by the Tell-All. I suspect that everyone aboard bought the farm, from the looks of it. Should we report it?"

"It would probably take days for anyone to check on it."

"You kidding? Anyone in their right mind stays away from there, what with the radioactive waste, active volcanoes, and — You'd be lucky if a patrol went in during the next three months."

Diane thought a moment, and then narrowed her eyes as she eyed Tim.

"Wait a minute, Babe, I know that look. And you know I prefer to stay here in my apartment and just —"

"I could use a good ultralight pilot to take me to the site," Diane interrupted.

"Last time I flew an aircraft, it took them three days to get me back together. What kind of an endorsement is that for my flying skills?"

"I've seen you fly. Get a rental lined up for us and then pack an overnight bag. I want to be on our way in a half hour."

"But—"

Diane signaled the computer to disconnect before Tim had a chance to protest. *It would be good for him to get out again.*

CHAPTER 15

"**Y**ou're sure the courtyard is clear?" Diane asked, an uneasy feeling making her think it was not.

"Yes," Tim said. "I scoped the front courtyard. Nobody there to worry about. Just the bag people along the south wall next to the front gate. You're such a worry wart."

"Worry warts live longer," Diane replied, shifting her duffel bag to her shoulder and brought her submachine gun forward on its strap, checking to be sure a round was chambered in it as the elevator headed toward the street level.

They came to a stomach wrenching stop, and the door slide open. After checking the lobby, Diane led the way toward the front entrance which slowly creaked clear, presenting an exit into the shadowed courtyard beyond.

"See," Tim said, stepping onto the concrete and gesturing with his arms. "All clear."

"It's too quiet," Diane said, cautiously venturing

into the open. She followed Tim down the narrow path, gun held at the ready.

"Hold it right there, babe," a familiar voice growled. "And I'd suggest you put your sidearm down if you and your mechanical marvel don't want to be left behind for the cleaning rats."

Diane made no move to drop her weapon as Moton stepped from the underbrush, standing behind a plexishield. His two bodyguards weren't in sight. *Not a good sign*, Diane thought.

"Run for it?" Tim whispered.

"No," Diane said softly. "Not yet." She raised her voice. "This guy just came down on the elevator with me. Why not let him go on his way. This is just between you and me."

Moton laughed. "How sweet. Dorothy tries to save the Tin Man. Let's see, that must make me the Wicked Witch."

"Or something that rhymes with that," Tim piped in. "I'll give you a hint: It starts with 'son of a'."

Moton whispered into the microphone he wore.

A laser beam hissed from the foliage to the left and was answered by the crackling of steel and the smell of burning plastic.

Diane turned toward Tim.

He stood, his face as expressionless as ever, examining the stub of his wrist where his hand had been a moment before. "Lucky I brought a spare," he quipped, lowering his arm. "Guess I'll have to send you a bill, Mr. Whoever-you-are."

"Name's Moton. And if you don't shut your trap, you'll be needing a spare head as a replacement part."

"Let's cut the games, Moton," Diane said. "What do you want?"

"The payment I gave you for the last job would be nice."

"The money's mine. I earned it. You owed it to me."

"I think you forfeited the right to keep it when you tricked us. I had your 'antidote' analyzed — perfume. It took me all day to get the taste out of my mouth."

"You drank the perfume because you tried to cheat me. If you'd paid up in the first place you never would have—"

"Perhaps a little more alteration of your friend would convince you to pay up." Moton signaled with his hand.

Before another shot could be fired, Diane stepped in front of Tim, shielding him with her body. "You'll have to do any of your alterations on me, not my friends. And if you hurt me, I swear you'll never get your money. Even if you kill me, my apartment's armed and has an auto-destruct. You'll die before you can steal anything from it. You might as well pack up and go home."

"In that case, perhaps we should simply make an example of you. I am a business man and it doesn't do for my associates to see some smart-mouthed broad cross me without paying the price."

"Time to run," Tim suggested.

"Now!" Diane agreed, bringing her submachine gun up and firing a burst at Moton. The bullets slapped against his shield, embedding themselves in its surface. Despite the fact that he wasn't hurt, Moton

flinched and ducked, giving his victims the chance to make a dash through the brush.

Diane knew there was no way they could reach safety before one of Moton's men cut them down. But there was nothing to do but try.

"Fry them," Moton yelled into his microphone.

There were two muffled pops accompanied by groans in the undergrowth.

But no laser fire.

"What the hell's going on," Moton screamed, turning toward where his men were hidden. "Kill them, they're getting away."

Diane paused at the front gate and looked back over her shoulder toward where Moton stood, his face beet red.

There was another distant thud and suddenly blood spurted from Moton's shirt, spraying the inside of the shield in front of him. He stared and Diane with a look of surprise on his face, then toppled over into the bushes.

"Never thought I'd be happy to see a sniper in the neighborhood," Tim said. "Come on, let's leave before he tests his skills on us."

Diane said nothing as she turned and left the courtyard. She'd caught a glimpse of the black-cloaked sniper on the ledge of the distant building and had an odd feeling she'd seen him somewhere before. She pushed the thought from her mind, watching for more dangers as they crossed the street to her car.

Diane headed for the toll tunnel leading to the airport; the guarded thoroughfare was expensive to

drive on, but the fact that the patrols simply killed anyone who engaged in criminal activities along their route keep it relatively safe. Easing her Eldorado down the entrance ramp, she removed the tint from the windows as they entered the tunnel. After pausing to hold her hand up to the scanner, she gingerly accelerated into the traffic speeding down the four-lane system. She pulled behind an armored train, smiling at the rear gunner who waved back.

Tim had been quiet the whole trip. Finally he spoke. "They would of fried my right hand," he groused, digging through the old bag he'd brought along. "All I brought as a spare is a left one. This is going to be awkward. At least they didn't melt anything above the detachment sleeve." He removed the stub and snapped the replacement unit onto his wrist. "What do you think?" he asked, holding the hand up for Diane to inspect.

"Can you use it like that – your thumb's on the wrong side of your hand."

"That's what I mean," Tim said. "They should have shot off the other hand. Not very thoughtful. Fifty-fifty chance and they shot the wrong one."

"I'm sure if you'd suggested that they hit the other one, they would have obliged you."

"Yeah, right. You sure have some weird associates."

Diane glanced at Tim adjusting his replacement hand with a small screwdriver. "I sure do."

He glanced toward her and then made the electric clucking that passed as a chuckle.

CHAPTER 16

Diane eased the Eldorado into the nearly empty underground parking lot at the airport, then shut down the engine and armed the alarm system. An intact armored truck was parked two stalls down; but most of the vehicles had parts missing from them and a few were little more than frames on cinder blocks, obviously stripped by criminals while their owners were traveling. Tim and she cautiously climbed from the Eldorado.

“Give your wheels a little protection, lady,” a voice echoed through the cavernous lot. “It’d be a shame for a classic like that to be damaged when you come back from your vacation. This place is notorious for car theft, you know.”

“I wouldn’t doubt that,” Diane said, eyeing the seedy looking stranger stepping toward them. “How much do you charge?”

“Hundred yen per day — or the current equiv in US dolls.”

“How about a gold spanner?”

"Per day?"

"For the week."

"It's a deal. Half in advance." He held out his hand. "My name's Pete."

Diane ignored the hand. "Can I trust you?"

"Hey, lady, is this an honest face or what? A face like this doesn't need no stinkin' references. Besides," he added, his voice taking on an ominous tone, "you don't really have much choice, do you? Take it or leave it."

Diane moved so rapidly Pete only had time to blink, then stare at the barrel centered against his forehead.

He whispered, "My price is a little high, maybe?"

"I'll pay your price because I'm feeling generous today. But I need to be sure you'll keep your end of the bargain."

Pete crossed his eyes, looking at the barrel still on his forehead. "No problem, lady. No problem at all. You have my word. Swear on my mother's eyes and hope she turns to — Hey, what're you doin'?"

With her free hand, Diane had removed a large copper ring from the side pocket of her duffel bag which she slapped against the side of Pete's neck. The device flipped around his throat and clanked shut behind his head, collaring him in the ring as its electronic lock cycled shut. The device beeped, a green diode glowed on its front, and it said, "Warning. Explosive packet is armed."

"Goes nicely with your plaid shirt," Tim offered as Diane withdrew her gun from the young hoodlum's pale face.

"Lady," Pete said as Diane stepped back, "this

thing isn't what I think it is? It isn't an execution collar, is it?" He cautiously felt it with his fingers.

"If the burglar alarm in my car is activated," Diane said, "or if you get more than fifty yards from my Eldorado, then the explosive charge over your throat will explode. That explosion will propel the crystal filament ringing your neck inward. Then—"

"Heads you lose," Tim finished. "I'd suggest you try real hard to take care of the car 'til we get back. Otherwise you'll be carrying your head under your arm the rest of your life."

Pete swallowed. "You're just kidding, right? You're going to take this thing off before you leave."

"Afraid not," Diane said. "We need to get going. I'll see you when we get back."

"Have a good trip," Pete croaked as the two left him standing next to the Eldorado.

Minutes later Diane and Tim crossed the air port lobby toward the rental counter. Tim glanced back toward the main entrance and then leaned over and whispered, "That wasn't a real execution collar was it?"

"It's real."

"But — what I mean is — you were just bluffing. It's not activated, is it?"

"I never bluff when it comes to that car."

Tim made a mental note not to place any scratches in the finish of the Eldorado.

A holograph of a young man stood behind the counter as they approached it. "Welcome to Arcane Rentals. How can I help you?"

"I'm Tim. I made a reservation for a rental

plane.”

“Ultralight for a trip west,” the image said. “Please place your hand in the scanner for ID.” A palm reader extended itself from the counter and waited for activation.

“Ummm, I’m sorry but I don’t have any fingerprints,” Tim said.

“Please place your face in the reader,” the image replied without missing a beat.

“My face won’t register — and neither will my eyes,” he added, anticipating the next suggestion. “I do have a—”

“Please wait one moment.” The image faded and disappeared.

“This is always a hassle,” Tim told Diane. “I have a handicapped ID, but the machines are never programmed to use it. I guess most people either have a hand or a face.”

A door behind the counter opened and a plump man stepped forward, adjusting a fake tie that he had haphazardly slapped onto his T-shirt. “How can I help you?”

“I need to give an ID for the rental — but lack a face or hand.”

“Oh, yes,” the attendant said, clearing his throat and looking away from Tim. “You have a valid ID?”

“Yes.”

“I believe we have a transponder somewhere here,” the attendant said, rummaging around under the counter. “Ah... Here it is.”

Tim took the wand and held it in front of the small infrared laser at the side of his head. The wand beeped and he handed the unit back to the clerk.

“Very good, sir. Now, if you’ll sign here... excellent. And before you leave, you need to listen to our taped message.” The clerk pulled off his tie as he turned to leave and the holograph reappeared. “Thank you for your business,” it said. “You can trust the plane that you rent from Arcane. Arcane Rentals – simply the best.

“Special alert to all travelers,” the machine continued. “The US Border Patrol has issued a warning that Mexican infiltrators may be encountered along the southern boundaries of the United States, especially in the southern Kansas and Colorado areas. Caution is advised and flights should stay above 2,000 feet whenever possible to avoid ground fire. For your added safety, all Arcane aircraft have automatic IFF transponders for quick and accurate identification with government authorities. Have a good trip.”

Fifteen minutes later, Diane was flying toward the Great Kansas Desert, staring at the meandering riverbed that snaked along the earth far below them. She took a deep breath of the cold air in the cabin. The iridescent wings of the ultralight broke the sunlight into rainbows around them as they sat in bucket seats almost totally surrounded by the transparent canopy. The structure gave the illusion that they were suspended in the air, hurtling through space. The noise cancellation circuits reduced the roar of the jet engine to a low drone that threatened to lull her to sleep.

She sat silent a moment and then spoke over the intercom headset she wore, ““You fly this thing like a pro.”

Tim laughed. "Guess I should. Logged over a million miles in my day."

Diane knew he wouldn't say much more about his past. Usually she couldn't get him to shut up. When it came to his shadowy past with the military, he refused to talk much. She knew she could easily find the information about the accident that had taken much of his skull and face as well as his two hands. But she knew he valued his privacy; prying into his past wasn't something she felt comfortable with.

She stared into the distance. The Kansas Mountains loomed far ahead of them, the sharp volcanic peaks looking out of place on the desert plain.

"It's still an hour before we get there," Tim said. "Why don't you lean back and take a nap?"

"Don't you want some company?"

"No offense, but you look like hell — just like you always do when you've missed some sleep. I can do without your brilliant chatter for a while. I'll run a radio input into my audio circuits and it will be just like having you chattering at me."

"You certainly know how to sweep a lady off her feet. I guess you're right, though. I'm bushed." She reached down and released the lever on the side of her seat, pulled the hood of her parka up to cover her head, and settled back.

"Pleasant dreams," Tim said.

"Nighty night."

Ten minutes later she was asleep.

* * * * *

"Slow down!" Smiley yelled. "Stop there behind the scrub brush," he directed, taking his binoculars

from the glove compartment in front of him. "I thought I saw something. Stay here while I check."

Joe knew better than to say anything. He waited behind the wheel while his boss dashed off, rounding a sand dune, binoculars held at the ready. *How did I ever get mixed up in this mess?* Joe asked himself, glancing in the rear-view mirror toward the tiger in the back.

What he saw nearly made him choke as he reached for his pistol. Drawing it, he twisted in his seat, aiming toward the old man that sat in the back, next to the tiger. "How'd you get back there?" Joe demanded.

The Native American's leathery face didn't move. Clad in a fringed buckskin jacket, he just continued to stare at the henchman without speaking or moving.

"Answer me or so help me I'll blow your freakin' head off, you old crow." Joe sighted down his barrel and clicked off the gun's safety with his thumb.

The air between him and the old man blurred. Joe thought he could hear the faint beat of drums being played far away, and then the Indian was gone.

There was no one in the back except for the cat.

I'm losing it, Joe thought, his hand shaking as he continued to point the gun toward the back of the vehicle just in case the man came back.

"You could release me," the tiger softly purred. "It would be the right thing to do. You would feel much better if—"

"Shut up," Joe said, turning away and putting his gun back into his shoulder holster. *No wonder I'm losing it*, he told himself. A talking tiger and a boss that was two sandwiches short of a picnic, perfectly willing to

kill his own men if it suited his needs. *It's no wonder I'm starting to see things*, he thought. The surprise was that he hadn't seen a pink elephant in the back instead of an old man.

"If I ever get out of this, I'm going straight," he vowed. But somehow he had the feeling he wasn't going to make it. He'd probably end up like Frank and the Doc. Smiley seldom hired the same people twice. And Joe was beginning to think he knew why.

He glanced back in the mirror again, half afraid he'd see the old man again. But there was only the tiger, bond by the hardened goop that held it in place.

The door to the Viper suddenly popped open, causing Joe to jump.

"Damned Mexican infiltraters," Smiley said, sliding into his bucket seat and slamming the door behind himself. "Armed to the teeth. They're headed east. Probably going to try and knock out some power lines then sneak back across the border. Idiots. We'll be lucky if the Border Patrol doesn't find us while it's tracking them down."

"Should I switch on the radar just in case?" Joe asked, motioning toward the small unit mounted in the dashboard.

"Yeah," Smiley said. "Good idea. Border Patrol stuff usually isn't stealthed. We might pick it up coming in and be able to hide before they got to us. Damn, if things weren't bad enough, we've got to try to do business in the middle of a blasted war zone. Let's go. We don't want to be late for the rendezvous with our buyers."

Joe flipped the radar on and slid the Viper into

gear.

CHAPTER 17

"We're almost there," Tim announced, causing Diane to start. She tried to think where she was.

"Time to wake up," Tim Man said.

She opened her eyes. The sun had vanished behind the clouds and a light snow was falling, sprinkling a white coat over the dormant volcanic peak they were circling. The wreckage of the helicopter spotted by the satellite was quite visible below, even though the blackened wreckage was slowly being hidden by the snow. The level of destruction that had taken place with the helicopter left little doubt in her mind that her quest for the missing tiger was about to end if it had been aboard the aircraft below.

"I'm taking us down," Tim warned. "It's going to be a little rough — there's a cross wind — there's a storm moving in." He pulled the rudder and circled the crater, losing altitude quickly as he adjusted the jet vents to slowly bring them into a hover. By the

time their forward motion was nearly gone, they were only forty meters off the ground.

The wind shook them during their slow descent, then the wheels of the ultralight bumped the ground. Tim quickly reserved the jets as they bounced on the surface, anchoring them in place, then he told the computer to initiate the power down sequence.

As the computer shut down the systems, Tim reached into the bag next to his seat and removed a hand-held Geiger counter. "Let me check the radiation before we get out. There's no telling how hot it might be out there."

Diane studied the helicopter as she waited for him to complete his survey. The chopper's plastic canopy had melted away. And the two corpses exposed inside left little doubt in her mind that they must have crash landed.

"Just background radiation," Tim said, fastening the meter to a metal stud on his chest. "Probably less than we're normally exposed to at our apartment."

"That's reassuring," Diane said, snapping open her door.

A gust of cold wind greeted her, bringing with it a swarm of cold flakes that stung her face. She pulled her parka more tightly around herself, waiting for Tim to join her before cautiously approaching the wreckage.

"You're the aircraft expert," Diane said, speaking loudly to be heard over the howl of the wind. "Would you say they crashed and burned?"

"I'm not so sure," Tim answered. "Most of the

distortion in the frame and rotors appear to have been from the heat of the fire. It doesn't look like they came in too fast. Not fast enough to kill the pilot and copilot."

"I didn't know these things could burn. Aren't they supposed to be designed to avoid this type of damage."

"They're supposed to be," Tim said as he looked through the open side door into the passenger compartment. "Is it okay to touch things in here?"

"Yeah," Diane answered, climbing into the cabin ahead of him. "The fire would have destroyed any fingerprints." She brushed away the snow that had drifted over the large mound on the center of the floor. "Look at this," she said, exposing a large feline skull with bits of burn flesh adhering to it.

"Looks like you found your tiger." Tim man studied the skeletal remains a moment, then turned and crossed toward the back of the cabin.

Diane stood, dusting off her hands. "I'd hoped to find the Silver Tiger alive — I don't think bringing back its ashes was what my employer had in mind when he hired me for this job."

"As long as they didn't put that in the fine print, you should still be able to collect on it, right."

"Yeah. They should pay up. But I'd still wish I could have delivered — it was a beautiful creature. Any sign what caused this fire?"

"Looks like they replaced the flame-proof issue tanks with a custom system. Probably to increase their range. Big mistake — as you can see from the crispy critters up front."

"I'm not so sure it was an accident," Diane said.

She held up a charred hose. "What's this lead to?"

"That would be the fuel line if I'm not mistaken. And I see what you're getting at. That's been cut, hasn't it."

"Looks that way to me."

"But why would they... Why steal a tiger, bring it out, and burn it up. Along with the two guys in the front."

"It doesn't make any sense. Maybe someone just wanted to slow down Biotech so they could leap ahead in the patent arena."

"Corporations," Tim said with disgust.

Diane turned and crossed forward toward cockpit. "Let's check these guys up front."

"According to his file, Smiley had a stainless steel plate in his mouth that allow the authorities to ID him if he's up front."

"Yeah. That would give us a positive match if we find it." Diane entered the cockpit and squeezed between the two corpses sitting in the front bucket seats.

"What do you mean, 'if we find it'? I don't look like a medical examiner, do I?"

"With all the fighting along the US/Mexican border, it could be months before anyone comes up here to check this out. If we want to make any sense of this, we're going to have to do it ourselves."

"I don't know..."

"You want to get paid, don't you?"

"These two are definitely dead," Tim said, shaking his head at the sight of the charred bodies. "How much more detail do you need for your report."

Diane took off her mittens and put on a pair of rubber gloves. "You're going to have to help me get the pilot's helmet off. Here, put on a pair of gloves."

"Oh, man," Tim said, taking the gloves. "I was afraid you were about to ask that. I'm betting his head pops off when you pull on the helmet. This is the most disgusting thing I've ever done. Glad I can't smell anything anymore."

Diane studied the body in front of her a moment. "I think if I hold his jaw while you pull the helmet, his head will stay in place."

Tim swore softly as she grasped the corpse, then clutched the helmet, trying to position his upside-down thumb for best leverage. "Ready?"

Diane nodded. "Easy does it."

"Wouldn't it be funny if he jumped up and hollered 'boo'?"

"Get on with it, Tim."

He wiggled the helmet a little. "I think it melted into his skin."

"Keep trying."

He wiggled it more and suddenly it popped lose. He eased it off the skull, exposing the charred head inside. "Oh, great, the skin's not burnt off under the helmet. Looks he's medium done to me."

Diane removed a slender knife from her belt, then made an incision across the surface of the exposed upper mandible and wriggled away the flesh, exposing the teeth beneath — and the glint of metal. "There's our steel dental plate."

"Then this is our guy?"

"Most likely. Unless he had some way to change

his records."

"Always possible when you're dealing with a criminal — but probably not too likely. So what's our next step?"

"I'm going to contact my client and relay some video from here to him. Hopefully I can also convince him to pay up the rest of his fee even though the tiger is dead meat. After that, I'll report this crash to the authorities so they can retrieve it whenever if they want. Then we can head home."

"I'll wait in the ultralight. This place gives me the creeps. Don't be too long; the storms about on top of us from the looks of things."

"I'll be there as soon as I'm through here."

As Tim left, Diane took off her rubber gloves and donned her mittens. The snow was getting heavier by the moment and she found herself wondering if the signal from her call would break up. *Better not put it off any longer.* She unfolded her comphone and ordered it to contact Ranbaugh at Biotech Universal.

"Dialing," the phone announced. "Connected. Call is being recorded from the receiver's end."

"Hello, Deathsong," Ranbaugh said. "You got something for me already? That was so fast you make it look easy."

"I did expect it to be a little tougher," Diane answered, looking at his face on the miniature screen. "I think I found your tiger — but I'm afraid it's not alive."

The smile vanished from his face. "Well, I had hoped maybe... Let's see what you have."

She turned the comphone around, using the

viewfinder to send a picture of the cabin to him. "This is the inside of the chopper we've located. I'm in the cockpit right now. As you can see, we have two corpses. The files you sent us indicated that Smiley knew how to pilot this model of helicopter, so when I found one had been stolen in the Kan-Topeka area, I started there and was able to track it to here — in the Kansas Mountains. This corpse you're seeing now is — according to his medical records — the late Smiley. This metal dental plate right here matches the one in his records," she said, zooming in on the plate in its jaw.

"I'll take your word for it and let my photo analyst double-check your work. What happened to these two guys. They look like charcoal. Did you do that to them?"

Diane grimaced. "Not hardly. They're sitting here in the wreckage of the stolen chopper. I can't determine exactly what happened. It looks more like sabotage than an accident."

"And the tiger? You say it's dead?"

Diane stepped back toward the passenger compartment. "It's back here. It apparently died in the fire as well." She brushed away the light covering of snow, exposing the skull once again.

"That's definitely a tiger skull — no mistaking that." Ranbaugh was silent for a few moments and then spoke. "I suppose any computer records Smiley had on him would have been destroyed in the crash as well."

"Undoubtedly. This fire got hot enough to melt some of the aluminum frame. Any data chips would be useless."

"Then I'd say your job's completed to my satisfaction. While we would have liked to have got the cat back, the main thing is that now we know our trade secrets are safe. It will take a few years, but we can culture another cat. Regaining our patent rights in a court of law would be iffy at best, especially given the economic setbacks we've suffered recently. As per our agreement, I'll be FedExing your Universal Pass to your office along with a bonus. Good job."

"Thanks."

Ranbaugh cut the connection.

Diane folded up her comphone and left the chopper, stepping into the drifting snow. She looked toward the ultralight and saw a figure trudging toward her, obscured by the blowing flakes.

At first should mistook the form for Tim.

But as the figure came closer, she realized her mistake.

CHAPTER 18

Smiley kicked the Viper. "I can't believe it" "I thought you said these were run-flat tires," Joe said.

Smiley gave him an acidic look, then turned away to stare at the desert spread in front of them. "I spent good money for run-flat tires. I guess you have to steal 'em to be sure you're getting what you paid for."

Joe stood beside his boss, unsure what to say.

Smiley turned back toward the henchman. "Don't just stand there — get out the tire tools."

"Yes, sir."

Smiley shook his head. They'd managed to put a little space between them and the M-2000.

But not enough.

If someone had chanced to see the wreckage in a satellite shot, there was an outside chance they would scan the generally area. If they did that, they could spot them, sitting in the middle of the Kansas desert with a flat tire. All that was needed was one

hotshot to zero in on them from space.

That's not likely to happen, Smiley thought, trying to reassure himself. But things hadn't been going at all as planned lately. The cards were stacked against him tonight. Just when everything looked like it was going according to plans, the Joker seemed to pop up.

He checked his watch. It was going to be touch and go if they reached the meeting in time. And he had a feeling the New Delhi Diversity Corporation representative wasn't going to be waiting around for long. The corporate rep acted like he'd had beans for lunch once too often.

And if Smiley missed the representative, he'd be stuck with the tiger. That meant he'd lose his chance to make any cash because unloading something this specialized would be a near impossibility. He didn't know anyone who'd be willing to pay what the New Delhi Diversity Corporation had offered.

He turned back and scowled at the flat tire. *When I find the guy that decided to substitute these tires on the Viper instead of the run-flats I paid for, I'm going to skin him alive,* Smiley promised himself. *Skin him very, very slowly.*

Nelson stood in the shadowy alley, wondering why Zigler insisted on meeting in such creepy places. He glanced back and forth to be sure no one had seen him enter for the meeting, then reached in a pocket and retrieved a Joy syringe, ramming the automatic injector against his thigh. He closed his eyes as the peptides coursed through his blood, docking on receptor cells in his brain to create a feeling of well-

being. He tossed the tube away, a euphoric smile plastered across his face. Looking up, he saw the lanky figure approaching, wearing his trademark a black leather coat.

Ziggler's unblinking eyes locked on those of the data manager. "You're stoned."

"Just a jolt," Nate replied. "To settle my nerves. I'm not used to doing things like this."

Ziggler grimaced, then spoke. "You've succeeded in getting the girl on the job?"

"As promised. She's hot on the trail of the lost merchandise."

"And I promised a handsome payoff if you succeeded in getting her on the job."

"Correct," Nate agreed, smiling insanely.

Ziggler reached into his jacket pocket and removed a narrow box. "Here are your twenty platinum bars."

"And you can depend on me to keep our, uh, secret," Nate promised, dropping the container into his shoulder bag.

"I *know* I can. Be seeing you." Ziggler turned on his heel and sauntered away.

Nelson waited until he was gone, and then fished the box from his bag. *Might as well admire my little treasure now as later*, he thought. He put a thumbnail into the catch and popped the lid open.

The muffled explosion wasn't loud. There was no flame or smoke. Just a plop and the sizzle of a high-speed filament cutting through the air. No one on the street passing the alley even noticed; the event was lost in the noise of the traffic.

But the blast had a devastating effect, all the

same. The micro-thin carbon thread expelled by the C6 uncoiled from the perimeter of the box, slashing through Nelson's flesh and bones as if they were made of butter.

He stared in disbelief as the fingers that had been holding the box rained along to the pavement, followed by each of his arms. There was a loud "clap" as the top of his torso came loose and slid off the rest of his body, toppling onto the ground as he lost consciousness.

His legs and pelvis stood alone in the alley for a moment before they, too, collapsed onto the now-bloody pavement.

Ravenfoot stood in front of Diane, a crooked smile on his face as he pulled the heavy blanket he carried around his body. "You seem surprised to see me."

"You don't know the half of it," Diane said. "How'd you get here anyway? And who are you really? I know there was never any real medicine man like you in my past."

"There should have been."

"Perhaps. We circled the mountain when we came in. How come we failed to spot you?"

"It is cold up here, isn't it?" He turned away from her to face toward the east. "Hot on the plains this very moment. Yet freezing up here."

Diane said nothing, cautiously studying the man that she thought was only a figment of her dreams. The biting cold of the wind convinced her she wasn't dreaming. And he certainly looked real enough. Yet his existence as well as his appearance at the crash

site defied a rational explanation. Her mind churned, trying to make some sense of the situation.

Ravenfoot faced her, his long snowy hair blowing in the wind. "You know that the body of the tiger in the helicopter is not the one you're searching for."

"I suspected as much but hoped that wouldn't be the case. I don't suppose you can tell me where the tiger I'm looking for is."

"I can help."

"Yes?"

"I can't tell you precisely. But if you take a route toward the direction of the sunrise off the mountains and then cut that way," he said, motioning toward the north, "you'll be on the trail of those who have stolen..." He paused as if thinking. "Who have stolen the creature," he finally finished.

"Who has it, anyway? The man I thought had stolen it is dead in the helicopter. That would rule him out."

"That flying machine is called a helicopter?" Ravenfoot asked.

Diane's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

"The *tiger* killed two men who now sit in the helicopter. The one who stole the creature put them in the helicopter and made it burn. Do you have a picture of this man who you thought stole the beast you are searching for?"

Diane took her comphone from its pouch on her belt. "Bring up the photo of Smiley," she ordered the machine. His picture appeared on the screen which she turned toward Ravenfoot.

His pupils in his eyes dilated when he saw the photograph. "That one's still alive. He's the one

attempting to transport the tiger northward as we speak."

"Where are they going?"

"That I do not know. But he's having problems. The wheel on his vehicle has..." He paused and then continued. "The wheel has broken and they are replacing it as we speak. If you hurry, you may catch up with him. But to do that, you must go now. I had not realized how quickly the wheels could be exchanged."

"But—"

"I can answer no more questions. Time is running out. Follow the eagle, it will lead you to them."

There was something about what he said that made Diane decide not to argue or question what he had told her. She folded her comphone and turned to go, then paused and turned back. "Ravenfoot, do you have a way off this mountain."

"There is no need for transportation when I'm not even here," he answered with a sad smile. He took a step back from her, became transparent, and vanished with a gust of wind that swirled through the snow.

"Ravenfoot?" Diane called, peering through the storm for some hint of his weathered frame. There was no sign of him.

Nothing.

It was as if the wind had swept him off the face of the peak. She started to leave and then looked down. Her tracks were still visible in the blowing snow. But there was not even the hint of a track where Ravenfoot had been standing. Diane shuddered, but not from the frigid air.

Was Ravenfoot a friend? "Or is he a Dark One, come to life?" she whispered, her voice lost in the moan of the wind.

Diane opened the side door and climbed into the ultralight, slamming the door shut behind her.

"You took your time back there," Tim said as Diane brushed the snow off her parka. "I think we'd better get going before this storm gets any worse. We're going to be pushing the design limits taking off in this as it is." He threw several switches on the console and then initiated the computerized startup sequence. Satisfied the engine was starting properly, he turned toward Diane. "Buckle up tight. We – Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Nothing," Diane replied, forcing herself to look at the shoulder harness rather than his face. Then she closed her eyes and wondered if she was losing her mind. Not only had she seen Ravenfoot, a person who, as far as she knew, existed only in her dreams, now she realized that Tim's face had somehow changed. That should have been impossible for a face molded of stainless steel.

Yet where before it had always displayed just a slight hint of a grin, now the metal plate that served as his face wore a large, grimace like what one might expect to see on someone about to groan or cry.

What had happened? How were such impossibilities taking place?

She said nothing as Tim powered up the engine. She wondered what his reaction would be when he discovered his transformed face. More importantly, she tried to puzzle out what could have modified a

solid steel plate without him being aware of the transformation.

CHAPTER 19

"Hang on," Tim warned as the ultralight shook in the blizzard. "We're going to have a few minutes of rough flying ahead of us while I take us to a higher altitude. I'm going to try to get above and ahead of this storm where things are calmer."

The plane shook as the wind buffeted it. Tim slowly pulled the stick joystick, taking them into a steep climb. The engine whined a loud complaint, drowning the howl of the wind as its blast rose above the capabilities of the noise cancellation circuits.

Diane closed her eyes to the snowflakes that splashed against the canopy in a random pattern that cut visibility down to just feet ahead of them. Biting her lip, she wondered if they plane was capable of surviving the strain of the maneuver Tim was putting it through. Would it suddenly break apart, sending them both cart-wheeling through the gale until they dashed on the rocky slope far below?

After several minutes, the shaking subsided and she opened her eyes. The sun shined overhead and

there, spread out far below them were the plains.

"Wow," Tim said, glancing toward her. "The clouds just dissolved away and then we were ahead of the storm." He leveled out, unaware that she continued to stare at him.

She pulled her eyes away. Somehow the grimace was no longer plastered on his face; he wore just a hint of a grin, the way he had been before.

"We should be home before long with the tailwind we've caught," the pilot said, taking them lower as lowered the throttle. "I bet old Pete will be glad to see you return to take his collar off," he added with a chuckle. "If he's still alive. Want to place any bets as to whether he's had his fool head blow off?"

"Turn to the north five degrees," Diane directed.

"That will take us off course."

"Just humor me for a moment. We need to get closer to the ground."

"Will do — you're paying for the fuel we use." He brought the stick to the left, bringing the airplane lower.

"Take us down to a thousand feet."

"Woe, lady. That will put us in harm's way if they're any Mexican raiders in the area."

Diane gave him a sour look. "Since when have you been one to be cautious?"

"Okay, okay. Heck, I was tired of playing it safe." They dropped down quickly, leveling off when it appeared they were about to be driven into the ground.

"One thing I can say about you, Tim," Diane said, her face drained of color. "You never do things half

way."

"Thought you'd enjoy that."

"See that eagle down there?" Diane asked, pointing out the front canopy.

"Yeah."

"Follow it."

"You're kidding, right?"

Diane shook her head.

"Oh, boy," Tim grouched as he lowered the throttle so their speed would match that of the dark rapture flying through the wisps of clouds far below them. "We've done some crazy things together, but this makes most of them look normal."

"Just humor me."

"You're the boss," Tim said.

Diane started to say more, but was interrupted by her comphone. "Priority message," it informed her.

She took it from her belt, unfolded the screen, and pressed the receive button. Her sister's face appeared on the screen. "Karen!" Diane exclaimed. "How are you?"

"Fine. Sorry to bother you with a priority message. But I tried your apartment and you weren't there, so I figured—"

"There's nothing to be sorry about. I've been hoping you'd get in touch. It's been so long and I never catch you at home."

"Listen, I know you're busy so I'll make this sort and sweet. I want off the reservation. You were right about it being... You know. Bad for people. If your offer is still open..."

"It most certainly is. We have some loose ends

we're trying to tie up here. But my employer said he was transferring the pass to my apartment. It should be there when I get back. Then *you* will be my next order of business."

Karen shook her head. "This seems too good to be true. You've really come through for me, Diane." She reached out and touched the screen.

"It will be nice to see you face to face," Diane said, touching the screen where Karen's hand appeared to be.

"I got to go," Karen said, her voice quivering. "Get here as soon as you can."

"I will."

Karen cut the transmission before Diane could say more.

I love you Karen, Diane thought. Why was it she could never say that to her little sister?

"What the—" Smiley yelled a fraction of a second after the alarm went off in the Viper. He glanced at the radar, taking in the warning display. Something coming in slowly, at a thousand feet. He flipped on the speaker on the unit.

"Report?" he told it.

"Ultralight jet. Most likely military scout."

Smiley swore, then told Joe, "Pull over next to that hillside. We won't be able to stay hidden here in the open, but we might be able to buy some time if we get next to that hill. That's it, get into the shade. That will make us harder to spot from the air."

"Won't they just fly by when they see we're not Mexs?" Joe asked, bringing the Viper to a standstill.

"They probably would," Smiley answered. "But we don't want *anyone* to know we're here. Otherwise someone might put two and two together and link us to the Harrier we downed last night — or the stolen tiger in the back. So I'm going to improvise a little to buy us some time before our client meets us at the rendezvous point to take the cat off our hands."

Joe steered toward the hillside and slammed on the brakes. Smiley jumped onto the seat and pushed the sunroof back on the Viper, then pulled the hydraulic lever next to it, raising the four-barreled Minigun into place. Though the gun fired only rifle cartridges, it did so at a high rate — high enough to bring a low-flying aircraft like the one homing in on them down.

After looking through the mechanical sight on the gun, Smiley hit the autogunner button, armed the weapon, and turned on its targeting radar. The servo motors controlling the gun hummed to life and the unit adjusted its aim. "Target in range. Locked on. Await command."

Smiley grinned. "Fire."

The gun erupted a stream of fire, sending hundreds of bullets skyward toward the ultralight heading toward them. But at the same instant, the tiger in the back of the Viper started growling, thrashing in its bonds and rocking the vehicle with the violence of its action.

The weapon stopped firing. "Target lost. Retracking," it said.

* * * * *

The barrage of bullets racing upward toward

them, sunlight glistening from their polished copper jackets.

"Someone's shooting at us," Tim yelled, jerking the stick so the plane jettied to the side.

His reaction came too late. The bullets pelted the right wing, causing huge chunks of the composite material in them to crack and break away. The aircraft abruptly cartwheeled toward the left before the computer compensated for the wing damage.

"There has been a major malfunction in the right wing surface," the computer announced. "It is recommended that you service the aircraft at the soonest convenient date."

"Will do," Tim said, pulling back on the joystick. "Should we survive long enough. Hang on, I'm taking us higher so we'll get out of range of whoever's trying to ventilate us."

Diane looked at the ground where the string of bullets had come from. And in her mind's eye, she could see the tiger that lay trussed in the back of the Viper. "Hurry," she told Tim. "They're getting ready to fire again."

Smiley studied the aircraft through his binoculars. The jet now had a clipped wing, but remained up, the majority of the rounds apparently missing their target. *But its luck wouldn't last*, he vowed. He waited until the cat was quiet and the vehicle motionless. "Fire," he ordered, the computer on the gun.

The spinning barrels belched another burst. This time the tiger remained deathly silent until the

Minigun stopped firing.

Smiley lifted his binoculars and watched, satisfied to see the fuselage abruptly shatter as the jet engine caught a string of bullets which caused its rotors to tear and shake its apart. The ultralight wobbled violently, breaking into sections, with the main compartment of the aircraft abruptly diving, spiraling toward the ground.

The criminal lowered the binoculars and leaned back into the Viper to holler to Joe, "That took care of 'em. Now let's get going. This place is going to get hot before long when the Border Patrol starts looking for the scout they just lost."

CHAPTER 20

Diane gripped the dashboard in front of her as the aircraft executed a stomach-wrenching lurch forward. The rending of plastic and the engine casing continued for what seemed an eternity, the ultralight twisting out of control, like a giant leaf suddenly free of its tree branch. They fluttered downward, nearly weightless.

"There has been a major anomaly," the computer announced. "It may be necessary to take action in order to avoid a crash or other serious accident. It is recommended you shut down the engine. Emergency parachute is being deployed."

"Brace yourself," Tim warned. "The chute will break our momentum."

Diane closed her eyes and waited.

Nothing happened.

"The emergency parachute has failed to deploy," the computer said. "Please activate the manual release. For further information, please press the help key on the dashboard to your upper left."

"I'm activating the emergency chute," Tim

hollered to Diane. "Hang on. This could be a rough stop." He lifted the cover of the release and then pulled the lever below with a hard jerk.

Nothing happened.

He swore and tried again. And then again.

"It isn't working," Tim said evenly, his fingers staying poised over the emergency release for a moment before he withdrew his hand. There was an abrupt silence as the computer went down, silencing the warning beepers, which Diane hadn't been aware of until they went off, as well. The whistle of the air increased as they twirled downward. The features on the terrain grew larger and larger.

"Impact in 50 seconds," the computer announced. "Please manually deploy your emergency chute. For more information—"

Tim switched off the computer and turned toward Diane, taking her hand in his. "Sorry, kid, but without the chute... Must have been damaged by the barrage that killed the engine. I wish we had more time."

"It's not your fault," Diane replied, releasing her shoulder harness so she could lean over and hug him. She held him tightly for a moment; smiling when she realized he smelled like plastic and old metal. "It's my fault, I should never have made you fly so low. I don't know what I thought I was having you do — it was crazy to think following a bird could lead us to the—"

"You're babbling," Tim interrupted. "If we only have sixteen more seconds to live, I'd like to do it with you just hugging me."

Diane laughed, and then sobbed. "It's a deal." She closed her eyes and held him tightly as he wrapped his arms around her. She tried not to think about what was about to happen. It would be over soon.

Quickly. Any moment.

She closed her eyes tight. Without warning found herself outside the aircraft, looking down at it as it tumbled ahead of her. Without thinking she folded her wide wings and dived after the wreckage, strong talons unclenched and ready to capture it as the ground rushed up toward them. She brought her head closer to her body, turning herself into a feathered dart that fell so fast, the giant feathers in her wings thundered in the air that sped by.

She could see she was gaining on the descending vehicle. But she knew instinctively it would be touch and go once she reached it. There wasn't enough time. She would barely overtake it before it struck the ground.

The huge bird dropped closer...

Ever closer.

And then the aircraft was within reach. Diane snatched it in her talons, sharp claws ripping through the thin skin to wrap around the titanium skeleton. She unfurled her wings and spread her tail, muscles straining against the rushing air and sudden weight of the plane she held.

They slowed, but not enough. They continued to plunge downward. Diane spread her wings farther, feeling muscles pull and tear as she strained against the inevitable. The ground continued to rise and the short distance between sky and earth vanished in a

violent collision. They struck the earth with an impact that threw sand upward, cracking the frame to fling wreckage in every direction.

Diane's feathered body broke over the frame. Her head impacted the sand, knocking her senseless.

The darkness of unconsciousness turned to dim light. In the distance, the sun was hidden behind the Kansas Mountains. The storm clouds that had threatened them were now gone, leaving the sky blood red.

With great exertion of muscles and servo motors, Tim forced his gaze away from the sunset, to survey the rest of his surroundings. As his head turned, he became aware that the steel collar holding his head in place must be seriously warped out of shape. His head rotated sluggishly. He tried to make some sense of what he surveyed in the panorama of wreckage scattered around him.

Then he noticed he could only see from one eye. "Just like the good old days," he muttered, remembering the destruction he'd endured long ago; that had cost him his hands and face.

Only then there had been fellow fliers around to help. Right now he seemed to be on his own. He was going to have to pick up the pieces himself, this go around.

Where was Diane?

Panic rose in his throat. He'd forgotten that she had been with him. The loss of an eye was nothing compared to the possible loss of Diane. He was not sure he could endure such a loss — and yet he knew he probably would be forced to do so if he survived

much longer.

That he had survived at all was miraculous, given the initial rate of their decent. Even with his brain encased in steel, he hadn't expected to see the light of day again. The chance that a frail body like Diane's might have survived seemed too remote for him to even hope for.

But he had to know.

He pulled the wreckage away from his lower body, taking inventory of the damage he had sustained as he threw away the trash that had covered him. Lifting a wind flap from his legs, he was shocked to see that his right foot was missing, severed just below the knee.

"Well, that's not too handy," he told himself, the appearance of the stub seeming more humorous than serious. He laughed, then realized he had no reason to. He was feeling very lightheaded.

You're losing it, he warned himself. He sat still for a moment, trying to think through the haze that enveloped his mind.

And then his old training took over.

Better get the bleeding stopped before you pass out. Do it before the pain sets in. He knew he could not afford to go into shock; on his own, that would be a fatal happenstance. His thinking was already cloudy from loss of blood. He was in danger of losing consciousness if he didn't do something.

"You can't pass out again." Not yet. *Not until you discover what's happened to Diane.* "Get with the program," he ordered himself.

He searched his surroundings and spied what he needed. He reached over with a hand that was now

missing two metal fingers and pulled a ribbon connector from what was left of the dashboard computer. After carefully wrapping the wiring around the stump of his leg, he twisted the cord until enough pressure was exerted to get the bleeding stopped. Then, noticing more damage, he pulled a chunk of fabric from what had been a seat and stuffed it over the gapping wound in his chest where pink, scarred skin lay exposed, no longer covered by the metal breastplate that normally hid it.

"Well, a fine howdy do you've gotten us into this time," he muttered to himself as he reached up and pulled away the tab that prevented his head from moving freely. Once he'd pried the metal away, his head more or less normally. "That's better," he said. He figured he'd done about as much as he could for himself short of going to a hospital emergency room.

Now to find Diane.

Sitting up, he pushed the wreckage out of the way so he could see better. It was getting dark. It would be night soon. He had to locate her now. In a few minutes it would be impossible to see.

He strained his eye, sitting up in an effort to see enough to make some sense of the wreckage that had once been the ultralight; fragments were scattered 50 meters in all directions. However most of the cabin debris appeared to be close to where he sat. Diane was most likely buried in the wreckage somewhere close by. He lifted himself up higher on his arms in an effort to get a better look at his surroundings.

There, he thought, spotting Diane's white coat,

barely visible beneath what had been one of the bucket seats. "Diane?" he called tentatively, rising on his knees. "Diane, can you hear me?"

There was no answer. No hint of movement. A gust swept across the wreckage, blowing chunks of fabric and plastic across the open plain. But Diane remained motionless.

Tim grabbed a long titanium rib and, using it like a crutch, stood on his good leg and hobbled toward her, trying to ignore the growing stain of blood that was blotting through the surface of her white coat as he watched.

He paused a moment, leaning on a titanium rib as he attempted to catch his breath, fighting off the blackness that dimmed his sight. After a moment his sight returned and, taking a deep breath, he hopped toward her again, attempting to disregard the pain that was throbbing up from his foot — or from where his foot should have been.

A shooting spasm traversed his chest and he gasped for breath, closing his good eye and swallowing hard. Before long he was going to go into shock. *You're probably going to die here in this god-forsaken desert.*

Maybe.

But he refused to die ignorant. First he was going to reach Diane. He had to know whether she was dead or alive.

After six slow, painful steps, he finally he reached her. *Careful*, he warned himself. *Don't move her until you know how serious her injuries are.* He knelt and started carefully removing the wreckage away from her still form as the last of the

daylight faded away.

CHAPTER 21

Ziggler stood inside the ebony muscle van as it sped down I-75 toward Biotech Universal Corporation's office building. Outside, the lights of the glittering needle scrapers of downtown Kan-Topeka glimmered in the nighttime sky like jeweled scepters.

Around Ziggler were the ten members of his team. Company insiders euphemistically called them *corporate raiders*; others, *headhunters*. Ziggler liked to think of his squad simply as *problem solvers*. Over the years, Ziggler had demonstrated his abilities to the House of Mao Corporation, first bringing in unexpected dividends. When the company management had realized how he achieved his ends — and after he railroaded the replacement of the chairman of the board by one more friendly to his methods — he had been given more and more sensitive jobs to take care of.

Tonight's business was taken on his own initiative, in part to round up the loose ends and in

part to get everything in place for the House's takeover of his pet project

Of course he'd seen a slight setback with the theft of the Silver Tiger.

But that hadn't been all bad, he reflected, since it had put the Biotech Corporation on the ropes. He studied the faces of the corporate raiders sitting around him as he completed his pep talk. "Remember, the fate of our house rides on our success tonight," he finishing, looking at the somber faces of the five women and six men who were all dressed in black military gear. He paused, then lifted his hand to give the company salute. "For honor and company."

"For honor and company," they answered solemnly.

"Lock and load," he ordered as the van slowed. "And double-check your masks." The van stopped. "We're there. Here we go."

Ziggler pulled his mask down and checked its seal as the wide doors at the rear of the vehicle hissed open. The hydraulic suspension lowered the van to street level, a ramp extending for his men and women to charge down. The point man's rifle spit fire and the automated gate died in a shower of sparks. The raiders at the front of the column quickly defeated the lock and opened the door for their comrades who sprinted up the stairwell at the north side of the building.

Clemonti, the M306 grenadier, dropped to one knee and discharged her weapon sending a 20mm grenade smashing through the glass door leading to the lobby, flooding the stairs with nerve gas.

"Let's go," Zigler ordered, his voice sounding tiny through the small radios in the gas masks he and his squad wore. He dived into the smoke-filled lobby, his boots scraping along the marble floor as he headed for the elevator. "Disable that," he ordered; a team member armed with a ball peen hammer obliged, smashing the controls with a single blow. "Put a grenade in the stairwell."

The launcher coughed and the glass leading to the stairwell shattered. There was a dull thump as the grenade exploded.

"You stay here to guard our exit," Zigler ordered the tall blond armed with a laser. "The rest of us will take the stairs and head up to our target."

Zigler paused before entering the stair well, turning his head to and fro for better visibility in the gas mask. Visually sweeping the stairs, he spotted the automated gun as it rotated toward him through the smoke. He fired his needle gun before the machine could react, the blast reverberating through the stairwell.

Racking another cartridge into the chamber of his weapon, Zigler raced up the stairs, checking for another auto gun. Observing none, he ascended the steps, two at a time, his raiders behind him as he bounded, their boots and equipment creating a deafening riot of noise in the stairwell.

As Zigler neared the entrance, he spotted a human watchman, a gas mask covering his face, running toward the glass door in an attempt to block their advance. The guard activated his laser, blazing away in the dim light, sending beams of energy splattering along the wall beside Zigler.

Hot slag splattered the bare skin on the back of Zigler's neck, forcing him to blink back tears of pain as he shouldered his gun and fired. The barrage of needles erupted from the muzzle, slashing into the watchman's body, splattering the wall behind him with blood; the man fell through the glass counter behind him with in a shower of broken glass.

Zigler hurdled through the broken door, past the fallen watchman, ignoring the pain of the deep gash that had resulted when a bit of broken glass from the door cut his hand.

The team members clamored into the hallway behind him and he raised his hand. "You stay here to guard the top of the stairwell," he told a short man with a short-barreled shotgun. "The silent alarm has had to have gone off by now, so we only have five more minutes. Watch for any automated guns or more watchmen. Let's head for the main computer. Remember what we're after — don't get distracted." Zigler and the others dashed down the hall while the designated guard dropped to his knee, weapon at the ready.

Zigler tapped the transmitter on his mask, leaving behind a bloody smear from the cuts on his fingers. "How's it look down there?" he radioed to the guards he'd posted on the ground floor.

"All clear, chief."

"Keep your eyes peeled and let me know if there's any problem. Out."

Zigler saw the shadow of someone crouching in a room ahead of them. He raised his hand and his men stopped behind him with practiced precision. He turned toward his grenadier. "Clemonti, put

some nerve gas at the end of the hall. I thought I saw someone."

The young woman lifted the M306 to her shoulder and fired; the projectile flashed from the launcher and smashed against the far wall, flooding the area with poison gas. Three seconds later, there was a paroxysm of coughing and then sudden silence in the hall ahead of them.

"Sounds like we splashed someone," Clemonti said grimly, chucking another shell into her gun.

"Good shooting," Ziggler said, rising to his feet. "Let's move." He yanked a stun grenade from his flack jacket and thumbed it on. "Fire in the hole!" he warned as he half tossed, half rolled the grenade toward the end of the corridor. The device bounced to the end of the hallway and exploded, Ziggler and his team racing down the hall after it, taking advantage of any confusion the loud explosion might have caused to anyone that might be waiting for them.

A watchman in exo-armor staggered into the hallway in front of them, blocking their path as he brought up his machine gun. A fraction of a second later, all hell broke out in the passageway as Ziggler and his raiders tried to down their foe whose firearm blazed in response, lighting up the nearly dark hall with the flashes from the hot barrel of the gun he commanded.

Ziggler finally managed to strike the watchman's unarmored neck, causing him to drop to one knee, and momentarily release the trigger on his deadly weapon as blood spurted from his wound.

Yelling for the raiders to hold their fire, Ziggler

ran ahead down the hall, pumping his weapon and spraying wildly at his wounded foe as he advanced. Several of his missiles had an effect, causing the watchman to topple over with an agonizing groan, his armor now defeated in several spots where blood oozed through the white plastic.

Cautiously stepping up to the fallen watchman, Zigler placed the barrel of his needle gun against the man's bleeding throat, and pulled the trigger, severing his head with the explosion of steel needles and flesh.

Ignoring the profuse bleeding from a bullet wound to his thigh, Zigler turned toward his people. "You two help the wounded back to the van and wait for us to return. You three will help me collect our treasure and place the charges on the computer."

"Yes, sir," his raiders answered almost in unison.

One employed a thermite unit to cut the lock on the data repository with a shower of sparks. He and the others ran into the room, collecting materials with proficiency. Zigler following them into the chamber, limping as he went. His men stripped it of useful documents and discs, then placed charges on the main ultra computer and its slaves.

Zigler smiled as his team demonstrated its abilities. He was proud that he'd been responsible for molding them into the competent corporate tool that they were today. He reached down and touched the wound on his leg. It wasn't as sore as it had been a moment before. Rubbing his finger over it, he was surprised to see the hole close and then scab

over.

He looked at his hand; the cut was gone.

He smiled, then got back to business. "Hurry it up, lets' go. Clocks running," he warned them needlessly.

They quickly finished up as he gently chided them. Then they all raced for the exit.

It doesn't get any better than this, Ziggler told himself, smiling despite the slight pain that remained in his leg as he limped along after his corporate raiders. *It just doesn't get any better than this.*

CHAPTER 22

Tim Mann knelt over Diane's still form and lifted the debris that covered her. He reached up to his forehead and popped open the small panel there, then turned on the emergency diode light so he could see. Reaching toward the pool of light he focused on her, he gently pulled at her jacket to see how serious the wound which had stained her coat in blood really was. He steeled himself for the sight of what he expected to be an jagged gash in her side.

The coat parted...

And then he laughed.

Because there was his lost, severed foot lying on her side, just inside the coat. He pulled the lost member from under the jacket and studied it for a few moments. A few minutes before, it had been part of him. Now it was like an alien piece of meat, totally useless and disgusting to even look at. "Any rescue headed our way won't get here in time to reattach this to me," he decided. And he knew the sight of the bloody foot would alarm Diane if she saw

it. He tossed his foot into a distant heap of rubble where he hoped she wouldn't notice it.

He knelt down and felt Diane's neck. Her pulse was strong; her breathing seemed normal. The truth started to sink in: She was alive.

Tim continued to examine her, being careful not to move her in case she'd suffered any spinal injuries. Her face and exposed skin didn't even have a scratch, though there was an ugly bruise forming on her temple. That might be responsible for the fact that she'd lost consciousness.

The night air was getting chilly. The cold air coming down of the mountains would lower the temperature considerably during the night. They'd need shelter. If she could move on her own, that would make things a lot easier. *Better try to get her awake.*

"Diane," he said, leaning over her. "Diane, can you hear me."

There was a groan and then she mumbled something unintelligible.

"Diane."

Her hand weakly pushed his away. "Go away. Can't you see I'm trying to sleep."

"Diane, we've been in a plane wreck. Remember."

Her eyes fluttered open. "Tim." They closed and then jerked back open. "The crash!" She sat up and glanced around, then looked back at him.

"Don't move just yet," Tim ordered. "Can you wiggle your toes."

She concentrated and then said, "Yeah. I'm fine. But... You're hurt." She pointed to the bloody

rag he'd plastered in the hole in his side. "And your eye's... Gone."

"Oh, I'm all right," he replied. And then promptly fainted.

Tim awoke beside a crackling fire.

"Among the land of the living again?" Diane asked, throwing some more dead cottonwood branches onto the crackling blaze. "I have to hand it to you, Tim. How you could be up and wandering around the wreckage with major parts of you missing is beyond me."

"Guess I've kind of gotten used to losing body parts in plane crashes," he answered. "Besides, I thought maybe you were seriously injured — or dead."

"I appreciate your efforts. Even if you about bled to death in the process."

"So what do we do next?"

"There's no *we* in the plans, Masked Man. *You* are going to lie there until the cavalry comes. I'm going to go on and find the Silver Tiger on my own."

"Wait a minute. That bump on the head must have been more serious than I thought. The tiger is a crispy critter — remember the charred skull you found in the helicopter?"

"That's a decoy. The real tiger is out there somewhere." She pointed into the night. "I can... feel it. Waiting."

"Sounds like a concussion to me. How are we going to get the authorities here to help us?"

"Already taken care of," Diane answered, bending over him and placing her blinking comphone

next to his head. "It's on auto-homing. They should be here in a half hour — right now they're busy with a major battle on the Colorado/Mexican border. When they get through duking it out there, they'll send a rescue crew around to pick you up."

"Not just me. Us. Pick *us* up."

"No, just you," Diane replied, tucking her coat up under his chin so he'd stay warm in the chill air. "I'm going to head Northeast to locate the tiger. I'll try to leave a trail behind so they can find me. The cat is stolen property, so they're obligated by law to help locate it."

"*If* they aren't otherwise preoccupied hunting down infiltrators or fighting invaders — or have you forgot that finer point of the law?"

"They'll find me. I have a feeling you'll see to it."

"Stay here," he said, taking her hand in his. "There's no telling what you'll run into, tramping through the desert at night."

"I have to go." She bent over and planted a kiss on his steel forehead. "There's more to this than I thought. You take care, Tim."

Before he could protest, she slipped from his grasp and vanished into the night.

"I can't believe it," Smiley said, raising his night vision goggles as he returned to the Viper. "This area is thick with Mexs. They've set up a camp just east of here. We're going to have take the long way around and hope they haven't discovered our cave so we can hole up in it."

"What are they doing this far north?"

"Damned if I know," Smiley said, as he stood at the open side door. "They're going to get smoked for sure if the border patrol noses around here. They're right in the open." He swore. "If the New Delhi reps see them around here, they'll be spooked for sure. Those Pakistanis are good at programming, but they're not brave. This is a sorry mess." He swore loudly and kicked the vehicle three times.

Joe sat quietly until his boss's rage had subsided. "Should we head for the cave then?"

Smiley sat down on the passenger seat and rubbed his chin. "Yeah."

Joe put the vehicle into gear.

CHAPTER 23

Diane slowly picked her way through the desert, walking almost blindly with only the dim starlight to guide her. She knew her destination was toward the northeast. By locating the North Star, she was able to travel at an angle toward her goal. But she was constantly stumbling in the uneven sand and snagging her clothing on the scrub brush which she often failed to see until she'd trudged into it.

Is this completely crazy to be doing? she asked herself. All she really had to go on was an old shaman who only existed in her mind, as far as she could tell. She stopped for a moment, and debated going back. *Turning around and backtracking would be the sensible thing to do – and Tim could certainly use someone to watch over him.* What had she been thinking, leaving a man with severe injuries unattended?

She turned around and started to retrace her steps. She had traveled only ten paces when she became aware of the dim figure traveling alongside her.

She stopped, her heart pounding. "Who's there?" she asked.

"If you want to know who's here," a low voice answered, "why not illuminate the area?"

"Who are you."

"I think you already know the answer. All you need is to imagine being able to see — and you'll be able to."

"Ravenfoot?"

"Think about being able to see in the darkness."

"This is crazy."

"Think it."

Diane closed her eyes for a moment. And opened them to what appeared to be daylight, though the blackness of the sky and the stars twinkling and dancing in the cold atmosphere argued otherwise.

"Isn't that better?" the medicine man asked.

"Impossible is what it is. I don't understand what's happening to me. I see things — like you. I know you can't exist, that you're impossible. And —"

"Your questions will be answered in good time," Ravenfoot said, holding up his hand. "Right now you need to go and rescue the Silver Tiger. I need it to complete my work."

"Your work? If it's your work, why don't you go rescue it yourself?"

"There are some things I can't do."

"Now there's an answer worthy of a hallucination."

Ravenfoot smiled. "Come this way." He turned without waiting to see if she would follow, cutting through the brush to ascend a low hill. Diane followed behind, wondering where they were headed. As they

descended the mound, she spied the deep tracks of a vehicle that had recently crossed through the sand.

"You were headed the right direction," Ravenfoot said. "Your instincts are good. But if you follow these tracks, they'll take you directly to the Silver Tiger."

"I think I should go back to Tim. That's the only thing that makes sense. Besides, the military team coming to pick Tim up could easily swing around and follow these tracks to wherever they lead."

"They will have to wait before going there. They would be too late. The tiger is slated to be sold in a few hours when daylight comes. The Army has been delayed — fighting along the border."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"I must go now," Ravenfoot said, becoming transparent. "Listen to your heart, not your head."

"Wait!"

He was gone. In the distance was a brief pounding of tribal drums, the likes of which Diane hadn't heard since she was a child. And then the drumming was gone, too.

She closed her eyes and rubbed her aching temples. *What should she do?* She hesitated. Something was very wrong and she knew Ravenfoot wasn't what he appeared to be. Yet for some reason she trusted him.

"Real bright," she told herself. "You're putting your trust in something that's most likely a hallucination symptomatic of a mind that's becoming delusional."

But sometimes faith is more important than logic, she decided. If she was going crazy, why not go

out in style? Abruptly the doubt was gone. Her mind made up, she turned to her left, following the path Ravenfoot had indicated she should take.

Tim awoke in the middle of a sand storm. "What the devil," he yelled, holding his hand in front of his face to keep the debris from scratching his one good mechanical eye.

Abruptly the storm lessened and the whopping of helicopter blades revealed what was happening: Rescue had finally arrived. He sat up and waved at the chopper, hoping they hadn't decided to leave after a quick survey of the wreckage scene.

To his relief, he saw the twin-engine chopper land some distance away. Before it had hardly settled down in the gale of dirt it kicked up, five soldiers leaped from its side door and charged toward him.

"Am I glad to see you guys," Tim said as they came toward him.

"Are there any more survivors in the area?" the sergeant asked.

"There was one — but she's headed northeast," Tim replied as two of the soldiers unfolded a stretcher.

The sergeant grimaced and glanced at his men, motioning the medic to look at Tim.

"We'll be able to pick her up, won't we?" Tim asked, ignoring the doctor who was examining his leg. "She's after stolen property — she logged the information when she sent our emergency assistance request."

"We got the request," the sergeant replied, his

plastic armor glistening in the firelight. "But we can't honor it right now. We're ferrying casualties from the battle eighteen clicks south of here. If your injuries hadn't been serious, we wouldn't have made a side trip to get you. As it is, we don't have time to recover stolen property when the lives of our boys are at stake."

"But we can at least swing around and pick up Diane, can't we?"

"Was she injured?"

"No. But she didn't have any water or—"

"We'll send someone to pick her up tomorrow — and maybe look for the stolen property then as well. Right now we have to get going."

"But —"

"I have severely wounded men on that chopper, Mister."

"But—"

"Get him to the chopper," the sergeant told his men, turning to return to the waiting aircraft.

"There it is," Smiley said, pointing to his left. "I'll get out and remove the environmental shield. You pull the Viper in and I'll pull it back over the entrance so no one can spot us."

Smiley opened the door and got out, jogging the short distance to the bunker he'd constructed several years back. Pulling back the plastic curtain that covered the mouth of the cavern, he waited for Joe to drive into the chamber. Once the vehicle had passed, Smiley carefully lowered the tarp and made sure it was weighted down so the breeze couldn't whip it out of the way.

After turning on the red lights inside to dimly illuminate the chamber, Smiley turned toward Joe. "Help me get the cat into its cage. Then we'll set up the Minigun in case some of those damned Mexican infiltraters are in the area."

Within minutes the two men had the cat in its cage. Smiley bathed it in water, dissolving the bonds that had bound it. The creature paced back and forth in its cage, glaring at the two men.

"I'm going to be glad to get rid of that thing," Smiley said. "It's starting to give me the creeps."

"At least it doesn't talk much," Joe ventured.

"Yeah, it could be worse I guess," Smiley agreed. "Let's get the Minigun and radar set up so we won't be taken by surprise."

CHAPTER 24

Smiley awoke when the radar alarm went off. “What the hell?” he muttered, crossing to the radar screen. It showed several people five hundred meters from the bunker. And headed toward it.

Smiley switched off the lights in the bunker and pulled back the environmental cover so he could peer outside with his binoculars. Switching them to their infrared mode, he quickly spotted the heat sources of the approaching men, all of whom carried rifles.

“Mexican soldiers,” Smiley muttered to himself, studying the advancing forms. Even if they didn’t know about the bunker, they were headed right for it if they didn’t change their course.

Smiley pulled the cover back farther, exposing the four barrels of the Minigun. Stepping behind the weapon, he activated it and targeted them. Watching them on the radar of the weapon, he hesitated in firing. He didn’t know how many more might be around. Once he fired, anyone seeing the

bunker would know something was going on. And if any other troops were close by, the muzzle flash produced by the Minigun's four barrels at night was nothing short of awesome. They'd spot it for sure and know right where he was.

So he waited, seeing if they'd change their direction and miss the bunker.

No such luck, Smiley muttered as he watched them continue toward him. He picked up the binoculars and studied them more closely. One of the six had an ancient radio strapped to his back. If they spotted the bunker, one call on the radio and Smiley might have untold unwanted guests descending on him from the Mexican camp he'd spotted earlier.

"Can't risk it," he told himself. He'd have to gun them down before they had the opportunity to inform their comrades where he was.

He switched on the motor to the gun, causing the barrels to whir as they came up to speed. He re-centered the weapon's sights on the band, concentrating on hitting the radioman first. "Lock onto multiple targets," he ordered the gun's computer.

"Targets locked on."

"Fire."

The gun thundered to life, breaking the silence. The salvo tagged the radioman who spun and was down with a yelp. Two follow-up bursts brought the others down. All lay still in the darkness.

"Secondary targets?" the gun asked.

"Standby," Smiley replied, peering through the smoke rising from the four barrels that had just

unleashed their power on the unsuspecting Mexican intruders. *Were they the only ones?*

"Boss, what's all the shooting," Joe asked, coming from behind to stand next to Smiley.

"Nothing to worry about," Smiley replied. "Had some Mexs headed our way. But I just aced them. Put on your night vision goggles and go to the emergency exit at the back. Keep your eyes peeled. The racket may bring more our way."

Ten minutes later, Smiley had shut down the gun and went on his own patrol of the area. He'd traveled only 200 meters from the bunker when he stumbled into another Mexican, apparently coming to see what had happened to the soldiers that had been gunned down.

Hiding in the darkness, Smiley centered the electric sight of his pistol on the advancing soldier. *These guys must not have heard of night vision equipment*, he thought as he waited for the man to fully reveal himself. As the Mexican stepped into the open, Smiley squeezed the trigger, sending a single 145-grain bullet across the short distance between them. The slug smashed into the soldier's neck; the man tumbled to the sand and lay still.

As far as Smiley could see, there were no more of the soldiers. But something was strange. They seemed intent on coming straight to where he was, as if they knew he was holed up in the bunker with the cat. Smiley clicked on his radio. "Joe, I just tagged another one. Keep your eyes peeled. The desert's thick with them."

"I read you," Joe's voice replied.

"I'm going farther out to check around. Don't shoot me by mistake. Be sure of your target."

"I understand."

It's a sorry state of affairs when you have to depend on someone like Joe to guard your back, Smiley reflected as he adjusted his night vision goggles. Of course there was a ray of light. The cat had saved him having to kill Frank so someone could find his body, check the dental records, and assume Smiley was the dead man.

A silver lining to every cloud, Smiley told himself, pausing as he neared a clearing among the scrub brush. After cautiously inspecting it, he sprinted across the open ground, passing the body of the soldier he had just killed. An angry whine, followed by the distant report of a rifle caused him to drop to the ground. A second bullet cracked over his head.

They might not have night vision equipment but that was pretty damned close, he told himself. He was going to have to be more careful not to silhouette himself in the darkness.

He rose to his knees, searching for the sniper that had nearly got him. He stared in the direction of the reports, and then saw five men spring from the brush and charge toward him.

"Got to hand it to them, they're brave," Smiley said, raising his pistol and taking careful aim at the rearmost runner. He fired, downing one and then another of those coming toward him.

The infiltraters saw the muzzle flash of his weapon and lifted their rifles, expelling a furious salvo in his direction and forcing him to hug the sand

for six seconds as their fired. As their bullets cracked by, he noticed a Mexican machine gunner to his left had joined in. The tracers from the automatic weapon flashed far to his left, indicating that the gunner was firing blindly.

When the shooting had subsided, Smiley gritted his teeth and rose in the darkness. The remaining three soldiers were now quite close, walking toward his position slowly with their guns ready for the least sign of danger.

As the approached, a jackrabbit suddenly sprang from its hiding place, loping off at right angles from the soldiers who opened up again, their bullets raising plumes of dust around the scampering animal.

Smiley took advantage of their mistake, quickly downing two before they realized they were being fired upon. The remaining soldier whirled and fired blinding into the night, just as Smiley aimed and pulled his trigger. The slug hit the soldier in the chest. Despite his wound, the man remained standing, bringing his rifle around.

Smiley shot again, this time catching him in the face, dropping him where he stood when the bullet smashed into his brain.

Smiley groaned as the machine gun opened up once more, this time beating the dirt just ahead of him, causing the bullets to ricochet through the night as he dropped and kissed the sand. The criminal reached up and turned on the radio mounted to his night vision goggles. "Joe?"

"Read you, boss."

"A machine gunner has me pinned down here."

Can you come around to the front of the bunker and pick him off with the Minigun?"

"I'll try."

"You'd better do more than try. Get a move on."

Another barrage slashed over Smiley's position. "Hurry up."

The machine gun opened up with another short burst. This time the bullets struck well to his left. *At least they aren't sure where I am. What's taking Joe so long?*

"Boss?" the radio crackled.

"What?"

"Keep your head low. I'm taking out the Mexs gunner now."

"I'm as low as I can get here."

A withering fire erupted from the bunker, the bullets tearing into the machine gun ahead of Smiley, clanging off the metal weapon and churning up a cloud of dust on the hill. The shooting ended, leaving only the moaning of the wounded.

"That should slow them down for a while," Smiley said. "Good work. Now turn off the Minigun and return to the back of the bunker in case they try to circle around. I'm headed back in."

Smiley got to his feet, turned, and found himself facing one of the wounded soldiers who had his rifle leveled at him.

Instead of dropping back to the ground, Smiley fired three slugs at the infiltrator just as he opened up with his own weapon. The henchman felt a stinging pain in his leg; the soldier clutched his stomach and dropped to his knees. Smiley followed

up with a head shot.

After glancing along the sand dunes on either side of him to be sure there was no sign of any more Mexicans, Smiley staggered back toward the bunker.

The desert was quiet.

Smiley holstered his pistol and examined the wound on his leg. *Just a scratch.* An inch over and he would have lost the leg to one of the explosive bullets the Mexicans used. As it was, the round had grazed his skin, most likely exploding when it had passed him. *Maybe my luck's changing after all,* he thought.

He glanced across the desert once more, double checking to be sure there were no more of the soldiers around the area.

And then he saw her.

Smiley's mouth dropped open and he felt like a small child who had just been convinced that ghosts were real – and hiding under his bed. Because the specter coming toward him looked like nothing if not a ghost. Her skin glowed a phosphorescent green in the darkness and beams of blue light shot from her eyes, lighting up the area around her and overloading the circuits on his night vision goggles when she stared at him.

He ripped his glasses off and peered into the darkness to see that she was visible even without the night vision equipment. "What the hell?" he asked himself, drawing his pistol. He forced himself to control his growing sense of panic, standing his ground as the goddess came toward him. "Hold it right there," he commanded, wondering if the thing was able to hear or would react to his order.

Her eyes grew brighter, bathing him in their light. Then the light vanished and he found himself looking at a young woman, standing in the darkness. "Where am I?" she asked, blinking as if she'd awakened from a dream.

"Never mind," Smiley said. "Just keep going the way you were headed. I'll follow."

She turned and continued toward the bunker, her eyes again glowing up to bath her path in light.

What in the world have I captured here in the Kansas desert? Smiley asked himself as he followed the strange creature.

CHAPTER 25

“**T**hat’s an MRI of the frontal lobe of the youngest girl,” Ziggler told the four chairmen of the House of Mao Corporation. The four elderly men sat at a polished conference table in the darkened room. He pointed to the crisscross of white tissue that floated over the table. “It resembles a filmy tumor – at least that’s about the only thing it’s like. In fact the doctor who first discovered it mistook it for some form of cancer. He was the reservation doctor. His fear that it was some sort of malignancy is what led to our discovery of them in the first place.”

The magnified picture vanished and was replaced by an old e-mail document. “He was baffled by the data and put the scan along with this note up on the old Med-Net system. One of our corporation’s computers collected it during a data mining and our people thought it might be something important for our biological warfare projects – there was lots of money in that field back

then."

A chuckle ran around those sitting at the table.

"Fortunately for us, the team checking into the tissue didn't discard the project when they found it wasn't a disease, otherwise our corporation would be a lot poorer, today. Our initial program attempted to discover just what the tissue was after adding the doctor to our payroll."

And later killing him, Ziggler added to himself.

"The next question was *what* exactly it was that the two girls had sitting up there in the front of their cortex," he continued. "Had they been lab rats, the next step would have been obvious."

This time those around the table laughed a bit nervously, perhaps aware of the recent spat of lawsuits regarding charges that their military division had been using volunteers in retirement homes as guinea pigs for developing new drugs.

"Since they weren't lab rats," Ziggler proceeded, "we first embarked on a battery of tests. We found the two girls very ordinary in every way we could imagine. However we did get more detailed scans of the tissue. This picture shows how the fine dendrites are tied in to all the major parts of their brains. In fact it is a mutated brain cell, with the dendrites exhibiting greater chemical activity than would otherwise be the case. This speeds up some of their responses to a very minute degree. However none of these seemed to serve any practical purpose. The two were not measurable smarter, faster, or more skilled than any of the other girls on the Uttawa reservation. So we chalked it all up to some evolutionary fluke."

Ziggler was silent a moment as everyone studied the 3-d projection floating between them, then he spoke. "We were ready to write off our expenses and pack up when this event occurred. Fortunately we had a camera running at the time."

A new three-dimensional picture appeared. A group of youngsters were collected around a matronly dark-skinned woman who motioned with her hands as she spoke to them. The children all sat in a semicircle around her, paying rapt attention to what was being said in the Ottawa language.

"This woman is a story teller," Ziggler continued. "She was part of the international project to preserve the Native American heritage of story and crafts. She's telling them about the Dark Ones, legendary monsters that rise up from the creek beds at night, capture small children, and drag them down into the mud to live with them."

"Nice bedtime fair," the wizened chairman quipped.

The woman in the film continued to gesture and make faces, speaking in the ancient tongue. The children all giggled, then were quiet as she continued her story, her hands mimicked claws as she raised her arms above them.

Ziggler spoke, lowering the volume of the soundtrack. "I want you to pay special attention to the coffee mug one of our workers left on the edge of the table behind her. Keep your eyes on it... The most frightening part of the story it coming up... Right... Now!"

The woman leaned forward and then suddenly straightened to her full height, obviously yelling.

The children all jumped, covering their faces with their hands and displaying fear and surprise.

The coffee cup behind her slide to the left and fell, throwing coffee into the air as it shattered into fragments.

The picture faded.

"Someone must have jarred the table," the eldest company officer suggested, pulling at the thin collar on his Chinese jacket.

"That's what we *thought* must have happened," Ziggler said. "But it seemed curious to me at the time. Later I re-examined it and had it enhanced. After that I did some checking and discovered there were reports from all over the reservation of strange incidents of objects breaking — some of the older people believed there was a evil spirit or poltergeist in the village."

"A ghost?"

"A very special one. One that could move objects and often destroy things. So we analyzed the film very carefully. Here's what we got from computer enhancement."

Another picture appeared showing a greatly enlarged mug sitting on a table. "The speed has been slowed. Now watch... There it goes. You'll notice it's already breaking apart, shattering *before* it hits the floor. The mug not only leaves the table by itself, it also shatters for no apparent reason long *before* it hits the concrete floor.

"After we discovered this," he continued, backing the film up and freezing it on the cup as it shattered in mid-air, "we realized the importance of what we were sitting on. Comparing the girls'

physical locations to the poltergeist reports proved the two young women were somehow connected to the events. The key that fear or intense emotion often triggered the effect. So our next step was producing the right conditions to cause similar results on a more predictable basis."

As he talked, Ziggler recalled the early days of the testing and how it had become a torturous ordeal for the girls. Because the results had only occurred when the two children were afraid or in pain.

He didn't give the full details to the chairmen sitting at the around him now; instead he gave them the sanitized, company version of the story, omitting the times they'd been forced to strap the girls to the table, the times that he and the others had dressed as the Dark Ones to scare them and, when that didn't work, how they used electric prods jabbed at soft, young skin to produce the pain that gave them the results they were searching for.

The procedures had changed the girls — and him. The experiments ended with hypnotherapy which eventually erased all memories of the affair from the minds of the two youngsters, saving the company from any possible lawsuits or criminal proceedings in later years. And the destruction of all the written records and "accidental" deaths of all those who had been a part of the program with Ziggler covered up all the loose ends and possible leaks that might become embarrassing.

"We eventually established that our subjects had no real control over their abilities," Ziggler continued, catching the eye of the eldest chairman

as he spoke. "They weren't even aware of them for the most part. So we took another route. We obtained small tissue samples and started culturing the cells in our lab."

He cycled to another picture of a laboratory for the directors to see. "The cellular material was well suited to artificial growth and quickly spread and connected with host cells when planted in a living brain. But we were never able to create any sort of telekinesis like that the girls displayed, even when transplanting the cells into human subjects.

"Eventually," Ziggler proceeded, looking at those around him to be sure they were following him, "we tabled the work. However, since we found the tissue did grow in a wide variety of brain cells without any problem with immune responses from the host, we eventually made money from the project by selling rights to reproduce it to Biotech Universal Laboratories."

"Isn't that the place that burned down several nights ago?" one of the directors asked.

"Yes," Ziggler answered. "A stroke of bad luck—for them. You gentlemen probably know where this is heading. Biotech exploited the cells to enhance the biological fighting unit they were perfecting for the South Africans."

The picture of the Silver Tiger appeared at the center of the table. "The project ended with this, every bit as ferocious as it looks. They put the tissue in the brain of this modified tiger and claim that not only can it understand orders given it, it can actually speak and reason. Needless to say, a very effective weapon in the field or in situations requiring brute

strength. Unfortunately they also managed to lose this beast along with all their data records shortly before the explosion at their labs."

"Before?" one of the managers asked.

"Yes," Ziggler replied. "We've, uh, intercepted some of their in-house memos. They learned that someone had broken into the complex shortly before the explosion — which was apparently set off to make it appear to be a terrorist act."

"So do we have any idea who has the animal now?" the chairman asked.

"Our spies believe the New Delhi Diversity Corporation may be behind it."

"Them again — it figures," the manager said. The others around the table nodded and murmured agreement. "So how does this effect our organization?"

"We can take advantage in two ways," Ziggler replied. "My lawyers informed me that much of the rights will revert back to us if Biotech goes bankrupt. At that point we can exercise our options and take over all their research projects. It will take some time in court, but we should be able to eventually secure the rights from any of their creditors.

"Second," Ziggler continued. "I worked behind the scenes to be sure they hired a person who could track down the people that had stolen the tiger and data. And this is the real kicker — the searcher I maneuvered into place to do the job is none other than one of the girls the tissue was originally taken from."

"What?" one of the previously quiet managers

sputtered. "But this sounds like madness."

Ziggler laughed. "You haven't seen the crazy part yet," he replied. "When I heard that the Silver Tiger was on line with Biotech, I retrieved some of my old equipment we'd used in the early tests. We'd developed a quite sensitive instrument that measured the minute fluctuations in power produced by the brains of the girls – sort of like a mental seismograph. It could measure very minute changes that normally would be imperceptible to a human being. We used it to gauge the minor changes in pressure and gravitation these girls produced. And as I suspected, the tiger was producing very small but measurable changes as well.

"And then," he said, tapping a button on his comphone so another display appeared at the center of the table, "the measurements went right off the scale. I had placed a surveillance camera across the street from Biotech Universal to record what was happening each time this occurred."

A scene of the street appeared. Cars went driving by but nothing out of the ordinary appeared. "That's right. Nothing special inside or outside the lab. Except for this."

The camera zoomed in on the Eldorado passing by the complex.

"The passage of this car from time to time caused my equipment to go off the scale. Still not enough for anything out of the ordinary to really happen other than dimming lights, broken windows, or the like, but measurable and growing results each time. I hired one of our men to allocate a new bug we're developing for the government, had it

embedded in her neck surreptitiously, and eventually discovered our Native American girl, now grown up and working here in the city as a searcher."

"So what causes the effect you've been measuring?" one of the chairmen asked.

"We knew that nothing happened with just one girl alone. Both were needed for any effect in our early experiments. Apparently the amount of brain tissue is critical. And now the interaction between the tissue in the tiger's head and that of the girl gives even greater results than before — a mental symbiosis, if you will. She doesn't realize what's going on and no longer has memories of what went on when she was a child.

"Currently I'm working toward bringing both girls and the tiger together. Then, I'm expecting some fireworks. We'll bring them back together in our laboratories and — with your permission — I will resume my research."

"An excellent idea," the director said. "But I thought you said the cat had been stolen."

"It has," Ziggler said. "But I have every confidence our girl will track it down and bring it back."

"But isn't she working for Biotech?" the chairman asked.

"I have it on good authority that Biotech will be going belly up soon. They won't be there to receive the cat. I will. Because I happen to have one trick that will make sure we get the two girls and the cat." He quickly detailed his plans to them.

"Now," he continued after his explanation, "I

have a final clip for you to see — before I present you with the budget I'm asking for to resume this work."

A three-dimensional image appeared in the center of the desk again.

"This was taken outside a surplus electronics part shop at the east side of town. The owner sells all sorts of bootleg computer and spy type equipment. Apparently the girl went there to purchase some equipment. That old geezer with the knife is about to dig the bug we planted under her skin. He's doing the work *without* any pain killer."

The chairman swore in Chinese.

"Exactly. Lots of pain. But watch this — The stolen cat was only miles from where she was, yet she exhibited a unique demonstration of the powers we can expect to unleash with our new experiments. I'm going to slo-mo so you can see what happens. There he's starting his incision. Now watch."

A bird materialized in the shop over Diane's head. It fluttered for a moment inside the shop, then melted through the roof, reappearing in the sky. The rapture glided upward and suddenly vanished.

"That, gentlemen," Ziggler said in a low voice, "is unlike anything modern man has ever seen before. A mental projection — something of ancient legends. I am theorizing that shamans and fakirs once could do such things. Remember the myth of Zeus turning himself into a bird. What we once thought of as magic is now within our grasp, gentlemen. And I will be able to extract it for you, package it, and help you sell it to the highest

bidder."

"Imagine what our advertising department could do with this," the director beamed. "We'll be able to sell godhood to the highest bidder."

Ziggler smiled, knowing he'd be getting all the funding he'd ever need.

"You have our platinum bars," Gindali asked his secretary who stood in the narrow aisle of the corporate jet.

"Yes, sir," Amanujum answered, holding up the aluminum brief case.

"And my pistol?"

"Right here." Amanujum said, removing the small firearm in its tooled leather holster from the case and handing it to his employer.

Gindali took the gun and strapped the gun to his belt, then buttoned his coat and sat back, stroking his beard a moment before speaking. "Tell the pilot to take off. Speed is of the essence if we're to get our product at dawn as agreed upon. Go."

"Yes, sir."

Three minutes later, the engines on the UD-6400 whined to life. The attendant trotted back, passing him to stop by his two bodyguards who sat quietly in the back. "Please fasten your seat belts," the mechanical device told them. Then it turned and hummed back down the aisle, stopping beside Gindali and swiveling to face him. "Please fasten your seat belt," it said, flashing a plastic smile.

Gindali ignored the machine.

"Please fasten your seat belt."

Gindali glowered at the device. "Go away, you

cursed machine.”

“Enjoy your flight,” the stewardess said, turning and zipping stiffly back to the front of the aircraft where it climbed into its closet.

Gindali closed his eyes and reviewed his plans, wondering if there were any flaws in his logic. Dealing with the criminal element was always dangerous. Yet in this instance, it was the only way to get ahead. The opportunity had presented itself and he had seized it. Once the Silver Tiger and the data dots were in his possession, he was certain he'd be able to advance to the upper echelons of his company. Then those who had laughed at him would see how far he could go.

“Ascend to the top,” Gindali whispered to himself. “That’s the goal.” *You have to take risks if you’re going to get ahead.*

Gindali aimed to get ahead. Even if he had to risk his life to do it. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize himself sitting in the director’s leather chair at the New Delhi Diversity Corporation’s home office, smoking a cigarette in an elegant carved holder, his sandal-clad heels on the polished desk.

CHAPTER 26

“ I ’m coming in,” Smiley warned.

“ I read you,” Joe’s voice answered.

“ I’ve got someone with me, so don’t panic,” Smiley added. Whatever he had, she looked normal now — which he found all the more spooky. One minute she’d been glowing like a haywire nuclear power plant and the next she was an attractive, dark-skinned young woman. Smiley shuddered, wondering what was wrong with her.

Joe took one look at her, then saw Smiley’s gun covering her. He stepped back from the two of them. “What—”

“Just stay back,” Smiley said. “She looks normal enough, but I think she must be a mechanical of some sort. Or have some really sophisticated cyborg parts in her.”

“She can’t be a mechanical,” Joe said. “She looks too real.”

“Yeah? Well her eyes glow in the dark — and her skin was glowing, too. Now stand back in case she

tries something.”

Diane crossed toward the Silver Tiger.

“Wouldn’t get too close to that,” Smiley said. “He hasn’t eaten for a while. Even if you’re a little different, he might give it a go. Sit down,” he added, waving his pistol at her.

Diane said nothing and sat on the ground.

“Secure her while I keep her covered,” Smiley told Joe. “Use the 2000 mph tape in the back of the Viper.”

Joe went to the parked vehicle.

“What are you?” Smiley asked Diane.

“I’m a searcher. I don’t know how I got here, but I was looking for the Silver Tiger. I banged my head in a plane crash — can’t seem to remember everything that happened but now I’ve found it, I guess.”

“You most certainly have,” Smiley said. He turned to Joe, “Whatever it is, you would mistake her for a normal human being. Maybe we can get New Delhi to cough up a little more change for her. Be careful. Don’t get too close.”

No one spoke as Joe wrapped her tightly in the super-strong tape.

“I’m not getting off this chopper until someone promises to go back and rescue Diane,” Tim told the Lieutenant hovering over him.

The medical officer shooed the two MPs away and then spoke to the cyborg lying on the stretcher. “What’s the problem?”

“We left Diane behind. She’s—”

“Diane?”

“Diane Deathsong. She’s the one that was with

me when our plane got shot down. We — your men — left her stranded in the desert. She doesn't have any water or food and is just—"

"Hang on a minute," the officer said, the wash from the nearly silent rotors whirling above him blowing his long hair into his eyes. "Let me check your records." He scanned the plastic bracelet around Tim's wrist. "Let's see... Okay. There's a report that says she was left behind... And our computer shows we've got a team scheduled to search for her day after tomorrow. You don't have anything to worry about."

"Day after tomorrow? She didn't have any water with her. Someone needs to go now to—"

"She'll be okay. If she's healthy, she'll be able to survive until—"

"You've got to send some one now. She was tracking a stolen—"

"According to this order, once they locate her they'll assist her in picking up the stolen property she was after."

"You've got to let me talk to someone and get them out sooner. Hey, what are you doing?"

"That will help you relax," the medic said, replacing the syringe back into his pouch. "You're getting too upset."

Tim felt himself getting drowsy. He started to speak, but found he was unable to.

The officer continued to look at the screen a moment and then switched off the reader. "Don't worry. They'll take care of it. Now *you* need to get patched up before infection sets in." The officer turned toward the mechanical orderlies. "Take him

directly to the infirmary.”

The two devices picked up the stretcher Tim lay upon and removed him from the floor of the helicopter. Then they shifted him to floor level, and rolled with him down the hallway, heading for the dispensary.

Tim closed his remaining eye. Darkness encircled him as he fell asleep, too exhausted to prevail against the weariness that had overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER 27

Ziggler stood in the back of his team's muscle van as it slowed, taking the exit off I-73 toward the Ottawa Indian Reservation. He eyed the giant billboards with their holographic displays of scantily clad dancers and happy gamblers.

The natives have quite a scam going here, he thought as he looked at the bright displays. And they don't even realize they have an even bigger gold mine sitting in their back yard. But he and his team would snatch it from them before they had even the hint of what was going on.

"Okay, raiders," Ziggler said to the ten members of his team who sat around him. "This is the first time for some of you. Just stay calm and stick to what you've been trained to do and we'll all get through this in one piece. You're on double-over time today — no need to do a half-assed job."

Everyone laughed.

"Remember, ladies and gentlemen," Ziggler said, "our house is depending on us capturing the girl

without being detected. Our job's going to be harder if we take too long — daylight is just a few minutes away. That means we'll be operating in the light during most of our mission. If we can get in and out in a hurry, then we have a good chance of succeeding. The longer it takes, the greater our chances of detection.

"I chose this time since it's when the fewest number of people are on the streets in the casino area. That means minimum exposure and, hopefully, a minimal body count. Don't neutralize anyone unless you have to — then do it quick and neat. Silencers on all firearms, set your suppressers to maximum. I'd rather have to buy a few new units than have too much noise and give our operation away. And use your knives instead of guns when you can. Last and *most* important, we use our goop guns when we get the girl; I don't want a scratch on her. Any questions?"

None of the three women and seven men sitting around him spoke.

"Okay then: For honor and company."

"For honor and company," they answered solemnly.

"Lock and load."

They neared the front gate where a security chief dressed in feathers and buckskin stood under a flashing neon light, waiting to collect the driver's payment for a parking permit. The van slowed; the guard peered toward the back of the van, as if straining to see what was inside.

"Just flag us through," Ziggler whispered, watching through the smoked windows. "If you get

curious, it will prove fatal, old man."

The security officer spoke to the driver again.

"Get ready for some action," Ziggler said. "If this idiot decides to inspect us, we'll have to ace him and try to get in to snatch the girl."

The security officer laughed at what the driver had said, then stepped back and waved them through.

As the van eased through the entrance, Ziggler exhaled the air he'd held trapped in his lungs. *So far so good.*

The muscle van eased its way through the thick traffic on the main thoroughfare which was packed with partying tourists, professional gamblers, and prostitutes. The whole street looked dim and dirty, painted orange by the sun peaking over the distant hills. The van turned down a side street where there was considerably less traffic.

And slowed to a stop.

"What's going on?" Ziggler asked, standing back up to look toward the front. Standing in the street was a reservation cop, waving them to a stop with a glow tube. The officer walked to the side of the van and spoke to the driver.

"He wants to inspect us," the van driver's voice informed Ziggler over the radio.

"We've picked up their beacon, Mr. Gindali," Amanujum's voice said over the intercom. "Our pilot says we will be there in forty seconds."

"Good," Gindali replied, hitting the enter key on his comphone, sending his latest orders for stock sales to his broker; the speakers on the device erupted

with a short sitar phrase, indicating the message had been bounced off several satellites and deposited in the proper e-mail box half way around the world.

He folded his comphone twice and compacted it, then inserted it into the breast pocket of his baggy jacket. Closing his eyes, he forced himself to relax as the jet slowed and went into a hover above the bleak desert that was painted pink by the rising sun. The engines rose in pitch, slowing their descent; then they rapidly wound down as the plane settled onto the ground with a gentle bump.

Gindali took a deep breath, then got to his feet, motioning his two bodyguards to follow him as he went forward and met his secretary at the front. "Tell the pilot to be ready for an immediate takeoff," he told Amanujum. "This shouldn't take long."

The secretary bowed and went back into the pilot's cabin to convey the message, his eyes wide with fear.

Gindali turned toward his bodyguards. "When I pull the handkerchief from my sleeve, kill all of those we're dealing with immediately. Just take care not to injure the Silver Tiger. You must act quickly and surely; this man is a killer and won't hesitate to eliminate us if he thinks he can get away with it. Today we will beat him at his game."

Both men gave a slight bow.

The side door popped open and extended upward with a pressurized hiss. "This way, please," the stewardess said, beaming a toothy plastic smile toward Gindali as he passed toward the stairs that had extended themselves from the side of the plane. "I hope you enjoyed your flight," the machine

added.

Gindali grimaced. The stewardess was even worse than the so-called living gods in his homeland. It was one thing to see a life-like creation in the temple. Quite another to have to endure such a contraption when conducting business. When he became director, the first thing he would do was have all the plastic travesties removed from the company planes, thrown into a pile, and burned.

Yes, that would be nice, he thought, visualizing the pyre as he descended the ramp to the hot desert. He looked around and saw nothing but endless sand and scrub brush. He turned his back to the sun, glancing downward at the long shadows the four of them cast over the dunes in front of them, like giants crossing the wasteland.

"Are you sure the pilot got the right coordinates?" Gindali asked Amanujum.

"He was certain he had," the secretary answered, looking nervously back toward the plane.

Before Gindali could say more, the air in front of them shimmered and a snake-eyed man with an evil grin appeared from nowhere. "Welcome, Mr. Gindali," Smiley said, closing the environmental cover behind him so it once again projected a picture of the desert. "I trust your trip was a pleasant one."

"As good as air travel can be," Gindali answered, trying to ignore the sweat that was oozing from the pores under his arms and soaking the collar and back of his silk shirt. "We are ready to conduct business."

"Right this way," Smiley said, lifting the environmental curtain to expose an opening into the man-made cavern beyond. With his bodyguards

flanking him, Gindali stepped into the lair.

CHAPTER 28

Gindhi strode into the bunker, his henchmen flanking him, and discovered the caged beast standing, looking at him intently. “The Silver Tiger,” he gasped. “It’s even more beautiful than I imagined.” He stared at the magnificent creature, unable to take his eyes off it as it paced back and forth in its cage.

“Sometimes it even talks,” Smiley said. “Although right now the cat seems to have its tongue.”

Joe laughed loudly and then quit when he saw no one else was laughing.

“Do you have your payment?” Smiley asked.

Gindali reached for the handkerchief in his sleeve; his two henchmen stiffened, their hands snaking toward their guns.

“Careful,” Smiley said, stepping in front of the cat. “I don’t want you to be tempted to do anything—forgive my choice of words—stupid. So let me direct your attention toward the automated

Minigun that my associate is standing next to.”

Gindali’s eyes narrowed as he looked at the four barrels aimed toward them as Joe waved.

“Yes,” Smiley said. “That’s a genuine, automated Minigun. It’s computer is set to fire at my command or at the sound of gunfire — see how it tracks you as you step aside. Obviously it would be unwise for you or your men to try anything underhanded.”

Gindali’s brow glistened as he continued to stare at the four rotating barrels that pointed directly toward his heart. He realized his fortunes had abruptly taken a turn for the worse. He had little doubt that Smiley was about to double cross him. Yet there appeared to be no way to save his skin other than to play the criminal’s game. “We have your payment right here,” he said, motioning to Amanujum to bring the brief case forward and present it. “In platinum bars, just as you asked,” he added, nudging his secretary.

Amanujum nervously stepped forward and placed the briefcase on the sandy floor, clicking the latches open. He thrust the case of platinum bars toward the American, continuing to kneel on the floor beside the treasure he’d been entrusted with, his eyes on the floor ahead of him.

“Looks good,” Smiley said. “But before you pay for the cat, I found something else you’d be interested in. I’m not sure what it is.” He crossed behind the vehicle parked against the wall, then reappears dragging a beautiful, dark-skinned woman on the end of a rope. “Looks like a young lady, doesn’t it? I thought it was a mechanical. But now

I'm not so sure. Her skin is soft and her hair has to be real."

"What makes this *person* so special," Gindali asked, hoping he could stall for more time or somehow bargain his way out of the danger he was in.

"She's got cyborg parts," Smiley explained. "Unlike anything I've ever seen before. She's able to throw light from her eyes at night. And her skin glows in the dark."

Gandhi said nothing, raising an eyebrow.

"I know it sounds crazy," Smiley continued. "But last night she looked like a spook. Nearly gave me a heart attack. I bet if you put her on the dissecting table back in India, you'd find a few more tricks that your company could patent."

Gindali decided he must surely be dealing with a madman.

"Want to make me an offer for her?" Smiley asked.

Licking his lips, Gindali tried to think. He was fearful of saying anything that might make the criminal lose his temper. And the way her eyes bore into him, he knew she could never be broken into being a submissive slave. Yet he wanted to avoid upsetting Smiley at all costs. "Perhaps we could throw in another 500 NK Rupees for her," he suggested. "Would that be suitable?"

Smiley scratched his head. "I don't know." He paced across the narrow bunker. "I had in mind a bit more."

"Then let's make it one thousand — but that's my top offer."

"I could live with that," Smiley said, slapping the spinning barrels of the Minigun. He turned back toward the New Delhi representative, stepping in front of the Minigun as he did. He started to say more. Then he stopped, a look of horror crossing his face.

Seeing that Smiley was between them and the Minigun, Gindali pulled the handkerchief from his sleeve and his two bodyguards drew their weapons.

Smiley swore loudly, diving toward the floor to get out of the way of the Minigun as his foes' machine pistols spewed bullets his way.

Ziggler motioned to a burley man sitting next to him. "Yarley, sneak around to the front and take out the joker who's stopped us. You two," he said to his best marksmen, "neutralize any witnesses. It will take the authorities a while to figure out what's wrong if there aren't any witnesses to inform them. Don't forget to hit the surveillance cameras."

Ziggler switched his radio to his driver's frequency. "Keep the cop occupied so Yarley can take him out."

The three designated team members silently popped the back door of the van open and slinked into the dawn, looking out of place in their black armor. The snipers knelt on the pavement, positioning themselves to cover both ends of the street while Yarley went around the side, coming up behind the officer who was studying the map that the driver was holding in front of him.

Yarley pulled his stiletto from his belt, grabbed the policeman by the face from behind, and jerked

back the same moment he shoved the sharp blade into his victim's back, shoving the steel upward into the man's kidney. Yarley twisted the knife, sending the cop into shock, then pumped the blade into his moaning prey three more times, silencing him. Yarley re-sheathed the weapon and dragged the body back away from the van before dropping it on the street.

As soon as the cop was down, the snipers opened up on the ten people who had witnessed the murder, as well as those who happened to be standing or strolling on the nearly deserted street; the two operated with quiet professionalism, dropping their targets with barely audible reports from their silenced rifles. Only the brief, bubbling cry of one fat tourist betrayed that anything unusual was going on; a follow-up head shot put an abrupt end to the hullabaloo. The snipers then turned their fire on the security cameras mounted to the lamp posts, shattering the units which rained bits of glass and plastic on the street.

Their jobs done, Yarley and the two snipers jumped back into the van which started immediately, speeding toward their primary target.

"Okay, team," Ziggler said as they made a sharp corner to travel down an alleyway, "our element of surprise is gone and the clock is running. It's going to be tight. Everyone will need to concentrate on doing at their best."

The van slowed at a narrow doorway, half-way down the alley.

"This is it," Ziggler said. "Let's go."

The team members leaped from the back of the van, two positioning themselves at either end of the

alley while the others broke down the door and raced down the narrow passage toward Karen's apartment.

Diane threw herself onto the floor as the first salvo from Gindali's bodyguards riddled Smiley's body with bullets. The projectiles exploded violently upon impact, flaying his head and chest as he fell.

She glanced up to see the two gunmen turn their aim toward Joe. That was their last mistake. Because while they were concentrating on hitting the henchman, the Minigun activated itself, reacting to the noise of gunfire in the fail-safe mode Smiley had programmed into it.

Joe fell beneath the bodyguards' barrage, a bullet smacking into the side of his head and blowing out the back of his skull the same instant the initial burst from the Minigun discharged across the narrow cavern. The automated weapon directed its four barrels toward Gindali who stood between his guards. The forty rounds that the gun spit toward him splattered blood across his white jacket as he turned to run. A cry escaped his lips and then he was dead; his lifeless body dropped to the floor, his handkerchief drifting down and settling beside his corpse.

The bodyguards desperately turned their guns toward their mechanical opponent. But they were too slow. The damage from their fusillade was minimal since they barely got six rounds off during the time the automated weapon fired two hundred cartridges their way, a hailstorm of high-velocity projectiles perforating both their bodies.

The two dropped, falling atop Amanujum who

had thrown himself over the platinum bars when the shooting had begun. Amanujum struggled a moment under their weight, trying to rise, then froze as the Minigun swiveled toward him, its barrels smoking ominously.

"I'd suggest you remain motionless," Diane whispered from where she lay on the bunker floor, her back against the bars of the tiger cage.

"I most certainly will," Amanujum promised. "When will that infernal device shut itself off?"

"Probably not until its batteries run down or it gets the correct command to disarm itself — and only Smiley knew that."

"Oh, my," Amanujum said, closing his eyes tightly with a shudder. "I never should have taken this job."

"Don't give up just yet," Diane said.

"My family will never see me again," Amanujum said mournfully.

"There must be some way to shut this thing down."

"May I offer a suggestion," a low voice growled.

"Another country heard from," Diane said, very slowly turning her head toward the tiger cage. "So you really can talk."

"I believe you are the one I've had contact with," the Silver Tiger said. "At night, when the dimness of the mind occurs."

"I don't think so," Diane replied. "I was hired to track you down but I've never been in touch with—"

"In the dreams. You speak to Ravenfoot."

Diane tried to understand what the animal was trying to say. "What do you know about Ravenfoot?"

she asked.

"He appears — when I sleep. Last night, he told me you were coming — and then you came. I had assumed that he was unreal. But your coming made me think otherwise."

"I know of Ravenfoot but—"

"Ravenfoot told me you have a powerful control over things," the animal said. "You can change things simply by thinking. *Star dancing*, he calls it. Think an event into happening. We must try your powers on the machine. Think it into malfunctioning."

Diane felt confused. *If the tiger knows about Ravenfoot and star dancing, then perhaps these things weren't simply part of her imagination and dreams.* But it seemed so impossible to her. Certainly not something she would risk her life on.

"Concentrate on the machine," the Silver Tiger said, interrupting her train of thought. "All we need is a very small malfunction. A very tiny bit of energy on our part to make the electronic chip controlling it make the wrong decision."

This is crazy, Diane thought.

"At least try," Amanujum said. "We have no other options at this point. The criminal said you were special. Perhaps he was right."

Diane closed her eyes. The whole thing was crazy. "Okay. I'll try," she finally said. "But it's just a waste of time." She closed her eyes, trying to erase everything from her thoughts except making the Minigun shut down.

Then opened her eyes and moved her leg and inch.

The Minigun swiveled toward her and waited for

another movement. "It's useless," she said. "It's still working. I told you it was a waste of time."

"We are lost," Amanujum said.

"I think we should make your need to alter the weapon greater," the tiger said. "I'm going to move toward you very rapidly. If my assumption is correct, the weapon will spit fire at us — if you don't take action to make it stop."

"No, don't do that," Diane said. "That would be crazy. It will only get us killed. There has to be another way."

"Get ready," the animal warned. "I'm coming toward you — now."

The tiger leaped; the Minigun swiveled toward them.

And fired.

CHAPTER 29

Ziggler paused a moment so his people could align themselves on either side of the door. He didn't expect their target to be armed, but wasn't taking any chances. Like the others in the entrance team, he carried a goop gun that would quickly incapacitate Karen without harming her, should she put up a fight.

"Ready," he said, looking at the team members who had aligned themselves on either side of the door. "One, two, *three*."

The explosive charge on the door exploded, kicking the door from its frame as Ziggler shoved his way past it. He covered the room with his gun as other members of the team passed him, one going to the kitchen while another sprinted toward the bedroom.

There was a scream and the blast of a shotgun. The raider who had been going through the bedroom door staggered back, his breastplate caved in by the buckshot it had stopped. His backup jumped into the

door way, goop gun firing as a shotgun blast threw another swarm of shot just inches from his head.

Ziggler stepped toward the doorway where his man now stood, gun pointed upward. "I believe we found our target, sir."

The young woman struggling against the sticky plastic that was congealing around her, caught Ziggler's eye. Emotions flooded into Ziggler's head, causing him to stagger back from the mental onslaught.

"Stay back," he warned those around him. He regained control of himself as the woman strained at the bonds which had hardened around her. She screamed and the furniture in the house started to shake; magazines and pillows leaped from the couch, forming a whirlwind in the middle of the room. A pair of scissors went slashing through the air, impaling themselves in the wall four inches from Ziggler's face.

He stepped back toward the bedroom, dodging a plate that sailed past, crashing into the way. He crossed the room and stood over the woman lay on the floor, struggling to get free.

"It's impossible to break free from that," he told her.

"Damned you," she hissed, her curse strengthened by a wooden chair that was inched toward Ziggler.

"Don't you want to be a guest of the Dark Ones?" he asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? That's only—"

"Make believe?" Ziggler asked. "It's all too real,

my dear. The Dark Ones have returned for you. Now quit fighting. You're feeling very sleepy; relax and go to sleep."

Her eyes fluttered and then opened. Drums pounded in the room, drowning the shouts of the team members. The light bulbs overhead exploded, leaving the room lit by an eerie emerald glow.

The chair that had been sliding toward Ziggler lifted from the floor and flew at him as he held out his hand to protect himself. The seat stopped in mid-air, remaining suspended a moment. Then it started to vibrate as opposite forces shoved against it, gently shaking at first and then oscillating more and more violently until it exploded into splinters which rained across the room.

Turning back toward Karen, Ziggler's eyes glowed red. The drums grew so loud that the walls shook with each beat.

Karen's mouth dropped open as she watched the transformation that came over the man facing her. His skin grew wrinkled; his hair, gray.

Then she recognized the face from her dreams. "Ravenfoot?" she asked. Her eyes narrowed and, for a moment, Ziggler was transformed back into himself.

"Just take it easy," Ravenfoot told her, reappearing. He took her hand and stroked it. "Everything's going to be all right. Soon I'll have you and your sister back together and both of you off the reservation. You'll enjoy working for me. You just wait and see." His eyes grew brighter, making it hard for her to see.

Karen fought against the darkness enveloping

her, then felt as if she'd been hit by a ball bat. Her body went limp, her face relaxed. At the same moment, the maelstrom in her apartment abruptly ended, the objects that had been hanging in the air dropping to the floor with a clatter. The pounding of drums stopped.

"What happened?" the team member nearest Zigler asked. "It was almost as if... It looked like you two were glowing. It was so bright I couldn't see."

"You may soon start believing in witches, my friend," Zigler replied, getting to his feet. "I can promise you, you haven't seen the half of it yet. Now I suggest we get her loaded into the van before she comes to. They we're going to high tail it off the reservation before the tribal authorities realize we're here."

As they picked Karen's unconscious body and carted her toward the door, Zigler rubbed the scars on his temples where, ten years earlier, the tissue samples from the girls had been injected into his brain. Slowly it had grown, integrating it into his head. He had forced himself to develop the powers he'd seen in the girls. Placed himself in danger, endured terrible pain.

Today it finally paid off, he told himself. Not only had he gained many of their powers, he'd actually surpassed anything they had. He could now go into their minds at will, no longer controlling just the images of the Dark Ones, but the fabrication of the shaman, Ravenfoot. Using him, he was able to get past the two women's mental barriers, hitting them when they opened up to the trust they felt

toward the medicine man he'd projected into their dreams.

Soon I will be able to harness their raw, undeveloped capabilities and combine them with the latent powers of the Silver Tiger.

He smiled. It was impossible to even imagine what might be possible for him to achieve after that.

CHAPTER 30

The Silver Tiger charged to the side of its cage, stopping directly behind Diane who sat outside the bars.

The Minigun whirred, swiveling to acquire its new target, and then fired. The burst miraculously missed, traveling just inches over Diane's scalp as she watched the weapon, her eyes wide open in fear. The gun hummed, changing its alignment so it pointed directly at her and fired again.

In just a fraction of a second, two hundred fifty bullets were launched toward her as she sat bound on the floor. The projectiles flashed toward her, riding on the flames of unburnt powder. But before they reached their intended target, they decelerated so abruptly they glowed from the friction generated. Then they dropped to the floor, thudding in the sand.

The Minigun hummed loudly, vibrating wildly, and then was silent. A thin wisp of blue smoke rose from the unit's computer.

Diane looked at the machine in disbelief.

"You see," the Silver Tiger said. "I knew you could stop it."

"If I weren't tied up," Diane said evenly, "I'd pick up one of the guns lying in front of me and shot you, you stupid beast. I came within just inches of becoming little Miss Swiss Cheese."

"I can understand your anger," the Silver Tiger replied. "But it worked, didn't it? Now hold still." A sharp claw reached through the bars and slashed the tape binding her wrists behind her back. "Fear makes the blood run hot. When you were frightened, you had the power to stop the killing machine. Ravenfoot said emotions must be strong before your powers will work."

"Ravenfoot," Diane sputtered, tearing the last of the tape that had been restraining her off. "Sounds like he's told you more about me than I know myself. You talk like you two are on a first-name basis."

"He has visited me often. And he says that your mind has a block in it, making you forget much of what he says."

"Well, I think this Ravenfoot is a crock. Even his name sounds phony. I don't think there's ever been any real Native American by the name of Ravenfoot. I don't understand who or what he is, or why he appears in my dreams, but I don't think he's what he appears to be. Something isn't right."

"Then how do you explain your ability to stop the bullets?"

"There's a lot I can't explain," Diane said, throwing down the strips of tape she'd pulled off. "We'll worry about that later. Right now we need to leave and get you back to Biotech where you belong."

"I believe Smiley kept the key to this cage in his right pant's pocket."

"A good thing," Diane said. "His pants are about all that's left of him. What were those guy's using, mercury filled bullets?" she asked, glancing toward Amanujum who was still lying on the floor.

"I don't know," he answered, rising to his knees and clicking the brief case shut. "I am only a lowly secretary to Mr. Gandhi. The late Mr. Gindali," he added, glancing away from the bloody corpse lying behind him. "Are you sure it is wise to release the cat. It looks, uh, somewhat dangerous."

"If you don't do anything stupid I won't hurt you," the cat answered.

"I was not planning on doing anything stupid," Amanujum answered. "I don't plan on ever doing anything stupid again. This brush with death has opened my eyes to how brief life can be. See, I am unarmed." He pulled his bloodied jacket open.

"So what are you planning on doing, now that your boss is history?" Diane asked the

the secretary as she located the key in what was left of Smiley's pants.

"I will return to my company and be reassigned. With any luck, I'll have a more responsible master." He again glanced nervously toward Gindali's bloody corpse. "You know, I should thank you. You saved my life, too, when you stopped the weapon from tracking our movements."

"No thanks is necessary," Diane replied, unlocking the cage. "There," she said to the tiger, swinging the door of the cage open. She crossed over and picked up one of the bodyguard's machine pistols

and stuffed it into her utility belt. "The next question is how we're going to flag down a ride out of here and get you back to Biotech."

"We can take the vehicle Smiley brought me here in," the Silver Tiger suggested, beckoning toward the Viper with his head.

"Guess that's the best bet," Diane said. She sighed. "Well, we better get going. It's going to take a while to get out of the desert and onto the interstate."

"Perhaps I could give you a lift somewhere," Amanujum offered. "I would feel good if I could help you in some little way. The corporate jet we came in is at my disposal now — I think. As the only surviving member of the business party, I believe it is mine to command. I could have you anywhere in this hemisphere within a few hours."

"We could use a ride to Kan-Topeka," Diane said.

"Which is where?" Amanujum asked.

"About 150 miles east of here."

"No problem," the secretary said. "I'd suggest you also take that briefcase over there. I suspect it contains the data dots that were to be traded along with the tiger."

Diane crossed to the table he'd pointed to and clicked open the satchel. "What's on these, anyway?"

"All the research materials collected in building the Silver Tiger," Amanujum replied. "My boss thought they would be worth a fortune. He claimed there was enough material there for at least fourteen new patents."

"Guess we'll take them along." Diane snapped

the briefcase shut.

"It would be unwise to trick us," the cat warned as Diane joined him.

"Believe me, I know better than to attempt to trick you," Amanujum replied. "I shall be a straight arrow from this day onward." He motioned toward the door to the bunker. "Shall we go?"

Diane settled into one of the padded seats on the jet as the giant tiger curled up at her feet, blocking the aisle with its huge body. She promptly fell asleep, awaking only when the plane landed at the Kan-Topeka air field.

"Thanks for the trip," Diane told Amanujum as she left the plane.

"My pleasure. Good luck."

"I'll probably be needing it," Diane said with a tired smile.

She quickly escorted the Silver Tiger off the tarmac and through the airport, hoping no one would try to stop them. Within minutes they were in the parking lot, headed for her Eldorado, passing the dismantled vehicles littering the parking spaces around it.

"You're back!" Pete's hoarse voice echoed through the cavernous lot. "I thought you would never return."

He stood up and threw the blanket he'd been wrapped in down, then staggered toward them. "Get this thing off my neck, will you?"

"Not so fast," Diane said. "I want to be sure everything's all right with my car."

"No one came near it," Pete said, eyeing the

tiger that positioned itself beside him as it licked its chops.

"Everything looks in order," Diane said after pacing around her car. She reached into her utility belt and removed a bar of silver. "Nothing's damaged or missing. Here's your spanner." Since she no longer had her comphone, she placed her hand on the door lock. "Emergency override delta, alpha, five, four, exclamation mark, twenty."

"Emergency override of burglar alarm successful," the car announced as the lock on the door popped open. "You may get in."

Pete licked his lips as she opened the door of the car. "Don't forget to take my execution collar off."

"You mean you don't want to keep that?"

Pete gave her a sour look. "I lost my sense of humor yesterday."

"My friend will take care of you if you try anything," Diane warned with a nod toward the Silver Tiger. "Turn around." She tapped in the release code on the ring around Pete's neck. The device beeped and snapped open.

Pete swore, rubbed his neck, and sprinted away without saying a word, nearly tripping over a cleaning rat as he rounded the corner.

"Now," Diane said, turning toward the Silver Tiger. "Where are you going to ride?"

"In the back seat of your vehicle, perhaps?"

"Let's try it," Diane said, opening the back door. The tiger squeezed through the opening and settled on the back seat, the rear of the car sagging noticeably under his weight. "Glad I got new tires and shocks not so long ago," Diane muttered as she

slammed the door shut after he had lifted his tail out of the way. She tossed the execution ring and the satchel containing the Biotech data dots onto the front seat beside her and settled behind the steering wheel. "I'm going to take you back to Biotech. I hope that's not going to upset you too much."

"Biotech takes good care of me," the cat replied. "I'm anxious to get back."

"Next stop Biotech, then," Diane said. "I don't have my comphone so we'll just drive there and surprise them." *Then I should be finished with this crazy job once and for all*, she added to herself. It was fortunate all of her work didn't go like this or she would look for a new line of work.

Fifteen minutes later, she was standing in the glassed-in lobby where the Biotech International Offices had been. "I'm sorry," the man behind the bullet-proof counter said, "but we can't let you go in there. Biotech is in receivership and the accountants are going over all the records. If you don't leave, I'll call animal control."

"But this animal belongs to Biotech," Diane protested. "I reported it as being burnt in a helicopter crash — but that was a mistake on my part. As you can see it's actually—"

"Miss, there is no record of a tiger in the company files. I just checked them twice just a minute ago, if you'll recall. Even if there were a record of such an asset, we have no way to keep it. We'd just be forced to put the animal down or give it to the local zoo — if they'd take it. The taxes on exotic animals have just about made it impossible for a zoo to own one. Especially a tiger. I didn't know

there were any of those left.”

Diane said nothing.

He leaned forward and whispered, “Frankly, Miss, if were you, I’d take it to the country and dump it. It’s going to be more trouble than it’s worth. One meal on your neighbor’s Aunt Eddie and you’ll have a lawsuit on your hands, if you know what I mean.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Diane said emotionlessly. Turning, she told the cat, “Come along and stay quiet.” The last thing she wanted was for the animal to speak in public. The tiger was attracting enough unwanted attention as it was.

Time to get back to my apartment and try to sort things out, she decided.

CHAPTER 31

After reaching her apartment, Diane opted to let her e-messages go ignored for a while longer, instead concentrating on taking a hot shower. After reapplying her makeup and drying her hair, she feed the Silver Tiger a slab of steak, then let him retire to the bathroom. To her surprise she soon heard the water running.

"What's going on?" she asked, cracking the door to the bathroom open.

"Can't a cat take a shower without raising a ruckus?" the tiger growled.

"Sorry," Diane said, discretely closing the door.

She sat and ate breakfast, wondering how much her utility bill might cost by the time the animal in the bathroom finished with the electric hair drier. And how he managed to hold the hair drier. She made a mental note to ask him when he was in a better mood.

Finally the animal emerged, a feline grin on his face as he strolled in. "I could get used to this," he said as Diane activated the mail service on her

computer.

"Priority e-talk from Karen Deathsong," the apartment computer announced. "Message is marked 'ultra urgent'."

"Let's hear it," Diane said.

"Diane," Karen said, her face appearing on the screen that filled the far end of the living room. "They're holding me— Don't do what they tell you to—"

"Hello, Diane," Zigler said, his face replacing Karen's. "I have a very short and sweet message for you. If you want to see Karen alive again, you will bring the Silver Tiger to me. I'm at the House of Mao Corporate headquarters on Washington Ave. I'll have people waiting to escort you to my office. And don't try anything. All I really need is her head. I'll discard the rest if you try to double-cross me."

The screen went blank.

"Sounds serious," the Silver Tiger said.

"I think that's a safe bet." Diane went to the security door in the hallway, placed her hand on the sensor pad, and opened it after it clicked unlocked.

"Who's the female human in the message?"

"My sister. I'm going to get her out of there."

"Who's the man?"

"That I don't know. But I'm certain I've seen him before, somewhere." She entered the small armored closet and placed the briefcase of data dots on a shelf. Then she started choosing the equipment she might need in getting her sister back: A ballistic vest, four throwing knives, and an MK-5Z submachine gun, similar to the one she'd lost in the ultralight crash.

"You're trading me for your sister?"

"No. I know this type. He'll simply kill us after he gets you. We're going to try to kill him first — if you'll help me."

"I will help. But couldn't we simply call the authorities and report the kidnapping of your sister?" the Silver Tiger suggested, running a paw over his whiskers to straighten them.

Diane laughed. "You have a few things to learn. The corporations own the police. Going to the authorities for help would get us nowhere." She carefully strapped on her equipment and then racked a cartridge into her submachine gun. "Come on. We've got some loose ends to tie up."

"We'll take that," the guard at the door said as Diane stepped into the armored lobby of the House of Mao building. Diane hesitated, then noticed the six heavily armored raiders who stepped into the chamber, backing up the guard with their rifles. She handed over her weapons.

"I'd rather not have to goop you," the guard said, covering her with a projection tube. "It's hell to get that stuff out of the carpet. But if you even look crossed-eyed at me, I will."

The tiger growled, causing the color to drain from the guard's face as he pointed the tube toward the cat. "That way," he said, motioning toward the elevator.

The lift stopped half way up at the two-hundred, twentieth floor. "Straight ahead," the speaker on the wall instructed them.

Diane cautiously stepped from the elevator and headed down the hall, the Silver Tiger stalking alongside her. She heard a muffled cry and glanced to her left as the door hissed open, revealing a large paneled room with Karen sitting in its center, a bright spotlight bathing her in brightness and reflecting off the titanium straps securing her.

Even though she knew it was most likely a trap, Diane ignored her fears and entered the room, dashing to her sister's side. "We'll have you free in a moment, Little One." She examined the lock and then hit the release button on the back of the chair. The metal bands that had held Karen's wrists and ankles snapped away.

The cat sprang into the room behind them. The door to the hall slammed shut trapping the three of them in the room.

Karen screamed. Diane turned and looked at her, then realized the problem. "It's okay," Diane told her sister, prying her hand off her arm. "He's with me — here to protect us. Right now we need to worry about getting out of here." She took a step toward the door, then stopped, looking upward at the barely discernible hiss.

A gossamer-fine power net, crackling with an electrical charge, dropped from the ceiling. Diane stood still, waiting to see what would happen next.

"So," Zigglar's voice said from the shadows. "You are finally mine."

The Silver Tiger growled and crouched to attack.

"No," Diane warned. "The power net will injure you if you touch it."

But her warning was ignored. The beast sprang

toward Ziggle with a wail, its claws slashing the air ahead of it before it slammed into the charged netting.

For a moment, it appeared the weight of the animal would overcome the strength of the crystalline fibers whose energy surged through the creature as its paws raked jagged tears in the material. Then the mesh sprang back, throwing the cat toward the center of the room where it tumbled in a limp ball of muscle and fur.

"You've killed him!" Diane cried, kneeling beside the fallen animal, her hands smoothing its fur helplessly.

"Only stunned it," Ziggle said, sauntering up to the electrified barrier. "I'm not about to destroy something so valuable as the Silver Tiger. He'll come to before long."

Diane turned toward him, a furious look on her face. The net in front of Ziggle started to shake, then ripped apart. The floor beneath his feet shook as if there was an earthquake. "Very good," he shouted. "Your powers are starting to take effect. The three of you together are quite strong."

The paneling around the room snapped and cracked apart, splintering from the floor as the light overhead abruptly went out, leaving them in the dark only for a moment before an eerie light was emitted from Ziggle's face.

Both sisters transformed themselves into giant raptors, flapping their wings to rise toward the top of the room where they fought the netting entrapping them. Sparks flew in the darkness as the two birds battled for their freedom, ripping at the

fabric with their talons.

"Enough!" Ziggler screamed. He raised his hand, making a swatting motion.

The two raptors fell from the air. The birds' feathers shimmered as they transformed themselves back into human forms which crouched in the center of the cage.

"You see," Ziggler said with an evil smile. "I have more power. More than you two combined, even with the cat adding to your capabilities. I can harness your power and throw it back at you. I can force you to do my bidding. Sit down!"

Diane tumbled to the floor, her sister sprawling beside her.

"You two *will* remember all that has been hidden from you — now. It's time for your hypno conditioning to be lifted. You will remember *now*."

Diane cried in pain as the suppressed memories from her childhood flooded into her mind, nearly overwhelming her. The pain of the table, the fear of the Dark Ones, the taking of tissue samples from her young brain— it was all there, in jolting detail. Fighting against the painful memories she glared at Ziggler. "It was you. You were responsible for the Dark Ones — and the nightmares."

"That's correct. And now *I* have the powers I coveted so back then. Because I've grown more of the cells that made you two special. The samples I stole have multiplied here, in my very own skull," he said, tapping his temple. "And unlike you two, I can really control my powers. With the added power you two and the tiger bring together, I can make my wishes become reality."

"Ravenfoot," Karen sobbed. "He will help us—"

Ziggler threw back his head and laughed and then was silent, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Who do you think Ravenfoot is, my dear?" he finally asked.

Neither sister replied.

"Come now. I know from the looks on your faces you've already guessed. *I* am Ravenfoot. I was the one who sneaked into your heads at night in an effort to make you exploit your powers. But it proved so hopeless. You'll never be able to achieve what I have. Apparently it's only when the tissue is injected into another living, human brain that it really expands and gains its full abilities. I can't explain it, but that's what seems to have happened. You can supply me with your power, but you can't use it yourselves. Ironic, isn't it?"

There was a flutter of light in the corner of the room.

Ziggler glanced toward the spot. "What's that?"

The distant pounding of tribal drums echoed in the distance, growing louder.

"Stop that," he said, turning back toward the girls. "Stop it!" he yelled, holding his ears. His fury enveloped Diane's mind in blackness and she gasped at the pain that shot through her frame. Then it vanished as quickly as it had started. At the same time, the thumping of the drums grew louder, accompanied by the distant chanting of a tribal gathering. A clay flute added its counterpoint.

"It it's not coming from you two," Ziggler said, "Where's that coming from?"

"From me," a disembodied voice said. "Your

time of power has ended."

A transparent form materialized beside the girls and Silver Tiger. "It is time for you to leave this wicked man," Ravenfoot whispered in their minds.

"What are you saying?" Ziggler sputtered. "You're not real. I created you. You can't be here without being called into being by me."

Ravenfoot grew translucent and then became solid. "Right now, I'm just as real as you are."

"But I created you," Ziggler protested.

"I chose to put the idea of creating me in your mind," the shaman replied. "Your delusions of grandeur let you imagine that I was your creation, even though you should have known better."

"But there's no one named Ravenfoot," Ziggler protested. "There never was."

"Once, long ago," the medicine man replied. "I was called back by your foolish experiments."

"Called back?" Ziggler asked.

"From the past," Diane supplied. "That's why you knew so little about aircraft and other modern things whenever I talked to you."

The Indian nodded. "That is more or less the truth."

"No," Ziggler yelled. His skin glowed so brightly it hurt Diane's eyes. Fire flew from his eyes, stabbing at the shaman. Then the blaze grew, transforming the shaman into a pillar of flames that burned the carpeting beneath him and scorched the ceiling as the blazing form inside the inferno toppled over, arms waving for a moment and then becoming still.

Diane choked at the smoke and heat, falling to

her knees, gasping for breath as the room abruptly cleared itself of smoke.

Ziggler laughed. "Good riddance," he said. "Some medicine man."

"You won't get rid of me so quickly," Ravenfoot's weary voice said. "I think I'm growing tired of this." The old man motioned with the eagle feather that appeared in his hand.

Ziggler cried and dropped to his knees, holding his head. His face shook, his eyes bulging and becoming bloodshot. There was a flash of light that rose from his head as he tumbled forward, sprawling on the floor.

The room was abruptly silent.

"Is he dead?" Karen finally asked.

"No," Ravenfoot answered. "Only unconscious."

"What will keep him from causing trouble when he awakes?" Diane asked.

"He no longer has the tissue he stole from your heads in his brain. He will awaken but will never again be a threat to anyone. He will have the mind of a child from this time forth, unable to tell anyone your secrets. As for you two and the Silver Tiger," Ravenfoot said, turning toward the sisters, "you three must leave." He bent down and touched the cat. The animal shook its head with a growl, then rose to its feet.

"Come with us," Karen said to the medicine man as they started to leave. She took his scarred hand in hers. "You could teach us a lot. We need you."

He gave her a tired smile. "You don't need me any more. And you don't know what you ask. Being here instead of in my place in the sky is painful.

Once the sweetness of Heaven is tasted, everything else is bitter.

"Your powers will be almost gone when I leave," he continued, waving the eagle feather toward them. "I only augmented them to bring about Ziggler's downfall. But you will still be able to star dance. And in addition, I am leaving two small gifts for you. You must bestow them wisely because they will only last for the rest of today. After that, you will be as you were before. You must go now."

Karen started to speak, and then was quiet.

"Thank you for your help," Diane whispered for them both.

Ravenfoot vanished.

The elevator stopped at the main floor and the doors opened. Diane, Karen, and the Silver Tiger stood frozen as the guards in the lobby raced toward them, guns held at the ready.

"What's going on?" one of the raiders cried, looking right through Diane.

"Must be a malfunction," another said leaning in to study the ceiling. "The elevator isn't supposed to come down empty."

Diane looked at Karen. Then the two smirked.

The tiger turned toward the sisters. "They can't see us? The first gift?"

"What was that?" a sentry asked, raising his gun menacingly.

Diane held her finger to her lips.

The tiger nodded.

Then the three carefully picked their way

through the maze of watchmen, being careful not to bump into any as they passed.

As she neared the front desk, Diane paused to retrieve her gun and belongings which had been confiscated on the way in. Then the three pushed through the exit and were free, leaving the guards behind to speculate on what had caused the entrance doors to open and close of their own volition.

CHAPTER 32

"Are you up to having some visitors?" Diane asked, peeking around the door into the hospital room.

"Whoa," Tim answered, sitting up in his bed. He fluffed up the pillows behind him and then leaned back. "Come on in. It's nice to see someone who isn't interested in draining blood or poking cold instruments on my skin."

Diane stepped in, followed by her sister and the Silver Tiger.

"Is that thing house broken?" Tim asked, pointing toward the feline. "Hey, it isn't dangerous, is it?"

The cat stepped up to his bedside, sat down on the floor, and frowned at him. "I'm only dangerous when provoked."

"How'd you do that?" Tim asked, looking first at Karen and then Diane. "It really looked like it was talking. You didn't tell me it was a mechanical."

"He isn't," Diane said. "The Silver Tiger is very much real and he really does talk — and reason."

"And lose his tempter when he's insulted," the Silver Tiger added, placing a huge paw on the bed beside the man, flexing its claws for added effect.

"Well, I've *always* liked cats," Tim said. "And just to change the subject, how did you guys sneak him in here. They don't allow pets and they for sure don't allow wild beasts — no offense meant," he added, eyeing the animal that watched him unblinkingly.

Karen giggled. "They can't stop what they don't see."

"You must be Karen." Tim said.

"Yeah," Diane said. "I forgot you two hadn't met — in the flesh. This is my little sister Karen, fresh off the reservation and still wet behind the ears."

"Yeah, I bet," Tim said. "I've heard about your reservation. You can probably teach *me* a thing or two — if we can shake your big sister long enough to leave us alone for a while. Seriously, I'm glad you're finally free. Diane's told me a lot about you."

"Not too much, I hope." She batted her eyes.

Everyone was silent. Then Tim pulled back the sheet. "How do you guys like my new leg?" he asked, sticking a golden foot from under the covers. "Thought the beryllium finish contrasted nicely with all my stainless steel and aluminum."

"Tim," Diane said. "We can't stay long. But before we leave, I have a question for you. I want you to answer it — and for once be truthful instead of trying to jive your way out of giving a straight answer."

"Hey, I'm the guy who's *always* on the level?"

"Tim!"

“Okay, I promise. Nothing but the truth. What’s the question?”

Diane bit her lip and then spoke. “If you could look any way you wanted, would you go back to being your old self or remain as you are now? Would you be flesh-and-blood or stay with your metal and plastic replacement parts?”

“What kind of question’s that?”

“I’m serious.”

Tim drummed his fingers on his metal skull for a few moments and then answered. “Well, I sort of like the idea of going back to how I was before; I miss not being able to raise an eyebrow or flash a leering smile when a good-looking babe passes by. But on the other hand, metal has its pluses. Things that would have killed me back when just bounce off my hard head these days – in our blood-thirsty culture that can be a lifesaver. And no one bothers you in public if you look like a monster.”

He was silent a moment, then continued. “But when it’s all said and done, I guess more than anything else I hate being trapped in this mask. I’d like to smile or frown – or really give a belly laugh that isn’t just a loud he-haw from a speaker embedded in my face.”

Karen and Diane exchanged glances.

“Guess I kind of danced around the question, didn’t I?” Tim finally said.

“Not really,” Diane said.

“So you’re saying the best choice would be metal that was as responsive as flesh?” Karen asked.

Tim nodded. “I guess a cross between the metal and flesh would be the ticket, but that’s not possible.

But it's all just academic with today's technology. What kind of a game are you guys playing, anyway? I mean, I'm stuck with what I've got. Pretty much like everyone else is stuck with what they are."

"Not necessarily," Diane said. "Close your eyes a moment. We're going to try something."

"Now who's not being serious?" Tim asked.

"Just do it," the Silver Tiger growled.

"Okay, okay. No need to be threatening." He closed his mechanical lids.

Diane put her hand on the Silver Tiger's head and then took her sister's hand, staring intently at Tim.

Nothing happened for ten seconds. Then Tim's features softened and very subtly reformed themselves, his pink skin taking on a metallic sheen while his face plate flowed and flexed into a normal looking, but golden, face with skin and steel becoming a seamless whole. Two minutes later, the transformation was complete.

"You can open your eyes now, Tim."

"Gee, I think I feel asleep there, for a minute," he said, his voice suddenly deep and melodious. "Was I out long? Hey, what's going on? My voice sounds — strange." He reached up to touch his mouth, then stopped, gazing at his hands which were now like fine, polished metal, yet flexed naturally like flesh as he held them in front of his face. "What in the world?" He glanced toward the mirror at the side of the bed, his hands shooting up to feel his new face. "How did *that* happen?" he asked sitting up on the edge of the bed. "And my feet are alike — I must be dreaming."

"We've got to go now," Diane said softly as Karen

opened the door and exited, the Silver Tiger behind her.

"You three did this, didn't you?" Tim asked. "Somehow you transformed— I'm beginning to believe in miracles."

"I think you should be by yourself for a while so you get the hang of your new body," Diane said. "But I'll be back in a bit."

"You promise?" Tim asked, looking intently into her face with his new, fiery eyes.

Diane reached down and squeezed his hand which felt soft and warm. "I promise."

"I'll be looking forward to talking," Tim said, a tear sliding down his cheek. "I'd like to have a serious conversation for a change."

"I'd like that very much." Diane gave his hand a final squeeze and turned to leave.

But before she could get out of reach, he pulled her back, catching her in his arms as she tumbled onto the bed.

Without another word, the two kissed.

For a long time.

About the Author

Duncan Long is an internationally recognized author with over seventy books that have gone into print. His subjects include everything from how to survive chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons to health manuals to how to handle firearms. Long has authored the Spider Worlds trilogy, the nine-book action/adventure *Night Stalkers* series as well as the science fiction novel, *Anti-Grav Unlimited*.

His manuals can be found in the private libraries of the CIA, US Marines, FEMA, and other US agencies as well as the library of at least one foreign embassy and the EPC (Emergency Planning, Canada); the FBI has requested that his non-fiction books be sent to their FTU (Firearms Training Unit) at Quantico.

Reviews of Long's books have appeared in *The Journal of Civil Defense*, *Emergency Planning Digest*, and other magazines. He has also been featured on radio and TV shows and for a time had his own radio program named (appropriately enough), *The Duncan Long Show*.

Read more of Long's short stories, novels, and articles—and browse a wealth of pictures and download MP3s—at: <http://duncanlong.com/>