

Destroyer 28-Ship of Death

Richard Sapir and Warren Murphy

For Alphonsus, Patricia, Brian, Brenda, Laurie-friends.

INTRODUCTION

It was the early 1960s and America was in trouble. Crime was getting out of hand, engulfing the country, forcing it surely toward either anarchy or dictatorship.

So a young president of the United States made a brave decision, and CURE was born. CURE was a supersecret agency, set up to save the Constitution by working outside it to fight the rising tide of crime. And, to head this agency that only he in government would know about, the president selected Dr. Harold W. Smith, a tight-lipped New Englander who had served in the OSS and the CIA.

CURE had everything: money, manpower, and a free hand. And still it failed. It needed something more. It needed a killer arm to mete out its own brand of justice.

So Remo Williams, a young, Newark policeman, was framed for a murder he did not commit, sent to an electric chair that did not work, and woke up working for CURE. Remo's training was put in the hands of Chiun, a tiny, aged Korean from the North Korean village of Sinanju. For centuries, Sinanju had provided the world with assassins and Chiun was the latest Master of Sinanju.

Chiun, the Master of all the Oriental killing arts, taught Remo to kill.

At first it was just a job for Remo. But as the years went on and the training went on, it became more than a job and he became more than a man. He became a Master of Sinanju himself, a troubled man torn between his Western heritage and his Eastern training.

And the bodies piled up.

CHAPTER ONE

She was big.

From even the first thought of her in the mind of Demosthenes Skouratig, she was big. There had never been one bigger.

Almost a half mile long from bow to stern she was, and tall as an apartment house. You could lay two Queen Elizabeth II's end to end and fit them in her big belly. You could parachute from the top of the superstructure to her cavernous insides. Made to haul oil from the Persian Gulf she was, and she had the power systems of a large city, the gut strength of a thousand armies of tanks, and the capacity of all the trucking of an entire state.

"Make her a little longer, sir, and we could lay her across the Atlantic," joked Sir Ramsey Frawl, president of Frawl Shipping Combine Ltd.

Demosthenes Skouratis smiled. He did not smile often and he did not smile widely. You had to watch the crease in his dark lips part ever so slightly to realize the fallow face was showing a form of joy.

"I am in ships, not in pipelines, Sir Ramsey," said Demosthenes Skouratis. He drank almond-flavored water and refused a glass of port. He was a short man, squat as if he had been compressed from a taller one. He was ugly enough to make other men wonder how he always managed to get beautiful women trailing after him, and rich enough to make them sure they knew why. But those who thought Skouratis ruled women through his money were wrong. Many people were wrong about Demosthenes Skouratis. For Sir Ramsey Frawl, such a mistake would cost him Attington, the grand, green estate at which Skouratis had first outlined his idea for the big ship.

Attington had survived raids from the Norsemen, the Norman invasion, the great depressions, the staggering drain on the family's fortune from World War II and ensuing

taxes, several national scandals involving the Frawl baronetcy, and the growing disinclination of the Frawl family's younger members to preserve the family business. It would not survive doing business with Skouratis, the former Greek shoeshine boy, whose shipping interests were rivaled only by those of another Greek, Aristotle Thebos. When Frawl announced to his board of directors that they were going to build the largest ship in the world for Demosthenes Skouratis himself, Frawl stock immediately jumped to an historic high on the London exchange. It did not bother them that someone was selling short on large amounts of Frawl stock. If they had been more suspicious, instead of enthusiastic, they might have hired detectives to find out who was behind the small brokerage house that was selling their stock short. And they would have found out that it was Demosthenes Skouratis himself.

When someone sells stock short, it means he is selling stock he doesn't own. When it comes time for him to deliver the stock, if the stock has gone up, he will lose money because it will cost him more to procure the share than he received for already selling that same share. But if the stock should plummet, if he has sold stock for 150 pounds a share, for example, and then is able to cover his sales by buying the stock for a dismal two pounds a share, he has made a 7400 percent profit.

This is what Demosthenes Skouratis did with Frawl shipping.

He knew something Sir Ramsey Frawl did not. Doing business with Demosthenes Skouratis was not an instant road to riches, but, instead, an opening of your veins to let him suck the blood out. A handshake with Skouratis did not conclude the bargaining, it started it.

At first, one would have thought he was Sir Ramsey's long lost father. He helped the firm to find financing. He used his influence to open up the Skaggerac shipyards in Stavanger, Norway for the building of the hull. When Frawl Ltd. was so heavily committed to this one project that it could not survive without its successful completion, the friendly long lost father started making changes. He wanted different metals here and a different structure there. He did it so regularly and in such small detail that the ship he would receive was almost twice the value of the one he had initially ordered. Sir Ramsey, himself now gaunt and haggard with dark signs of worry under his eyes, personally refused the last change.

"Mr. Skouratis, we are not equipped to install atomic-powered engines. I'm sorry, sir, we cannot do it."

Skouratis shrugged. He was not a shipbuilder, he said. All he knew was what he wanted. And he wanted atomic engines.

"You cannot have them from us, sir."

"Then I do not want your ship."

"But we have a contract, sir."

"Let us see what the courts say about that," said Skouratis.

"You know quite well, sir, that we are so heavily in debt that we cannot wait for complicated litigation to win us our money."

Skouratis said he knew nothing about courts. All he knew was what he wanted and what he wanted was atomic engines. He pointed out that the final design of the ship would perfectly support atomic engines.

"If we are going to succumb financially," said Sir Ramsey with all the dignity of hundreds of years of nobility, "then at least we shall do so with a certain succinctness. The answer is no. Do your scabrous worst."

But Greek shoeshine boys are not put off by a few trifling words. Life is too hard on the bare edge of starvation. And he who raises himself in the gutters of Piraeus does not build his schemes for regal gestures to undermine.

While Skouratis did not know about shipbuilding and he did not know about courts, he did

know about financing. Now Sir Ramsey was talking his game. There was no great, great problem and talk of bankruptcy was nonsense. Why, Sir Ramsey wasn't even using the full potential of his credit base. There was the vast worth of Attington, a great landed estate. Sir Ramsey's problem was that he could not turn a thousand years of British history into liquidity. But Skouratis could and he would help him. Now if Sir Ramsey did not lose his head with all this bankruptcy talk, Frawl Combine could extend its credit base, put in atomic engines and make a vast profit. Did Skouratis ever say he would not pay handsomely for the engines? No. Never. He wanted to pay for what he got. But he wanted what he wanted.

This time, Sir Ramsey demanded deposits and bonds and assets in trust. This time, Sir Ramsey said, he wanted to protect himself. And protect himself he did. But only until delivery, when he read in the London Times that Skouratis was not going to accept delivery. The stock plunged to slightly more than a pound a share. Creditors in sudden panic descended on the old and reputable firm like crazed sailors reaching for lifeboats. All the assets in trust for the atomic engines could not delay the onslaught. And then Sir Ramsey discovered, when the stock hit bottom, that Skouratis had bought it and owned a majority share of the company. With a bit of deft juggling, he then sold the assets in trust back to himself, sold the giant ship to himself at the original scandalously low price, collected Attington because he was the banker behind the loan, sold Frawl yards to a dummy company that declared public bankruptcy and, for an added kick, picked up Frawl stock for mere shillings and turned it over to the luckless people who had bought it from him when he sold short at 150 pounds a share.

It was a maneuver that could make a toad gloat.

It left Sir Ramsey with three choices: kill himself with a gun, kill himself with a rope, or kill himself with a chemical. He wanted a private leaving of the world, something near his ancestors. So one chilly October day, five years after the Greek shipping magnate had offered him that splendid opportunity to test Frawl shipbuilding skills, he drove up to Attington for the last time in a dark Rolls-Royce. He said good-bye to his chauffeur and apologized for not being able to give him the security of retirement, which had been implicit in his hiring, and gave the man a gold watch fob that was somewhat recent, having been in the family for only 210 years.

"Feel free to sell this," said Sir Ramsey.

"Sir, I will not sell it," said the driver. "I have worked twenty-two years for a gentleman—a real gentleman. No one can take that away from me. Not all the Greek money in the world. This is no more for sale than the twenty-two good years of my life, sir." A thousand years of breeding in the cold British clime enabled Sir Ramsey not to cry. Death would be an easy thing after this.

"Thank you," said Sir Ramsey. "They were twenty-two good years."

"Will you be needing the car tonight, sir?"

"No. I don't think so. Thank you very much."

"Good afternoon then, sir. And good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Sir Ramsey, realizing that life was always harder than death.

The furniture was covered for storage as it had been for the last year. He went to the room where he was born and then to the room where he was raised and, finally, in the grand banquet hall with its majestic fireplaces that he could not now even afford to fill with wood, he strolled the gallery of family portraits.

And in the sense that comes to dying people, he understood. He understood that the baronetcy had not begun in grandeur but probably very much like that wretch Skouratis—with lying, robbing, stealing, deceiving. That was how fortunes began, and to preside over the ending of one was perhaps more moral than to preside over its beginning. Sir Ramsey would oversee the end of the Frawl fortune with grace. That was the least he

could do.

The low purr of a Jaguar engine came into the quiet peace of the great banquet hall of Attington.

It was Skouratis. Sir Ramsey could tell by his desperate pudgy run. Skouratis jiggled several locks until he found an open door and, finally, sucking great inadequate lungfuls of air and wiping his forehead of greasy sweat, he stumbled into the great banquet hall of Attington that he now owned.

"Sir Ramsey, I'm so glad I got here in time."

"Really? Why?" asked Frawl coolly.

"When my people told me about your despondency and when I discovered you had come here with a pistol, I rushed here right away. I am so glad I got here in time, that you have not shot yourself already."

"You are going to try to stop me?"

"Oh, no. I just didn't want to miss your suicide. Go right ahead."

"What makes you think I won't shoot you? Just curiosity, mind you."

"To survive, one must know people. That is not you, Sir Ramsey."

"It has just occurred to me," said Sir Ramsey Frawl, "that you might have selected me to build my own disaster for other than business reasons."

"As a matter of fact, yes. But business is always first."

"Have I done something to offend you in any special way?"

"Yes. But it was not out of malice. It was something you said to the newspapers."

"What, if I may ask?"

"It was a small thing," Skouratis said.

"Obviously not that small to you, Mr. Skouratis."

"No. Not to me. You, as president of Frawl, had said that Aristotle Thebos was the foremost shipping man in the world."

"He once was. Before the great ship."

"And I am now, correct?"

"Yes. But my comment was so long ago. So very long ago."

"Nevertheless, you said it."

"And that was enough?"

"No. I told you it was business."

"I think there is something more, Mr. Skouratis."

"No, no. Just business. And, of course, Aristotle Thebos. What you had said."

"And that was enough to make you want to ruin me?"

"Certainly."

"And now you want to watch me finish the job?"

"Yes. Sort of a grand finale to all we have accomplished."

Sir Ramsey smiled. "It's too bad that you haven't read the newspapers this morning. You may have accomplished nothing at all. You may have become the biggest dinosaur since the Ice Age, Mr. Skouratis. The Jews call today Yom Kippur. It's their Day of Atonement. Your day of atonement is yet to come."

"What are you talking about?"

"A little war that started today in the Middle East."

"I know about that. I knew about it before the newspapers."

"Have you ever thought what you're going to do with the largest tanker in the world, when oil becomes too expensive? Your tanker, sir, was built to carry cheap oil. Cheap, plentiful oil."

Sir Ramsey turned his face from the grunt of the man in the ill-fitting suit to gaze upon a more graceful sight, the chair where his father had sat during so many formal dinners and the chair that he had used, and had been used so many times before when the

British Empire was the empire of the world. And he pulled the trigger of the small gun, whose barrel he had stuck in his mouth, and it was so very easy. So much easier than life.

Skouratis watched the far side of Sir Ramsey's head pop out like a burst of tiny red spit. There were, of course, the proper witnesses coming into the room now, none of whom would remember Demosthenes Skouratis ever having been there. Actually, there had been no need for him to be there. He had known Sir Ramsey was a doomed man from the first time they shook hands on the deal to build the great ship.

Sir Ramsey had not been the first death connected to the great ship. There were eighteen others but, to Skouratis, that was just the average number of people killed or maimed in a large project. The real tragedy was the oil embargo. There wasn't enough oil to move because now there were too many ships ready to move too little. The price quadrupled and, like any other commodity, the more the price went up, the less it was used.

The great ship lay moored in its Norwegian berth and to just keep the engines running enough and the ship from rusting into an island of waste, it cost Demosthenes Skouratis seventy-two thousand dollars a week. It was like financing an empty city and he might have scrapped the great ship called only Number 242, except for the party that Aristotle Thebos had thrown for him in the shipyard when the ship was completed. Kings were there, socialites were there, the press was there, and every picture showed the great hulk with two hundred and forty thousand dollars' worth of tarpaulin, acres of it, covering the great pumps and fixtures.

"I am giving this party so that we may pay respect to the greatest ship ever built before my poor, poor friend, Demosthenes, must dismantle it," said Thebos.

"Ridiculous," was Skouratis' response to newspaper reporters. He answered with a little smile, as if the comment really were ridiculous.

And he was trapped. He knew Aristotle Thebos was correct. So did Aristotle. So did anyone else in the world who knew shipping. But it was only seventy-two thousand dollars a week, and it was worth seventy-two thousand dollars not to let Thebos have the last laugh on him. Only seventy-two thousand dollars a week. He could live with it for a while. The awhile became years-until lunch with an African diplomat one day in New York City, when Demosthenes Skouratis realized what he would do. He would be famous for it, great for it. Aristotle Thebos would die from envy. Die from it.

Skouratis had kissed the pimply black cheek of the African diplomat and danced around the table at the restaurant. The African diplomat had looked bewildered-until Demosthenes explained to him what he would do.

By the time the United States State Department found out about it, it was too late.

"Are they kidding? They're lunatics."

The officer who said that was talking about the United Nations. And everyone in the State Department agreed with him.

CHAPTER TWO

His name was Remo and he was supposed to enter the room after the lights were turned out. He had been told everything was arranged which, nowadays he knew, meant that he had probably been given only the right name of the city-Washington, D.C.-and the right name of the building-State Department-and possibly the right room-B Level, 1073.

So there he was outside of B Level, 1073 and the lights were bright enough to film the whole thing and the room was buzzing in a half dozen different languages and some clerk with a gun on his belt and a badge on his chest and a whipped look on his face, as though he were trying to get through life without another incident to rob him of his pride, was telling him he either had to show identification now and enter, or never enter at all.

"No one goes in when the lights go off."

"Thanks," said Reino, and kept moving. He had been told he was not supposed to attract attention to himself, and he had been told that he would have been briefed privately but there was neither the time nor the extensive assistance the organization used to be able to provide.

What extensive assistance Remo was not sure. In the old days, before headquarters had been closed down in America, he had been given identity documents and "upstairs" had told him this person or that person was doing this thing or that thing and he could always get into government offices without trouble. Someone would always be waiting for him, not knowing who he was but knowing he should be allowed here or there without hindrance.

But that was in the old days. Millions spent on very little. These days, things were different.

With a dime, Remo phoned a number written on a piece of newspaper.

"The lights are on," he said.

"Do you have the right room?" The voice was lemony and tight, as if the speaker's jaw hinges had been packed with sand.

"B Level, 1073," Remo said.

"Correct. You should be admitted with the lights off."

"That's what you told me before."

"I'd say, work it out yourself, but we can't afford an incident."

"Swell," said Remo. He lounged against the wall, a thin man in gray slacks and dark turtleneck and a pair of sandallike loafers he had picked up in a shop off Via Plebiscite while doing work in Europe.

He was home now in America and, except for his too-casual clothes, he looked like anyone else with a B-Level pass.

If one looked closer, however, he would see the way Remo moved; he would notice the inner balance that was always with him and the quiet of his breath, and the dark catlike eyes and the wrists as thick as forearms.

And it would still be possible to mistake him for what he was not. Men often thought they had met just a quiet man whose mind was really someplace else.

For women, the reaction was different. They sensed the power in Remo and chased him, driven by even more than the satisfaction they knew he could give them, by some primordial urge to carry the man's seed, as if he alone could insure the survival of the whole race.

To Remo, this attention was getting annoying. Where the hell were all these women when he was nineteen years old and would spend a half month's salary on a fancy dinner and a show and get maybe a kiss? What bothered Remo so very much was not that he had paid so much for so little as a youth, but that he was not a youth now, when sex was easier to come by.

He had expressed this regret one day to Chiun, a Korean more than four score years old, who answered: "You were the richer in your search than those in their achievement. For those who indulge with ease, it is of little value. But for those who seek and make it a great triumph, then it is richer."

He had been told that as he achieved more life force, his problem would not be getting women but keeping them away from him.

"I don't see, Little Father," he had told Chiun, "how casting a hand blow is going to get me a piece of ass."

"A what?"

"A piece of ass."

"Disgusting," said Chiun. "Horrible. Horrid. White dialect manages to be degrading

without being specific. I will tell you now and this is so. Sex is but an element of survival. Only when survival does not become a major problem, only when people are under the illusion they are safe from the normal terrors of life, only then does sex appear to be something else. First, perfect survival. Women will know and they will be attracted to you."

"I do okay," Remo had said defensively.

"There is nothing you do okay. Nothing about you is adequate, especially your perceptions of yourself."

"Go spit in a rain barrel," Remo had said.

"He who attempts to transform mud into diamonds should expect to have to wash his clothes often," Chiun had said, and this had bothered Remo because he had known that he was wrong and had spoken out of turn that day so long ago.

He waited for an answer, cupping the pay-phone receiver on his shoulder.

"I don't know what to tell you," came the lemony voice.

"That's an improvement," Remo said.

"What do you mean?"

"At least you're aware of your inadequacies now."

"Remo, we can't afford an incident. Maybe you should just walk away and we'll come up with something else."

"Nah," said Remo. "I'm here already. See you."

"Wait, Remo..." came the voice from the receiver as Remo hung up. He waited for the door to shut at B Level, 1073, then went into a nearby men's room. The urinals were old marble with obvious water seams. He waited until he was alone, getting a small offer from a pervert, which he declined.

Then he pressured an edge of the marble urinal into its seam and cracked it off. It came like a ripe peach pulling easily off a late August tree. Armed with two handfuls of cracked marble, he began throwing one, then another and another, and finally the last slivers and shavings out into the hall. With authority, he entered the hallway pointing to the marble mess on the floor.

"The guard did not do it. He was by the door all the time. I will vouch for the guard."

A man in a gray suit with a briefcase stopped to glance and before he could move on. Remo had his lapels and announced loudly again that the guard did not do it, that the guard had been in front of that door all the time and anyone who said otherwise was a liar.

This trivial commotion drew passersby like mosquitoes to moist flesh. It was something people in the State Department could understand—a broken toilet and a welcome break from foreign affairs.

"What happened?" asked someone in the back of the growing crowd.

"A guard broke a urinal," said the secretary next to him,

"How do you know?"

"Someone's swearing that the guard didn't."

The guard had orders to stay before the door. He had a list of identification numbers of those allowed to enter. He had a badge, a side arm and a pension only fifteen years away. However, when he saw supervisors pointing at him and heard a loud, "Why did he do that?" he checked the locked door once more and, with the pad, went to join the crowd to see who might be slandering him. It was not the kind of job anyone expected you to do right, but the kind where you tried not to do anything wrong. And someone was accusing him of a breach of something and he'd better deny it immediately.

When he got to the center of the crowd, he saw marble wreckage in a pile and an undersecretary for African affairs was announcing that he was going to get to the bottom of this.

Remo pressured the lock of the door downward against its weakest point and then, focusing the full energy of his body, the knob cold in his warm hands, snapped it forward. He backed into the darkened room, saying: "Stay out, no admittance." He shut the door and announced that everything was all right, no one had entered. The room was dark except for a small lit screen near the ceiling. There was no light going toward it so Remo assumed it was a television tape and not a movie projector.

"And stay out," yelled Remo, sitting down in the darkness. The large television screen had a picture of a ship on it. Since there was no background against which to gauge, Remo couldn't tell how large it was. This he knew, however: it was not a sailboat because there were no sails and it was not an aircraft carrier because he knew aircraft carriers had flat things on them. He figured it carried bananas or something. The man to his left had eaten a steak for lunch and reeked of it.

"Now, getting back to our incipient disaster," said someone near the screen. His voice was British. "Who hasn't been briefed by his naval ministry as to the vulnerable points?"

"Yeah," said Remo. "Here. I haven't."

"Oh, gawd. We really don't have time for a naval history, sir."

"Well, make time. I got time."

"Yes, but you see, the rest of us really don't. If you wouldn't mind, sir, I would just as soon make you privy to the naval functions after the meeting."

"You're not making me privy to anything after anything. Just tell me what's going on and let me get the hell out of here. This room smells," Remo said.

"You're American, I take it."

"As American as rice and duck," said Remo.

There was a small commotion up near the screen and again the British voice.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, we have just received a message that we are to wait for someone to be admitted with the lights out. I imagine that's so we shan't see him properly. I guess I can explain something of the dangers of this ship while we wait for the late arrival."

"The late arrival's already here," said Remo.

"Oh. Then it's you."

"It's my mother. Go ahead, Charlie. What's with that boat?"

"That boat, as you so quaintly call it, is the largest ship in the world. While it is moving, its bow can be in one current and its stern in another. Literally, in its transatlantic crossing, it experienced at times three kinds of weather simultaneously. It is powered by atomic engines and each of its propeller screws are larger than most sailboats of the type-one class."

"Oh, that explains it," said Remo, who did not know what a type-one sailboat was and was beginning to suspect that upstairs had fouled up again. So he was looking at a big boat, so what? He heard several foreign tongues and knew this was not an exclusively American venture. His main question was, What was he doing here? Was there somebody he was supposed to see and identify and kill later? Was there some master scheme he had to be aware of? Someone started to smoke nearby in a room fouled by body odors.

"Put out your cigarette," said Remo.

"Your pardon is in the begging," said the man with a thick guttural accent. He did not put out the cigarette. Remo snipped off the burning ember and let it drop into the man's lap. The man angrily lit another cigarette and Remo snatched the lighter. The speaker was talking about a world disaster they all might just muddle through if they kept their heads and worked together, when the commotion in the back row forced him to stop.

"We're trying to save the world here. What is going on back there?"

"He started it," said Remo.

The man denied he had started anything. He was chief of security of the Albanian government and he did not start anything.

"Did too," Remo said.

"Gentlemen, in one month, representatives from every nation in the world will place their lives in our hands, trusting to our skill that they will survive. The world expects us to do our duty. Can I not ask you to act in a spirit of cooperation? We are not here to seize some political advantage but to make sure hundreds of delegates and thousands of staff persons from all over the world don't go sinking to the bottom. Gentlemen, it is quite simply up to us to prevent the greatest naval and diplomatic tragedy the world has ever seen, a tragedy that most likely would unleash World War III. In the light of that, I must ask you, please, please, overlook your minor differences. We cannot afford childishness. Now, I am perfectly willing to hear any mature well-reasoned statement concerning the dispute in the back of the room."

The chief of Albanian security said that in the interest of world cooperation he would refrain from smoking.

"See? I told you he started it," Remo said.

Immediately, a man who identified himself as American Secret Service said that Remo's position was not America's. He apologized to Albania for American rudeness. The Albanian accepted the apology. There was light applause.

Remo laughed and made a raspberry.

The Englishman, who identified himself as assistant to MI5, Great Britain, continued. Everyone, he was sure, knew that the great ship called Number 242 was about to be rechristened Ship of States and become the permanent floating home of the United Nations.

"No," said Remo. "I didn't know that. The United Nations is moving out of New York?"

The Englishman paused a moment, then chuckled. "Very humorous," he said.

"No, I'm not kidding," Remo said. "I didn't hear about it. The UN's leaving New York. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir. That is exactly what I'm saying."

"I'll bet New York's happy as hell," Remo said.

"New York may be happy but we are decidedly unhappy. All of us in this room, in essence the policemen of the world, are facing a security situation unlike any other in the history of the world. We are, in essence, going to have to police our own bosses. This can be touchy. And, in an age of terrorism, the entire ship is a target, an incredible danger. Can any of you imagine what would happen if this diplomatic ship sinks?"

Remo raised a hand.

"Yes. The American," said the British officer at the television screen.

"I can imagine," Remo said. "Nothing. There's always another diplomat around. You never get rid of them. They're always there. They call cops and soldiers dispensable, but let's face it, a cop or a soldier has to be trained. He's got skills you've got to replace. But a diplomat? I mean, how did he get there? He said the right words to some pinko in Moscow or made a campaign contribution in the United States or some other politician back home wanted to get him the hell out of the country. That's what a diplomat is. He's really useless. It's the cops and the soldiers guarding them who are worth something. The ship goes down, nothing'll happen."

The room was dark and each man felt a sense of safety in that anonymity. And in the room there were murmuring approvals. The officer at the screen cleared his throat. Then someone clapped and the room became applause.

The British officer cleared his throat again.

"Nevertheless it is our job and duty to protect these people. The world expects every man to do his duty."

Ship of States was now at berth in New York City. Official opening ceremonies would be the following week.

"We have every reason to fear that this ship may become a ship of death. Already, there have been five mysterious deaths during the building of this ship. Five, gentlemen, five," said the Briton with a note of vindication in his voice.

The American raised his hand again and was recognized reluctantly.

"Now that's a pretty big boat," Remo said.

"Ship," said the British officer.

"Whatever," said Remo. "Now if you've got a... ship that size, you've got thousands of people working on it. I mean, you'd have at least a thousand to look after it when it's resting."

"Moored," said the British officer.

"Right," said Remo. "Well, if you take the thousands who built it and everybody who's watching it and you figure only five people were murdered during that time and you look at any big city with that many people, I bet you'd find out that the boat is no more dangerous than any other big city in the world. So, basically, everyone's getting all worked up over a thing that's no more dangerous than anyplace else carrying a bunch of people who won't be missed anyway."

One person laughed at the obvious clarity of the American's truth and this laugh unleashed an explosion of laughter. When it subsided, an American voice apologized for Remo who apparently represented some agency he was not aware of. He called Remo's remarks "unfortunate and counterproductive."

"You're a jerk," said Remo. He rose from his seat and opened the outside door, letting in hallway light. and left. The hallway was packed. A reporter was trying to get to the center of the small mob.

"What happened?" Remo asked him.

"The CIA went berserk in an assassination plot in a bathroom here. Blew up a bathroom."

"How do you know?"

"An informed source," said the reporter. "And I will refuse to reveal his identity, no matter what pressure you bring to bear."

Whistling, Remo left the State Department Building and strolled through the lovely spring afternoon of the nation's capital. Just before sunset, he made a phone call and spoke into a tape recorder. He knew it would be heard shortly after by upstairs. The message Remo left was this:

"Attended the meeting. Found it and, therefore, you a waste of time. I hereby resign. Effective the day before immediately."

For the first time in more than a decade, he was free.

Enough was enough. For ten years, he had worked for CURE, the secret agency that had been formed to protect America against crime. He had seen his function changed from enforcement arm to detective, and he hadn't liked it. He had seen CURE driven even further underground by a Congress intent on destroying the nation's intelligence function, and he hadn't liked it. He found himself getting overseas assignments that the CIA would have handled if it hadn't been crippled by the Congress, and he didn't like it.

Enough was enough, and ten years was too much.

Darkness came upon the nation's capital and Remo felt good walking. He did not want to return to the hotel where Chiun, the Master of Sinanju who was his trainer, would he waiting. He wanted to think first before he approached his teacher who had been right about so many things when he wasn't being incredibly wrong.

Kemo prepared his speech to Chiun. He would be direct. He had been wrong about working for CURE and Chiun had been right. It was time to take their talents somewhere else,

where they would be appreciated.

Yet something very deep inside Remo was sad. He did not know if he was leaving America, or if America had left him a long, long time ago, in so many little ways.

CHAPTER THREE

The last British sea captain to suffer beheading died at a little-known sea battle off Jamaica in the early 1700s when Her Majesty's admiral suddenly discovered he was outgunned by Spanish galleons that he was attempting to pirate, and so attempted to negotiate a gentleman's cease-fire.

The Spanish captain swore on a sacred relic that his word was his blood and his soul. The British captain gave the word of an officer and a gentleman. Therefore, both agreed that the British ship would surrender flag and gun and that the Spanish would not seek reprisals under any circumstances.

The British ship, seeing the Spanish admiral so very exposed on the bridge, lobbed a shell there during intense manifestations of religious oaths, and the Spanish proceeded to decapitate every Englishman on the privateer, leaving the captain for last.

A similar ceremony was recreated in New York Harbor aboard the massive, remodeled Ship of States while it stuck out into the bay like a gleaming white peninsula. Exactly twelve hours to the minute after some unidentified American security officer had proved at a secret United Nations security meeting that the vessel, considering its size and population, was no more dangerous than most cities in the world, Adm. Dorsey Plough Hunt was forced to his knees on the bridge of the moored goliath and, staring intently at the base of the computer director wheel, felt a sharp sting at the base of his neck and then felt nothing else. The head rolled.

The neck spurted blood like a red car wash on a sunny Saturday.

A black gloved hand wrote on the picture of the current secretary general of the United Nations, framed in honor on the bridge, the words: FREE SCYTHIA!

The chief translator, organizing the very complicated working shifts for the first United Nations cruise, turned around when he heard footsteps in his supposedly locked room. He saw eight men all dressed in black with faces darkened with night paint.

In English, he asked them what they were doing there. Then in French, then in Russian, then in Arabic, and then, in an international gesture, he threw up his hands and shrugged.

They forced him to his knees while he tried to explain in Swedish that he had no money and was not political and certainly was not anyone who was important enough to give them anything.

He didn't even feel the sting at the back of his neck as a blade made his eyes and brain useless. The head nestled under a chair and the body convulsed and again they used blood to write, this time on the charts of work schedules: SCYTHIAN LIBERATION FRONT.

In the mammoth vessel there were eighteen chapels: mosques serving different Islamic sects, cathedrals for Christians, synagogues for Jewish groups and temples for Buddhists and Hindus. In every area of worship, a head was placed, and on every altar, the word Scythia was written.

The black-clad men worked and cut until the darkest part of early morning, until the blood made some giddy and made some talk to themselves and made others feel light with triumph, reactions common to men who had killed for the first time and had suddenly discovered it was what they had wanted to do all their lives and they had simply never known it until they tried it.

Then the leader called "Mr. Scyth" made his first mistake. He entered the Middle East corridor on one of the ship's passenger decks. Despite pledges made formally at the old United Nations building in New York, the corridor was heavily armed.

The men with machine guns and pistols and small pocket grenades were not called guards but "cultural attachés." The Jordanian cultural attachés had British Webleys and Brens while the Syrian agricultural experts carried Kalishnikovs, the Russian automatic rifle made famous on wall posters where they are held aloft in a fist while the poster proclaims some sort of social improvement to be gained by firing one of the things. Actually, they worked very much like the British and American weapons, hurling pieces of lead into human bodies so voices that might say that cultures had not been improved but merely relabeled could be stilled. If one had enough Kalishnikovs, he could force thousands into the streets to proclaim in marching ranks how happy and free they were. An Egyptian cultural attaché spotted three men in black with bloody swords and let loose a burst from his M-16. A Libyan choreographer, hearing the shot, threw a hand grenade into the passageway. The Iraqi singers poked Kalishnikovs from their outer doorway and fired at everything, especially the Syrian doorway. The Saudis stuffed American hundred-dollar bills and large Swedish kroner into wastebaskets and threw that out into the blazing fury of the Middle East corridor.

Accidentally, the cross fire proved immensely effective against the band of night raiders. It forced them to huddle in a large cleaning closet, their hands over their ears and their heads tucked into their chests in some small attempt to escape injury. Only Mr. Scyth remained calm.

"We've got to run for it," one said, but Mr. Scyth touched his cheek and said calmly that there was nothing to fear.

"We'll be trapped here," said the man. "They'll close us in. We're in a closet. There is no escape." And those who had just minutes before taken delight in rolling heads suddenly did not like killing anymore.

The Lebanese delegation, just arrived from Beirut, slept through the exploding din for it was much like their homeland. It was also the Lebanese delegation that picked up the phone in the morning to get in touch with other Arab delegations in the Middle East corridor.

"Look, old boy," said Pierre Haloub, deputy consul of the Lebanese mission, "I'm hearing Kalishnikovs down the hallway and heavy Bren action about twenty yards past that and back away, maybe sixty or sixty-one yards, is M-16 activity, and one of them has a small defect in its recoil that should cause the Egyptian some trouble in about eleven minutes if he continues his firing pace."

"Holy Allah," said the Syrian at the other end of the telephone. "How can you tell?"

"The sounds, old boy. Now, are you firing at anything in particular?"

"We are being attacked and we are firing to defend ourselves."

"It doesn't sound like it," said the Lebanese. "Too random. Now what you've got to do is phone around, find out who fired the first shot and what he fired at, and give me a buzz back in a few minutes. All right, old boy?"

Haloub finished his juice and unpacked his shaving kit.

"Anything?" asked another delegate coming out of the lavish main bathroom.

Haloub shook his head. When he finished shaving, he telephoned the Syrian again.

"Well?" he asked.

"No one started it," said the Syrian.

"That's ridiculous."

"Zionists," said the Syrian.

"This isn't a UN debate so stop the nonsense. We've got to get the shooting stopped so we can all go out this morning. Now who defended himself first?"

In two minutes an Egyptian was on the phone. He said he had seen men clothed in black with bloody blades and shot at them.

"What sort of weapons did they have?"

"Bloody knives for murder."

"What sort of guns?"

"I didn't see any."

"Aha. All right. You stop shooting and I'll phone the other delegations. I think we may have just gotten ourselves something."

The ensuing symphony of silence woke up the rest of the Lebanese delegation.

"What? What? What?" they said, stumbling sleepy eyed into the main chamber of their UN consulate.

"Nothing. A cease-fire," said Haloub.

"I can't sleep with all this quiet," said one of the Lebanese. "I never should have left Beirut."

Haloub, who really was a cultural attachÉ but had picked up a fine knowledge of firearms and street warfare just by growing up in Lebanon, unpacked his .357 Magnum, a very large pistol that made very large holes in people, and an ashtray. He opened the outer door into the corridor and threw the ashtray out onto the thick carpet. No one fired, so he stepped out into the hallway. He had seen walls like this before after intense cross fire. It looked as if someone had gone through the hallway with a McCormick reaper, whipping away chunks of the walls and ceilings, gouging out large pieces of the carpets. "Take your hands off your triggers and everyone come out into the hallway. C'mon," he coaxed. A door opened. Someone poked out his head. Another door opened. Finally all the embassies along the broad hallway had people out in the middle of the corridor, with guns and silly grins.

"All right, everybody," said Haloub, "we're going to find the men in dark suits with bloody blades. I don't see any bodies so they must be in a room somewhere. Where's the Egyptian who saw them first? Don't be afraid. Come to the front. It's just the cease-fire of the morning. I'm sure we'll have hundreds before this cruise is over."

A dark man in a white silk bathrobe with an M-16 pointed up the hallway, behind a mass of Syrians in long nightgowns who carried Russian Kalishnikovs.

Haloub calculated what the cross fire had been and knew he had not seen a body, and therefore the only living place the intruders could be was behind some closed door.

"Find a door that's closed and don't open it."

The door was found immediately and identified as a large cleaning storage area, checked out the day before by Syrian security. The Egyptians said that was a lie; it had been checked out by Egyptian security.

A Libyan accused both of lying and said the closet had never been checked out by anyone and was probably part of a CIA, American-racist and Zionist plot. By saying it was checked out, the Egyptians and Syrians were now in collusion to sell out the revolution of the Arab peoples.

"Quiet," yelled Haloub.

"Racist," screamed the Libyan.

"We can all be killed if we don't do this right," Haloub said.

The Libyan was quiet. Haloub went to the closet door. He made everyone get on either side of the door and keep quiet. He pointed to the carpeting. There was fresh wet blood at the door. Obviously one of the intruders had been wounded.

Haloub stepped to the side of the door. With his back pressed against the wall and all the delegates out of danger, he scraped the barrel of his Magnum against the door. Often in cases like that, the occupants would start shooting. No one shot.

"All right. We know you're in there. Throw out your weapons and you'll be all right," said Haloub.

"You have the word of an Arab," yelled the Iraqi.

The Egyptian giggled.

The Iraqi said he didn't think that was funny.

"I don't think there's anyone in there," said Haloub.

"There's got to be. There's no exit," said a Syrian security man, listed as a linguist.

"I don't think so. I've been through this before. I just have a feeling."

"But I have the plans to the ship," said the Syrian.

"He's right," said the Egyptian, and everyone agreed. Everyone except Haloub, who for the last two years had lived in Lebanon, where you had to shoot your way to Sunday mass. Someone returned to his consulate and brought back one of the eighteen volumes of the ship's plans. It was a gigantic condensed blueprint. They found the corridor and Haloub isolated the large closet. It was more like a small storage room.

"What's the material of the closet's walls and ceiling?" Haloub asked.

"Reinforced steel."

"Then there is absolutely no theoretical way in which that band is not trapped inside the closet," said Haloub.

Everyone agreed.

From a far corridor, several guards clad in United Nations blue ran up asking what had happened. Was everyone all right? Yes, they were, Haloub said. The guards told them they were lucky. Some madmen had gotten aboard the ship and were cutting off heads.

"We have them trapped in that closet," said someone.

The United Nations force asked to take over. But Haloub refused. Of all the men in the corridor, he had the most battle hours. He simply turned the handle of the closet door and opened it as everyone else ducked for cover.

The closet was empty. There was some blood on the floor but it was empty. The hallway became a din of charges and countercharges. Haloub retreated from the center of the crowd and returned to his consulate aboard the great ship.

He let the Lebanese press aide leave to join the others lest the American press run "another lopsided story about trigger-happy Arabs."

Haloub called a meeting of the Lebanese delegation. Back home, many of them would have shot each other on sight. But here, away from their homeland, each who had tasted civil war and who had learned in their grief that dead bodies solved very little and who understood better than most what killing was about listened intently to Haloub, a Maronite Christian.

"Gentlemen," said Pierre Haloub, "this ship is a coffin."

There were no charges of conspiracy, just serious listening by serious men.

"There were murders on this ship last night. It is a big ship with thousands of people. Yet these murders look like the work of terrorists. Now terrorists can strike anyplace. They do not bother me much. That is not why I call this Goliath a coffin. No. This ship is a coffin because it has secret passages not known to us, but known to the people who committed the murders."

There were questions about how Pierre Haloub knew this thing. And he explained about the cross fire and the trail of blood to the closet door, and the absence of anyone from inside the supposedly sealed closet.

"I think this ship was designed to kill many people."

"Arabs?"

"No. All. Everyone," said Pierre Haloub on the last day of his life.

In Washington, the president of the United States assured the National Security Council, two visiting ambassadors, eight United States senators and an interviewer that he had great faith in the safety of the vessel called Ship of States.

"While of course we regret the decision of the United Nations to leave New York-

particularly coming, as it did, as a result of a dispute over free parking and the veto by our representative of the UN resolution demanding an additional fifty-percent income tax on Americans to help the emerging nations 'find themselves'-we still look to the UN as the hope for peace through negotiation, progress through reason, and change through love and mutual respect."

"What about the beheadings, the gun battle and the horror in the Lebanese consulate section?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," the president told the interviewer. "It just shows how badly we need peace." He excused himself and raged into the office of his top assistant. Why hadn't he been told about the horrors on the Ship of States? And what happened at the Lebanese consulate section aboard the ship?

"Burned alive, sir. The entire consulate turned into flames. They were cooked. Apparently fire bombs."

"Oh, that's great. That's really great. We needed that. We really needed that. I wish those bastards, if they want to start frying each other, would wait until they get the hell out of New York Harbor so we don't get blamed for it."

"What's our position, sir? For the press."

"We're against frying as a way of solving international disputes. I'm going to my bedroom."

He had a half hour to wait in the bedroom and every ten minutes he looked toward the top drawer of a bureau. He drummed his fingers on the arm of a Chippendale. At precisely 6:15 P.M., he dialed a red telephone secreted in the top drawer of the bureau he had been staring at.

"You assured me," said the president coldly, "that those two would be assigned to that ship. You gave me your word on it. Today I hear about massacres aboard that ship. We and every nation I can think of are committed to the safety of that ship. Who, what and why went wrong? I want to know."

"Hello, hello," came a voice through the receiver, a voice fatty with the thick consonants of the Bronx in New York. "Is that you, Selma? Selma? Selma?"

"Who is this?" demanded the president.

"Who are you? I'm trying to get Selma Wachsberg. Who are you?"

"I'm the president of the United States."

"A great imitation, Mel. Really great. Get Selma for me, will you, please?"

"There's no Selma here."

"Look, Mr. Smarty-pants. I'm not looking for an impersonations single. Get me Selma."

"This is the White House. There's no Selma here."

"C'mon, already."

"I am the president of the United States and I want you to get off this line."

"Give me Selma and I'll get off the line."

Another voice came on and this one was taut and lemony. He explained there was a mix-up.

"You bet there is," said the woman in the Bronx. "I want Selma Wachsberg."

"I want an explanation," said the president.

"Madame," said the man with the lemony voice, "this is a government line. There has been a mix-up. I need privacy. It is important."

"My call's important too. What's yours about?" said the Bronx woman,

"The possible survival of the world," said the lemony voice.

"Mine's more important. Get off."

"Madame, this is your president and he is asking for your help. Not only on behalf of your country do I ask this but on behalf of the world."

"Hello, hello?" It was a new woman's voice, younger than the first.

"Selma. Is that you?"

"What I want to know is what went wrong in New York Harbor?" said the president. It was a chance, to be sure. But he knew he could not reach this man again until early morning and he could not wait until then to find out what had happened. The telephone lines worked in such a way that their two home numbers only existed during specific times. Moreover, if he were not too specific, the two women wouldn't know what they were talking about anyway. Nothing went right in America anymore, he thought.

"Ruth, Ruth, is that you?"

"It's me, Selma. Who is that jerk on your line?"

"We didn't have our people there," said Dr. Harold W. Smith, the only director the secret agency CURE had ever had.

"What people there?" asked Selma Wachsberg, thinking there might have been a party to which she had not been invited.

"Why not? You had given me assurances," said the president of the United States who, the previous week, had been assured by Smith that his two-man special unit would be launched as a floating security team, unidentified to other security agencies.

"Will you two get off this line? I've got something important to talk about," said Ruth Rosenstein of 2720 Grand Concourse, the Bronx, who had found an unmarried accountant who said he might be interested in meeting a lovely charming young girl named Selma, who was, of course, a fantastic cook.

"Small disorder. Unit doesn't want to work for us anymore." Smith knew two women on an accidentally open line could not possibly perform a trace, nor even understand what was being talked about.

"Say, are you two married?" asked Ruth Rosenstein, who understood that good matches had been made from greater accidents.

"Yes," said the president of United States.

"Yes," replied Dr. Harold W. Smith of CURE.

"Ruth, how could you be so crass?" Selma Wachsberg cried, secretly glad the question had been asked directly, so she wouldn't have to do it with cuteness.

"You Jewish?" queried Ruth Rosenstein, who understood that one never knew when someone was getting divorced, and why waste a phone call.

"No," said Smith.

"No," replied the president.

"Then it doesn't matter," said Ruth Rosenstein.

"Ruth!" Selma Wachsberg, who at thirty-four realized the main priority in life was sex, not sect, cried.

"Well, get someone on it," commanded the president.

"They are our only someones, sir. We're not an army."

"Are you saying we're helpless?" the president asked.

"Probably," Smith said.

"Have you tried Transcendental Meditation?" asked Selma.

"To hell with TM. I use Nytol," said Ruth, who had found that most problems become less difficult after a good night's sleep.

"Do you have any suggestions?" the president asked.

"Me?" asked Ruth.

"No, not you," the president said.

"I will try to get that team on it. But I can't guarantee it. Without them, I don't know what we'll do," Smith said.

"What'd he say?" Selma asked.

"He can't give any guarantees," Ruth explained.

"Oh," Selma said.

"Doesn't he do a good president?" Ruth asked.

"That's him. I knew I recognized the voice," Selma said.

"Nah," Ruth said.

"It is him," Selma said, shocked.

"Really? Look, Mr. President. Don't you worry. I've traveled. This is the greatest country in the world. Do what you think is right and let them all stew in their own juices."

"If you want to help, madame, hang up," the president said.

"Who's paying for this call?" Ruth asked.

"Honestly, I don't know," the president said.

"Better hang up, sir. Will contact later," Smith said.

"Good luck, you two," said Ruth.

Aboard the UN ship, investigators went through the charred remains of the Lebanese consulate. The bodies remained where they had burned to bone, stiff and brittle with lips burned away so that the skeletons looked as if they smiled.

The investigation team was made up of an American, a Russian, an Englishman, a Chinese, and five Arabs from security.

The Arabs watched each other and everyone else. The Chinese security man watched the Russian and the American watched the Chinese, the Russian and the Arabs. Basically, they stood in the center of the main-consulate waiting room and milled about. This left the Briton to poke around. He found the defenses—even though they had apparently been hastily erected by Pierre Haloub, acting head of the Lebanese mission—perfectly adequate.

No one should have been able to move into the room, overpower all of them, and set them and the offices afire. Yet someone had. Haloub and all his men were dead. How? The Lebanese had been careful men, each one of them a survivor of Beirut, where just waking up in the morning was a significant demonstration of caution and cunning.

Moreover, thought Inspector Wilfred Dawes, formerly of Scotland Yard and now on loan to MI5, it had been this Lebanese consulate that had told the nearby Egyptian consulate that the entire ship was a coffin. Was it possible they had been selected for this death precisely because they knew something? Wasn't it Pierre Haloub who stopped the small-arms fire that morning and isolated that closet with the bloodstains where the terrorists vanished? Had he learned something?

Dawes was not a large man, yet his round stomach and paunchy cheeks made him appear larger than he was. He wore a brown tweed suit with flannel vest and dark tie over white shirt. His graying hair looked as if he precisely parted it with a plumb bob. He called his hair lotion "stickum." He smoked inexpensive tobacco and had every intention of collecting his pension, instead of providing his wife a widow's pension.

By the time he returned to the main room where everyone else was watching each other, he had a reasonably good idea why the Lebanese consulate had been chosen for destruction although he did not know how it was done. The key was the word coffin. It had been spoken by a man familiar with daily death and Haloub had not been the kind to exaggerate. It had also been overheard, which was also quite logical.

The other security men asked Dawes what he had been doing.

"Looking around a bit," Dawes said.

And, by saying this, Inspector Dawes of MI5 had provided the other security men with the first thing they could agree on. Dawes was part of their team and if he wanted to work for the United Nations, he should do so in the proper spirit, namely, stay with everyone else where they could talk things through. While Dawes was meddling about the charred consulate, the security team had come up with a proper solution and they wanted Dawes to

be a part of it.

"What solution do we have?" asked Dawes. The room reeked of pungent death by fire, a sweet pork aroma that no one ever forgot having smelled it once.

"Everyone but America says it's the work of Zionists," said the Libyan delegate.

"I see," Dawes said. "And what does America say?"

"America says it's not the work of Zionists."

"I see," Dawes said.

"And what do you say?"

"I abstain," Dawes said.

And he realized that if he were to solve this and publicly allow, anywhere on this ship, that he had solved this crime, he would be as dead as the charred skeletons around him now. It would not be impossible to solve, just dangerous.

He first had to find out when it was decided to transform this vessel from a tanker to a luxury liner, who had done the refurbishing, and a host of similar dull facts, all of which had been lost in the overwhelming glare of publicity. Sometimes, so much light is shed on a subject that one sees only the light and not the subject. So with the Ship of States, Dawes had heard and read and seen so much publicity about it, it came as a small shock to him to realize that he knew almost nothing about it at all.

Inspector Dawes' abstention that day was called "moral cowardice" by the other security men. Dawes shrugged. He had work to do.

CHAPTER FOUR

Before money, death. That was the deal.

Remo saw Chiun nod, ever so slightly, the whisper of white heard scarcely moving, the long fingernails placidly resting in the cradles of the hand. He was sitting in a kimono made of gold threads and jewels laced into silver settings. Remo had never seen the Master of Sinanju wear such a kimono before, not in an entire decade. He had asked Chiun if he too should wear a kimono. He had never bargained before.

"No," Chinn had said. "You are what you are and that is good."

Chiun had also never called Remo good before. But since Remo had returned to the small motor launch tied up in Virginia Beach, Virginia and admitted that he had been stupid, always stupid, serving a country that would no longer fight for itself, Chiun had been calling him worthwhile, superior, and good until Remo longed for the ridicule of old.

"How dare you call yourself stupid and unworthy?" Chiun had demanded when Remo had first returned. Rage seemed to electrify the normally placid body. "You have been given Sinanju. You, among only a few in centuries, know how to use your body the way it was made. You think. You perform. You are superior."

"Nah, you were right, Little Father," Remo had answered. "You cast diamonds into mud. You gave me Sinanju and what the hell was I? Nothing. I was nothing when you started training me. I was nothing. I don't even know my parents. I was raised in an orphanage. Nothing past. Nothing present. Nothing future. Zero times zero equals zero."

Chiun had smiled, the yellowed parchment face showing a private joy.

"Nothing, you say? Worthless, you say? Do you think a Master of Sinanju would be so foolish as to pour an ocean of wisdom into a broken cup? Do you think I, Chiun, cannot judge worth? Are you calling me a fool? Has your despair cast out your reason? Now, you are saying I made a mistake."

"Don't laugh. Just don't frigging laugh," Remo had said, but Chiun's squeaky voice had risen in chuckling joy.

"I made a mistake. I," said Chinn and this amused him like a tinkling toy before a baby.

"I, making a wrong decision."

"Nah, you didn't make a wrong decision. They paid your village its tribute and you got

paid to teach. Cash and carry. They pay cash, you teach. So you made a right move. The gold has been delivered to Sinanju on time every year and you made a smart move." Chiun moved his head slowly. "No," he said. "I could have shown you how to move your hands and your feet, but I could never have given you Sinanju if you were not worthy of it. You have learned in a mere decade what others from birth take fifty years to master. By the time you are sixty, you will be as full a Master as any. I say this. How dare you deny it?"

"But I've given my life to garbage for more than ten years. This country's falling apart. It's worthless, I think."

"No. It produced you and therefore do not disparage it," CMun had said. "Do you think the people of Sinanju, a tiny, poor village in North Korea, are worthy of the Masters of Sinanju? Of course not. The people are slothful and meat eaters. Nevertheless, from their loins come the jewels of history. Us. And this is so. You are good. Know this if you know nothing else. Good you are. From good, receiving of good, and soon to be giving good. In twenty-five or thirty years, you will be able to teach and never does one have so fully as when he gives to another."

For all his control of his body, down even to how the parts of his blood moved within his blood, Remo clung dangerously to the edge over the precipice of tears. He felt them in his teeth. And he did not cry. He surrendered.

"Yes, good," Remo said. "You know, Chiun, I'm good. Damned good."

"But ungrateful," said Chiun. "Incredibly ungrateful, and abusive to gentle sweet souls." The gentle sweet soul was, of course, Chiun. The abusiveness came somehow by Remo not doing all the shopping and cooking, breathing loudly during reruns of old soap operas, and by his general lack of appreciation of Chiun's poetry, specifically his forty-three-thousand-page eighth-century B.C. Ung "Ode to a Flower Petal Opening Up to the Morning Sun."

"You're right," Remo had said. "I am ungrateful. I don't want to hear your poem anymore. Sounds like a glass pitcher breaking in a tin drum, no matter how much you call it poetry. Right again, Little Father. Ungrateful."

And since Remo had said this with his old joyous viciousness and lack of sensitivity, and since there had been a true smile on Remo's face, Chiun only made the routine disparagements which, of course, now had no effect upon his white pupil.

It was then that Chiun had said the most important lesson he would ever give Remo was about to come. It was bargaining, and Remo must learn now that he was free of working for Dr. Smith.

"I never liked that man," said Chiun. "He is a lunatic. So now you must watch me closely, for the future of Sinanju depends upon this most crucial exercise. For what future does the artist have if he has nothing to eat?"

Chiun had decided that since the House of Sinanju had not worked for the Persians for twelve hundred years, and since Persia was now wealthy through oil and had what Chiun considered the most enlightened and reasonable form of government—an absolute, monarchy headed by the emperor, Shah of Shahs, claimant of the Peacock throne, Shah Reza Pahlavi of Persia, now known as Iran—it was Persia who would get first chance to bid on the services of Remo and Chiun.

"Little Father, the Iranian ambassador is not going to fly down to Virginia Beach just for us. I know who you are, you know who you are, Smitty knows who you are and maybe half a dozen people around the world know what you really are, but you can't get an ambassador to Washington to drop everything just to negotiate a contract for a few hits at a moment's notice."

"First," Chiun had said, "it is not on a moment's notice. Second, I do not beg ambassadors. He is only a vehicle for His Highness. And third, when you see how a real

government is run, you will appreciate so much more how bad all other kinds are."

"He's not coming," Remo had said.

"Tomorrow. I think the noon heat would be good," Chiun had said.

"Never," Remo had said.

Twenty hours later, he was ushering one of the more famous ambassadors to Washington aboard the small boat moored at Virginia Beach. The ambassador's bodyguards belonged to a small elite force who had dedicated their lives to protecting the throne of the Shah and who had honed their deadly skills by juggling heavy weights. Each weighed 225 pounds and each was three inches bigger than Remo.

The ambassador wore a dark pinstriped suit that fit like sculpture and probably cost as much as a museum piece. The bodyguards followed him. He perspired freely in the early summer sun and wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

He looked at Remo's thin frame with the contempt of a man offered stale fruit at a restaurant, a man who was full already.

"Let me say this. Before money, blood," he said to Remo.

"What?" asked Remo.

"You are supposed to be Sinanju, no?"

"You mean the Master of Sinanju," Remo said.

"Correct. I am Mahoud Zarudi, ambassador of His Most Serene Majesty, emperor, Shah of Shahs, ruler of the Peacock throne, Shah Reza Pahlavi. At his instructions, I am here. I do not intend to be here long. There is tonight in New York City a party I must attend to celebrate the launching of the Ship of States, the new home of the United Nations. I will give you your choice now to save your life and not waste my time."

Remo, lounging in white shorts and a striped tee shirt, looked at the dandy in the pinstriped suit and the two hulks behind him with shaved heads that left their skulls with dark stubbles. One had a round scar in the top of his head, as if he had once stood still for someone to bang him over the head with a bat.

"I'm not the Master of Sinanju," Remo said. "He's inside." Remo did not even bother to glance into the small cabin.

"And who are you?" asked the ambassador.

"You don't want to find out, sonny," said Remo, and reluctantly ushered Ambassador Zarudi down into the small cabin where Zarudi announced to Chiun, Master of Sinanju, that before there would be money, there must be blood. Zarudi did not wish to waste time or the emperor's money.

"When one has a national treasure, one is always assaulted by charlatans seeking to rob the people of their natural wealth. His Majesty is under the impression he has been corresponding with the true Master of Sinanju. His Majesty has an open and gracious heart."

Chiun, sitting in the center of the cabin in his dark bejeweled robe, nodded serenely.

"The graciousness of the Shah's heart is well known."

"And likewise is the legend of Sinanju in the East. Very well known among those who sit upon thrones," said Ambassador Zarudi. "And to those who would use this legend to rob the people of their wealth."

Remo shut the door to the cabin behind him.

"If you're talking about the oil under the ground, drilled by Americans with American machinery and made valuable by Americans' need for it, then it's only a treasure because we're willing to pay for it. You people have as much use for it as dust without us. Your treasure? American sweat makes oil valuable. You people just happen to breed over it."

Remo expected to be scolded by Chiun but there was no scolding. He knew he was supposed to keep his mouth shut and listen. He felt bad that he hadn't.

Zarudi ignored Remo as if the remark was beneath answering. The two bodyguards stared

darkly at the slim American. Zarudi continued speaking.

"As I was saying, one must protect one's national treasure. The House of Sinanju is merely a legend. For to believe that there is a House of Sinanju, one must believe that there are men who can climb up and down sheer cliffs as fast as other men can run on level ground. One must believe that there are men who can snap steel with their hands and with reflexes fast enough to catch arrows in flight. That is what one must believe to believe in Sinanju. I do not."

"So whaddya' doin' here?" asked Remo.

"I am here at the direction of my ruler. He wishes to employ a Master of Sinanju and I wish to show that Sinanju is just a fairy tale, like monsters who eat babies, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, and all the other tales that are used to entertain one's children."

Chiun held up a delicate hand. It was a signal to Remo to be quiet although it appeared to the ambassador as if Chiun had understood and agreed with his statement.

"I agree," said Chiun. "That which we have not seen does not exist. You have merely seen people who are not us and, therefore, since we are so different, you cannot believe in us. It is a most wise conclusion."

"We can settle this impasse, Ancient One, if you could give us a small demonstration that you are who you say you are. Are you not a bit old?"

"Yes," said Chiun. "For teething." And Remo laughed hard to show his contempt. One of the bodyguards pressed his hands together to show that he could crush Remo's head like a grape.

Remo smiled.

"I wish no trouble from you two," said the ambassador. "And I wish to warn you that these two men are from the Shah's private guard and are the most feared men in the Middle East."

"Next to your hairdresser," said Remo.

"You must show who you are," said Zarudi. "You must show it against these men. I am sorry but this is so and a requirement."

"How do we know you do not just wish us to assassinate these two men for nothing?" said Chiun. "We do not work for nothing. That would be unprofessional."

"Then I will pay you to assassinate my two bodyguards," said Zarudi. "A thousand dollars each. We will sail out past the three-mile limit into international waters and then you can collect your money or your doom. I do not wish this thing, old man, but I must protect the treasure of my people."

Zarudi felt one of his bodyguards rest his chin on the ambassador's left shoulder from behind. It was a breach of etiquette and yet the bodyguard was smiling. Zarudi stared angrily into the man's black eyes, his countenance demanding an apology. But the man did not stare back. He just smiled. And then Zarudi saw that the thin American's right arm was stretched out to the back of the man's neck. He was holding the bodyguard's head against Zarudi's shoulder. The bodyguard should never have let him do so such a thing.

"Kill him," ordered Zarudi. But the bodyguard only smiled dully at the ambassador's shoulder, the chin touching his cheek. "Kill him," said Zarudi, turning to the right behind him. But the other guard looked back at the ambassador with a sickly grin and tears in his eyes. He held his hands in front of his dark pants, even darker at the crotch where he had wet them.

"Kill him," ordered Zarudi again.

"My lord, look," said the guard, pointing to his partner.

The ambassador, already annoyed at the man's insolence in resting his chin on an ambassadorial shoulder, heard sticky liquid at his left shoe as he shifted his weight. He looked down. The guard's arm was bleeding at Zarudi's shoe. How could his arm be down

there and his chin resting on Zaradi's shoulder?

Zarudi stutter-stepped backward and when he saw the guard's head held aloft in the air, and the headless body on the floor, bleeding like a red sewer from the neck, he screamed. The American had decapitated the guard with his hands and had done so silently. Zarudi remembered the guards' thick neck muscles and the comment from the military that in hand-to-hand combat, the Shah's personal guards liked to have added layers of neck muscles because that was where hand fighters liked to hit.

"That's the biz, sweetheart," said Remo. He dropped the head onto the floor with a clunk and wiped an imaginary stain from his hands. "One must believe what one must, mustn't one?"

And thus it was that the Peacock throne in the last quarter of the twentieth century again welcomed the services of the House of Sinanju with most felicitous heart and optimistic feelings about the cojoining of Throne and loyal House.

"Loyal to the end of the stars. Long life to the Shah. Long life to the Empress. Long life to the Prince, who in many many years shall assume his rightful throne in true glory of his true royalty, the House of Sinanju by his right hand, his sword, his shield and his assurance of ultimate victory in every encounter." So said Chiun.

"This garbage on the floor yours? Clean it up." So said Remo.

The ambassador, in terrified delight, wanted to assure the Master of Sinanju how grateful he was to be able to report to his Shah that the throne and House were now cojoined, but asked if the American had to come along and, if he did, could he at least be a bit more formal in his treatment of the ambassador?

"Hey," said Remo, grabbing \$150 worth of ambassadorial tie and using it as a pedestal for the man's chin. "I am very polite. Very."

Zarudi wondered if Remo might express it a little less vigorously.

And Chiun spoke.

"When there is a flower of great beauty and great value, sometimes there are thorns. The greater the beauty, the sharper the thorns. We are sure His Majesty will be most appreciative of what you endure in his name."

Thus it was agreed that the House of Sinanju would begin work immediately, but not in the capital, Teheran, but as special guards on the great ship Ship of States where there were troubles and where the Iranian delegation might itself be in danger.

The small power craft was taken beyond the three-mile limit, the body and head weighted and dumped with a prayer from Chiun about there being no greater way to lose one's life than in the service of one's emperor. This brought up the subject of the thousand-dollar bonus, not to be taken in paper currency but in gold and jewels, the large emerald ring of the ambassador's right hand being worth approximately a thousand dollars.

Ambassador Zarudi said the ring was worth eighteen thousand dollars.

Chiun explained that that was a retail price, not wholesale, and he did not see why the House of Sinanju should be responsible for the inflated charges of overpaid middlemen.

Ambassador Zarudi said he gave up the ring with a light heart.

"Or a missing finger," said Remo.

On their flight to New York City, Remo told Chiun he had seen pictures of Ship of States. Smith had wanted him to learn something about it for CURE. He said he did not know how he would feel if he had to kill Americans in the line of Persian duty. He didn't know if he could do it.

"Do not worry," said Chiun. "We are working for fools."

"But you said there was nothing better than working for Persian royalty."

Chiun had a sudden lapse of memory. But he pointed out that when they reached the Emperor, Remo must show more formality.

"You think I'm maybe not polite?" asked Remo.

"No," said Chiun. "You are most polite. I ask that you be a bit more traditional."

"No. I think you're right. I'm not polite."

"You can learn to be polite. You can learn the ultimate in gracious manners by merely following me."

"I'd rather be me."

"A noble goal and a worthwhile one," said Chiun.

"You're only saying that because I'm down. I think I liked it better before when you were abusive."

"So did I," said Chiun. "But I was not abusive. The toad always thinks the flower offends his ugly body. As for your goal to just be yourself, the rocks that line the road have achieved that. Your contentment with yourself is an overwhelming triumph of bad taste over perception. And as for going to the Shah's court in Teheran, I must now haul mud to the Peacock throne and attempt to disguise it as jewels. It has been very wearing on me, trying to lift your spirits. I am tired of being nice."

A stewardess returned from the front of the plane with two messages. One, the ambassador wished to see Remo and Chiun up front immediately. Two, the stewardess would settle for Remo later. She gave a wet-lipped smile.

"Tell him if he wants us, he can come back here," Remo said.

"Tell him," said Chiun, "we work industriously in his behalf."

"Well, which is it?" asked the stewardess.

"They are both the same," said Chiun.

Soon, the second and still-living bodyguard came respectfully from the front of the plane with two large envelopes. He said Ambassador Zarudi wanted his assassins to read the newspaper articles, so they would know the dangers of the United Nations ship. Remo told Chiun he had been at some sort of briefing about the ship and the security men from many nations feared it might become the target for terrorists, possibly holding the entire ship for ransom on its maiden voyage.

Chiun took half the clippings and Remo took the other half. Chiun read "Mary Worth" and Remo read "Peanuts." The other sides of the clippings were marked with red crayons. The headlines told of a new terrorist group—the Scythian Liberation Front.

Chiun asked to exchange clippings. He read "Peanuts" and Remo read "Mary Worth." Chiun did not like animals that talked. Momentarily, the ambassador himself returned.

What, he asked, did the Master of Sinanju think of the dangers of the Scyths? What, in the great history of the House of Sinanju, did the world's greatest assassins learn about the Scyths? Zarudi pointed out that the once-feared Scyths no longer existed as a people. At least that was what everyone thought, but they had thought the same thing about the House of Sinanju. Perhaps the Scyths still existed too.

Chiun allowed as how the use of the name was quite significant. He pointed out that the Scyths were ancient enemies of the Medes, the ambassador's forebears who came even before the Persians. Excited, Zarudi said, yes, this was true. And Chiun said that the very use of the name posed special dangers to the Peacock throne. But, along with the dangers, there was also a great advantage, because those who used the name Scyth did not know that the House of Sinanju now dominated the night in the name of Persia, waiting to deal death to the ambassador's enemies.

"You are going to attack?" asked Zarudi.

"No," said Remo. "We are going to use their strength as their weakness. The weaker you appear, the more fatal for the Scyths."

Chiun nodded with approval.

"Hail the House of Sinanju," said the ambassador.

Churn wanted even more information about the Scyths, preferably with "Mary Worth" on the back.

"A time of great danger and great opportunity," Chiun told the ambassador, winking at Remo. He carefully examined Remo's newspaper clippings. There were no more "Mary Worths."

CHAPTER FIVE

It was a grand launching.

The great United Nations ship moved out into New York Harbor bearing enough lights to power Iowa for a month.

There were enough newsmen from around the globe to staff The New York Times, the London Times and Pravda combined, although they all covered the launching from the dock, the United Nations having decided that the press of the world was scandal happy and not to be trusted. Henceforth all news of United Nations activities would come from a UN press officer, a fourteen-thousand-dollar-a-year African with a degree in Cultural Anthropological Artifacts, otherwise known as basket weaving.

The holds of the big ship carried enough food and luxury liquors to supply the great armies of Genghis Khan for two years in the field. The awesome atomic engines, deep in their sealed and cooled water beds, moved the great propeller screws with 120 times the power of the atomic weapon dropped on Hiroshima in World War II.

Ship of States moved like an immaculate white peninsula, slowly drifting from land out into the great Atlantic Ocean. Men were dots on this behemoth. It would take delegates a full year to explore the entire ship with its ballrooms, meeting rooms, consulates, tennis courts, and gymnasium/stadium with an Astro-turf floor and seating for five thousand. At full speed the great ship took a minimum of 12.27 miles to stop.

There was no feel of motion but passengers were told that sudden earthquakelike rumblings in the stem would really be the shock waves of the bow crushing waves before the boat. The UN ship did not cut through waves, but crushed them. A demonstration for delegates had likened it to a broom handle pushed down into a tall narrow tumbler. The water splashed up around the broom handle.

Ambassador Zarudi himself explained what he knew of this great ship as porters carried Chiun's fourteen lacquered trunks into the Iranian consul section. Zarudi asked what the Master of Sinanju thought of this marvel of the twentieth century.

"Drafty," said Chiun. The ambassador himself showed Chiun how to adjust the temperature control, which also provided the exact humidity desired.

"Stuffy," said Chiun.

Zarudi adjusted the panel again,

"Moist," said Chiun.

The ambassador went back to the panel.

"Dry," said Chiun.

Zarudi offered to let Chiun adjust the temperature and moisture to his own tastes.

"No," said Chiun. "Hardship for the glory and honor of the Peacock throne is not hardship but joy." Remo knew this was nonsense because the human body itself was the greatest furnace and the greatest air conditioner if one could use it right, and Chiun could. However, he said nothing because Chiun had explained that in working for an Emperor, the only person necessary to please was the Emperor himself. He had warned Remo about becoming too friendly with Ambassador Zarudi, which Remo had said was highly unlikely.

"Be polite but not friendly," Chrun warned.

Zarudi asked Chiun to examine the consulate for safety to see where any terrorist group might find a flaw in the protective devices.

He talked of electronic eyes and guards posted here and guards posted there and how a person could not unlock certain doors without certain codes.

"Did you build this?" asked Chiun after serenely gliding through staterooms, reception rooms, clerks' rooms, communications rooms, meeting rooms and bedrooms.

"No," said Zarudi. "This was built by the great shipping magnate, Demosthenes Skouratis. It is the greatest ship ever to float."

"And this Skouratis is loyal to the Emperor?"

"He did not build it for the Emperor but for the world."

"If someone sewed a suit for someone else, would you wear it, Persian?" asked Chiun.

"No. Of course not," said Zarudi who was known as one of the better-dressed men in the diplomatic corps.

"If you would not trust your appearance to something made for someone else, why then do you trust your life? You will tell His Excellency that the Master of Sinanju declares this consulate unsafe because it was not built by Persian hands. This I give as a gift. We are not bodyguards, but we know how they should think and work. You talked of flames in rooms and people disappearing who have cut off heads. This is not surprising, none of it. You should be grateful that these things happened early, sealing the greatest exposure in your armor-your false sense of security. For the greatest danger to any man is his illusion of safety."

"What should we do?" asked Zarudi.

"Build your own fortress."

"But we are part of a greater ship. We can't build our own ship."

"Then learn how to die in such a manner as not to bring shame to your emperor."

Zarudi's glacial composure shattered like an ice cube under a mallet. What had the Master of Sinanju been hired for? If Zarudi were killed, it would show weakness in the Peacock throne. How could a Master of Sinanju tell his employer to die well? Chiun was not hired, Zarudi said, to stand around and watch favorites of the Emperor die.

"The great sword does not make the world safe for fleas," said Chiun, and turned away from Zarudi. Remo shrugged. He didn't like this business. He didn't like Zarudi. He didn't like the ship. He didn't like the perfumed smell of the diplomats and he didn't like having servants around. He felt uncomfortable with them.

There were gifts from the Shah in their rooms: silver tea services, a jeweled cup, a large French-made television set inlaid with the symbols of the House of Sinanju in gold and silver, porcelain boxes, silk mats for sleeping, the choicest fruits and fowls and a young dark-eyed girl in a very stiff European suit. She had been educated in Paris and was their clerk-typist.

"We don't use that sort of stuff. Thanks anyhow," said Remo.

"I have much correspondence," said Chiun. "She will be used."

"Who do you write to?"

"Many people write to me," said Chiun, and it was time for silence because he was about to use the television set from the Shah for the first time.

"An emperor," said Chiun, "knows how to treat an assassin. In America, Smith was so ashamed he bade us work in secret. What disgrace. See now, Remo, the way that civilized people respect the House of Sinanju?"

Going up on deck was like taking a subway through New York City. You knew you would eventually get where you were going but you weren't sure how. Security men with badges from different nations crowded the elevators to the decks. The men in the elevator with Remo sported an assortment of rifles, submachine guns and pistols that could fill a small armory.

"I see you're Iranian security," said a thin man with a very cumbersome pistol that looked like a shotgun with a grip. Remo couldn't place his accent.

"Yeah," said Remo. He wore the Iranian badge with his identification picture on a black tee shirt. He wore his usual loafers and gray slacks.

"You don't carry a weapon?" the man asked.

"Right," said Remo.

"A bit dangerous, no?"

"What?" asked Remo.

"Not carrying a weapon."

"No," said Remo.

"You don't sound Iranian."

"I studied language arts in Newark, New Jersey."

"You don't look Iranian," the man said.

"That helped in Newark."

"I know a faster way to the deck. Want to take it?"

"All right," said Remo. The man was quite interested in the Iranian consulate's new security system.

"You're supposed to have something nobody else has."

"Really?" said Remo.

"Yes. Ambassador Zarudi was boasting about it. Everyone is talking about the new Iranian security system. They say it's the best in the world."

"You don't say," said Remo. The elevator door opened to a corridor that looked decorated in nineteenth-century-American galvanized pipe. The other corridors Remo had seen were done with tapestries and rugs and lush indirect lighting, glistening off polished teak and mahogany. Even the floor here was bare rubber.

It absorbed the other man's footsteps so that he walked soundlessly. Remo had not made a sound when walking for the last ten years. He could run through a corridor of Rice Krispies softer than a Kleenex dropping on a pillow. It was the way you moved, not the speed. But this ugly gray floor seemed designed to smother the clumsy clomp and press of the average walk.

Pink and blue and black strips ran along the gray walls. It was obviously a repair corridor of some sort but there was no plumbing here. The strips Remo recognized as one of the newer forms of wiring. Yet why was the wiring exposed and not the plumbing? Remo's conclusion about these contradictory facts was that he did not care all that much.

"I don't see the deck," Remo said.

"We're coming to it."

"When?" said Remo.

"Soon," said the man. "Don't raise your voice."

"Suffocate," said Remo loudly and began to sing.

"I asked you once nicely," said the man. The heavy-barreled pistol came out of the holster.

"You didn't fall down on your knees when you asked. Where's the deck?"

"You will keep quiet," said the man.

"And if I don't you're going to shoot that thing? That's stupid."

"This has a silencer," said the man. "It's not really a shotgun, you know."

"No kidding," said Remo, snapping it out of the man's hands so quickly that the man was pulling his trigger finger through the air where the trigger had once been. Remo held the pistol in his palm and tried to tell where the silencer was. He used to know guns fairly well but he thought this must be a new model. He flipped the pistol back to the thin man and as the man's arms went up to catch it. Remo snapped a forefinger into the man's belly button. The floor absorbed the sound of falling bodies also. The man moaned softly.

Remo walked the strange corridors looking for an exit. He passed a room that had one full wall filled with television sets, all on, receiving pictures of what was going on

in the conference halls, staterooms and even the bedrooms.

A handful of men were clustered around a set labeled "Swedish Embassy." Remo peeked over a shoulder to see what was going on. A man and a girl were fornicating in a bed. He used to like those things but when a person became one with his body, everything else became natural. It was no more interesting than watching a flower grow. On another television set, red lights blinked and everyone turned to it. Remo saw the man he had knocked out being helped up.

"He's faster than we thought," came the man's voice over the television screen.. "I didn't even see his hands."

"Didn't you get off a shot?" asked one of the men helping him up.

"I didn't see his hands. My gun was in his hands before I could pull the trigger. It's incredible. You don't see the hands."

"Number One won't like this."

"Fuck Number One. You don't see the hands."

Remo watched the man regain his breath and take a tentative step. The whole ship apparently was monitored. He left that room just as someone demanded to know who was responsible for the breach of security. "You've got to stop watching the bedrooms. This will not be tolerated," the man said. His accent was German.

"It wasn't my shift," said someone else. The accent was French.

"The area has been violated. Full alert."

Remo expected to hear sirens or gongs but only lights flashed. The groups seemed well organized because they rushed in silence and everyone knew where to go. It was this movement, this rapid taking of stations without a multitude of dramatic orders that for the first time made Remo suspicious.

He did not know about lights or concealed corridors or flooring that let clumsy people walk in silence. But he did know about how people moved, singly and together. These people had been training for more than a year. The ship had only just been launched and the group of security experts he had met in Washington would have been shooting each other by now. It wasn't any one big thing that told Remo this, just small things: the way people didn't bump going through doorways; the way they knew someone was coming past them without looking. It was simply normally clumsy people being unclumsy in a group. All their guns had silencers. Some carried long-bladed knives.

And there was something else Remo noticed. These people had been trained in separate groups and brought together on this ship just recently. No one recognized that Remo did not belong there, undoubtedly the result of two things: many faces were strange to each of them and their feelings of absolute security within the corridors negated any fear. He would be discovered soon, he knew, because he would be the only person in this warren who did not have a place.

Remo imitated the clumsy run of the others, plopping his feet down until he heard, "That's him," and on those words, he unleashed. Low and smooth, legs appearing slow but only as the vehicle upon which the body force moved. Bullets coming out of silencer barrels made clumping noises against the walls. Remo went into a threesome like a bullet through butter. He left one without a thorax. He snap-turned into a large room. A man sat with his back to Remo at a computer console that covered an entire wall. No exit. They were setting up two rifles at the entrance when Remo came out through it. Going back to the elevator was out because he would never find it; in the twists and turns all the corridors looked alike.

He needed some help finding an exit. He closed on a young man with a fresh face and a long-bladed knife that he swung like a slow baseball bat. He rolled the young man onto the floor and his forefinger worked against the nerve routes leading to the skull.

"How do I get out of here?"

"No hablo inglÈs" said the young man.

Remo pressed harder.

"No hablo inglÈs!"

"Shit," said Remo and threw the man down the corridor. He ducked into a small room, empty except for a mop standing in a plastic bucket.

Behind the bucket was a panel, again of dull gray metal, soundproofed by soft rubber molding. Remo brushed his hands along the panel. It moved by pressing and forcing sideways. It moved almost silently. He swelled the fresh oil. All the moving parts apparently floated in grease.

The panel opened to a closet and over the sharp odors of detergents, Remo smelled the faint saline aroma of old blood. He was in a cleaning storage area. He slid the panel closed behind him.

Outside, on the other end of the closet, he heard footsteps, clear and loud. He heard voices like people spitting.

He walked through the closet and opened the door and stepped out onto plush carpeting where the hallways were wide and exotic tapestries covered the walls and soft lights played up and down the ceilings. This was the ship he recognized.

He moved through crisscrossing corridors and then he was in familiar territory outside the Iranian Embassy. It was somewhat lucky since he would have had to spend at least two hours looking for the embassy if he hadn't bumped into it. There were guides and officers every few hundred yards, of course, but they were still learning their jobs. Remo's pass was good for entrance and the bodyguard bowed as he allowed Remo in. The embassy rooms themselves were like a large floor of an apartment building and Remo quietly entered his room where Chiun was dictating to the young thing supplied by the Iranian government.

Chiun was dictating in Persian. Every once in a while the girl would laugh and look at Remo.

"What'd you say, Little Father?" Remo asked, after one such demonstration,

"It is a Persian joke. It cannot be translated into English," said Chiun. He was in a light pink evening kimono with strands of simple gold woven throughout.

"Try me," said Remo.

"It loses its flavor in English," Chiun said. "Let's see."

"He walks like he walks because he walks," said Chiun. The parchment face beamed joy. The girl giggled.

"Yeah?"

"That is the joke," Chiun said.

"What?"

"He walks like he walks because he walks," said Chiun.

"That's not funny."

"In Persian, it is most witty," Chiun said.

"Yeah, well, I have news for you. We're on television."

"Really?" said Chiun. His seated posture assumed a slightly more heroic tilt.

"Yeah. This isn't one ship, it's two. There's the ship everybody knows about, and then there's another one that's like built inside it."

"Network television?" asked Chiun.

"No. There's an internal circuit. There are people here watching every one of us. They can get in and out through closets and probably through the walls too. I guess that's how they killed all those Lebanese in their consulate. They're listening to us now."

"I don't televise well," said Chiun, who had once been shown through a studio and when he saw tapes of himself realized Western technology had a long way to go. It could reproduce recognizable images but not the grace and grandeur and benign magnificence of

truly wondrous peoples. That Caucasians would still have to work on.

"The whole ship's a death trap, Little Father."

"In that respect, it is like the rest of the world," said Chiun. "We stay." And he waved to a small fixture on the ceiling that Remo recognized to be at the same angle that the TV sets were down below. The fixture was broken off. Chiun had known all along and had put the camera out of commission.

In Skaggerac, Norway where the giant ship had been built, Inspector Dawes, loaned to MI5 from Scotland Yard, laid out through precise analytical deduction the same principles Remo had discovered on board the United Nations ship.

He had isolated one contractor who had purchased "X" amount of materials to do "Y" and had "Z" amount left over.

"Sir," said Inspector Dawes, "the answer to this mystery is Z. I call it the Z component. Z represents materials that were left over because you didn't use them to build what you were supposed to build. Instead you built something else, a hidden network inside that ship, and you are therefore an accomplice in murder. Don't deny it." And Dawes laid out the subcontractor's travels, precise times isolating months of consultation in Greece.

"But sir," said Dawes, "you were not consulting with Demosthenes Skouratis, the builder of the ship. You were consulting someone else. Someone who would stop at nothing. Someone to whom the slaughter of helpless people means nothing. Someone willing to invest millions of dollars and many years to bring about his own ends."

The builder listened stone faced. He sat in his living room of rough-hewn lumber and matched stone floors. A large bay window overlooked the clear silver fiord below. The builder had white-blond hair and a face as impassive as a frozen pond. He sipped a sweet green liqueur.

Inspector Dawes stoked his Meerschaum. His ample belly pressed out the tweed vest so tight that returning his pipe tamper to its pocket required a snug push.

"And, sir, that is what stumps me," said Dawes. "I know there are two ships floating out of New York Harbor. I know this has been in the works for years. I know this takes a knowledge of shipbuilding and an awful lot of money. I also know this trap started in the conversion of the giant hull from a supertanker to a luxury liner. I also know that the Scythas were ancient horsemen and don't exist anymore. What I don't know, and this is what stumps me, sir, is who in the bloody blue blazes would bother?"

The builder finished his drink.

"You say a lot of people have been killed?" he asked.

"So far, many. I might add that just following orders to make a special structure is not a criminal offense. You have done nothing criminal."

The builder poured himself a full glass of the green liqueur. He drank it down and licked his lips clean.

"Nothing criminal?" asked the builder.

"Nothing," said Inspector Dawes.

"You have a logical mind, no?"

"I like to think so," Dawes said.

"If all these people have been killed, as you say, why would I be any different? And by that, I mean, why would someone stop at killing me? If I have done nothing criminal, then I don't have to talk to you."

"It could become very criminal," said Dawes. "I'm sure your country of Norway has maritime and business laws that punish people who say they build one thing and then build another, yes?"

"Yes."

"I saw a room with charred and smoking bodies; burned to the bone, some were. I know a man like you would never want to build something that might be responsible for that, would you?"

The Norwegian finished his drink and then poured another.

"Would you?" Dawes asked again.

he Norwegian builder drank half the sweet warm minty liqueur.

"I said, would you?"

"Sure," said the builder.

"Sure what?" asked Dawes, harumphing his throat clear.

"Do something like that. I'd do that," said the builder, and he drove a fist into the ample tweed-vested belly of the inspector from Scotland Yard and watched the mound of pink flab collapse on the stone floor, retching. He went outside to a small tool shed he had built one summer and got a 1.2-meter beam of raw oak, smoothed a handle with a medium-grade wood file, took off any burrs with 020 production, sandpaper, decided against unwieldy flanges and returned to his living room overlooking the fiord where Inspector Dawes was attempting to recover from the hard body blow.

Inspector Dawes had one hand on an arm of a wooden chair. He groaned.

"You broke a rib," he gasped.

"Sure," said the builder, and beat in his head with the 1.2-meter beam, which worked infinitely better than one with flanges. The problem today, thought the builder, was that the world was flange happy. He weighted the body with lead stripping, careful to securely wrap Dawes and the lead weighting with three-centimeter nylon ribbon and dropped the body to the bottom of the very blue fiord.

Then he cleaned up his stone floor with an industrial-grade cleanser and warm water and hammered the 1.2-meter oak beam into the ceiling of the new attic room he was building. In the ceiling, he wondered if the beam did not indeed need flanges.

He drove into Oslo in his green Mercedes sports car and sent a telegram to a small shipbuilding firm in Saint Mary's Axe, London.

He had always wondered why Number One had wanted such an expensive network. Then, when he found out that the great ship would house the United Nations, he assumed that Number One represented some government spy apparatus.

But when the killings started and when everyone on television and in the papers said it was the work of a liberation front for a people who had not existed for hundreds of years, he too began to wonder what it was all about. There was too much money involved, however, to wonder too hard.

Also he did not have long to ponder the question. On the way back to his home, a car pulled him over to the side of the road. He assumed it was a police car and automatically offered out his license through the window. It came back very quickly into his face, driven by a .45-caliber slog that enmeshed the paper fibers into his brain on its way out the back of his skull along with a nice piece of his occipital lobe.

CHAPTER SIX

Demosthenes Skouratis did not wish to see reporters. He did not wish to dine with the Prince of Monaco nor the designer, Saint Laurent. Nor did he wish to allow the tables at any number of gaming resorts to enjoy his presence. He did not answer any cablegrams from the beautiful women of his life. He did only what business was necessary to keep his empire from dissolving in its own fiscal complexity.

Otherwise, he kept his yacht, Tina, on the high seas and avoided port. He ate only what his personal physician said was the minimum to sustain life. He slept in twenty-minute gaps during the day. At night, he paced the teakwood decks. He did not converse with the

captain about the seas as he normally did when he could not sleep. Every so often he would scream out at the black Atlantic. He walked until he was tired enough for a blessed twenty minutes of sleep and then he would return to the decks again. During the day, he spat at the sun.

It was a trained crew and part of their special training was to not think about what the great Demosthenes Skouratis did. Nor did they discuss it. One who worked for Mr. Skouratis did not idly talk about Mr. Skouratis, even though everyone knew he was going, day by salty day, as mad as a bee in a bottle.

Fifty miles outside of Morocco, in the Mediterranean, the yacht Tina picked up a passenger from the yacht Corning. The passenger wore a dark suit and white shirt with muted tie. He was bald, thin, and wore rimless spectacles. He was moderately seasick, his stomach kept settled only by his Swiss willpower. He was a banker. He was one of Mr. Skouratis' primary bankers.

The crew did not know it but Demosthenes Skouratis owned the bank, whose main purpose was to make him the cheapest loans possible with other peoples' money.

Skouratis met his banker in a stateroom. The Greek wore a towel around his gross hairy midsection. He had not shaved for three days and his face looked like furry tar paper with dark grape lips set in to the center to spew curses with.

The banker did not have to disguise his dismay at the sight of Skouratis drowning in despair before his eyes, because the banker did not feel dismay. It was not really a very Swiss emotion. It was the sort of thing one lived very well without. Arabs, Jews and Greeks lived with those emotions and it certainly hadn't done them any good, the banker thought. The Italians never settled down long enough for really good depression and the Swedes committed suicide, almost as a relief from boredom. The banker never understood why the world was not like Switzerland, but he also did not care very much. It was enough that Switzerland was Swiss.

First, he wished to convey the congratulations of the bank's board of directors to Mr. Skouratis. Mr. Skouratis had taken a financial disaster and, by his genius, had transformed it into a profit of 28.3 percent, devaluation of the dollar figured in.

For a minimum of gifts to Third World delegations, Skouratis had foisted the great hull on the United Nations. By his genius, he had devised the argument used—that America was too racist to house the United Nations—and had brilliantly maneuvered home the votes. Now, as its share of the ship cost, the United States was paying hundreds of millions to have itself castigated before the world as racist, which was fine because that money was now in Mr. Skouratis' hands. The last transfer of funds had been consummated and that was what he had come to report. Felicitations from the board of directors.

"You will always be comfortable," said Skouratis, "but you will never be really rich."

"Mr. Skouratis?" said the banker.

"You will never be very rich because you will never be very poor."

"Sir?"

"What I am saying, you dried-out cadaver," yelled Skouratis, "is that you know numbers. You do not know people. I know numbers and people. You do not know me, but I know you." Skouratis hoisted his runted bulk from the silk pillow he sat on and crushed Maalox cubes into water until the substance became milky white. He swallowed the full glass of it.

"I know numbers as good as you, banker. Do you think I kept that massive hull afloat at seventy-two thousand dollars a week for a profit? It was the stupidest business venture north of Tangiers. Did you know I thought it was stupid? Did you know that I was aware it would make more sense to scrap the ship?"

"We had made reports to you that it was economically unfeasible," said the banker. He did not sweat on this hot Mediterranean day. Skouratis glistened like a sausage. He put

down the empty glass of his stomach medicine that brought the cooling of his belly fires for a few minutes.

"The great ship-and if you really knew me, you would know this-was not a business venture."

"But we did make a profit," said the banker.

"Profit, profit. Of course we made a profit. We could have made a greater profit in other ventures. Why did I choose to build the biggest ship in the world in the first place? Did you ask yourself that?"

"Because you are a shipping man."

"I am also a metals man, a stocks man, a land man, a money man, I built that ship to be the biggest. To be the most important. I built it for pride. After the first hundred million dollars, banker, money is all ego. The interest alone on one hundred million, in a modest investment, is two hundred thousand a week. Do you not think I could live lavishly on that? Do you not think my needs are taken care of with that? Ego. Pride. Hubris, if you will. I built that ship because it was the biggest, flot the most intelligent."

Skouratis waited, looking at the banker. This was the Swiss mind at work. He gave an explanation; it fit; why look further? But further was at the bottom of everything.

"You might want to ask why I wanted the biggest ship. And I might tell you there is one man I want to be bigger than."

"Yourself?" asked the banker in a wild venture into philosophy.

"Don't be an ass. That's for athletic teams and other muscle-bound idiots. I wanted to be bigger than Aristotle Thebos."

"Ah, yes. You are friendly competitors."

"Friendly, ha ha ha."

"But you never raid each other financially. So I assumed you were friendly."

"Does the wolf pick fights with the bear? No. The wolf attacks the deer and the bear attacks the salmon. That is why we do not raid each other financially. We are too dangerous for each other. We fight spiritually. And I have lost."

The banker had been aware of the party Thebos had thrown at Skaggerac when the Skouratis ship had first appeared to be a giant white elephant. He had wondered then why Thebos had done it.

He had been aware that when Thebos married a movie star, Skouratis wedded an opera star, and then Thebos married and divorced the widowed wife of an American president.

He became very aware of that when he had been directed to put up two hundred thousand dollars to shoot a picture that sold for two thousand, which at the time he did not understand. The two hundred thousand dollars went to buy an old World War II submarine and to refit it, and there were special Japanese lenses on a special German camera body. There was eighteen thousand dollars for the photographer and there were many payoffs to many people just to get this submarine and special camera close to Thebos island in the Aegean. There the photographer shot nude pictures of Thebos' wife and later sold them to a pornographic magazine in America for two thousand dollars. Net loss: one hundred and ninety-eight thousand dollars. It seemed like an absurd investment, but being the sort of banker he was, he did not question a man of Skouratis' genius.

The banker was also aware of a transfer of funds shortly after Demosthenes' daughter Tina, after whom the yacht was named, started seeing a famous gigolo. The gigolo was introduced to Tina at a Thebos party. The gigolo was found in a Paris gutter one spring morning after several fund transfers. That is, most of the gigolo. He had been sexually mutilated and the rest of him was served on a silver platter to Aristotle Thebos at a restaurant in Lucerne the next night.

The restaurant owner, of course, knew nothing of how the obscenity occurred. The next

day, the banker transferred a gross amount of funds to the restaurant. After that, Aristotle Thebos married Tina Skouratis himself, although she was twenty and he was fifty-seven. She committed suicide within a year. By saying that Thebos' and Skouratis' relationship was one of friendly cooperation, the Swiss banker had meant: based on things that did not hurt vital interests. By vital interests he meant profits. Therefore the competition between the two men could be called friendly.

"I built the great ship against Mr. Thebos, because I wanted a symbol floating in every port saying I was the greatest, and by greatest, I mean better than that pretty silver-haired vomit upon the earth, Aristotle Thebos. When I failed, he reminded the world of my failure with a party. Then I could not scrap that giant financial drain. I could not because I would not."

"But you salvaged everything with the sale to the United Nations."

"Correct. Until it became a death ship. He is going to turn it into a useless hull, sitting somewhere unused by man, a monument against me, just as I had it built against him. Just as I used Sir Ramsey Frawl, who was Thebes' lover."

"I didn't know Sir Ramsey was a homosexual."

"He was British nobility. He would mount a mongoose if it stayed still."

The banker did not mention that he thought similar things about Greeks. And Swedes. And about just about everyone else but the Swiss. And he was not altogether sure of his Uncle William. He certainly hoped Mr. Skouratis kept the towel around him tightly wrapped.

"Sir, how do you know Mr. Thebos is behind the killings?"

"One, the killings began after I made my profit. Two, the killings required skill and coordination and a knowledge of ships and a great investment of money. Three, it serves absolutely no purpose but to make the ship unusable. There is no such place as Scythia anymore. The Scythian Liberation Front is to liberate no one. It is an excuse. It is that person's way of saying to me, 'ha ha ha.'"

"Is it possible that it's just some madman?"

"No. It has taken years and millions to transform my beautiful monument to me into an ugly beast of death. Madmen are not that well organized. But if there is any doubt in your mind, guess who is sponsoring a lavish party? Tonight and tomorrow night. Two nights of parties for the delegates aboard the ship. And guess who the party is a tribute to?"

"You, Mr. Skouratis."

"As of now," said Skouratis softly, "I am defeated. I am becoming the new Howard Hughes. I know why he became a recluse. It started with pride. Then pride is injured over one incident and you avoid one party or one public exposure in order that that incident not be brought up to you and from there it becomes a habit. You slide into your own grave alone, down a chute greased by your own money. If I were a workingman I would have to face the morning and the ridicule and would adjust to it in some fashion. But when you can live alone on a yacht and avoid that first sling of ridicule, you tend to do it one day at a time until there are no more days and no more time."

"Why are you telling me these things, Mr. Skouratis?"

"Because we are going to war and I want you to know the mind of your commander in chief. I might as well go to war. I am a dead man anyway. There is much you have to do."

The banker took notes of instruction for two hours. At the end of it, Demosthenes Skouratis smiled like a toad digesting a plump fly. And it was the banker who reached for the Maalox to ease the burning fires in his stomach.

They were right. You didn't feel the waves up front because the Ship of States didn't ride the waves. It crushed them.

Remo strolled Deck 18, which was very much like riding the Empire State Building out to sea. You saw the sea way down below you, moving way down there, and you knew it only because you had been told it. Otherwise you would sense you were very high up in a place with good air, heavy with the rich salt of the planet's early time, America back behind you, Africa somewhere ahead of you, because you were still. It was as quiet as a goblet on a table in an empty monastery. The forty-fifth person that day came up to Remo to tell him how fast they were really moving, amazed at modern technology.

There was to be a grand party late that night in the world stadium, thrown by Aristotle Thebos in tribute to his countryman, Demosthenes Skouratis. Steaming along a half mile from the Ship of States Remo could see the Thebos yacht, Ulysses.

UN Security Command had issued a statement on the teletypewriter in every consulate security office that the ship was now safe. Chiun had instructed Remo that there was no need to inform others of a secret that now belonged to the House of Sinanju. This meant that the Iranian government also should not know of the ship within a ship. There was a proper time for everything and this was not the time.

"Hi, there. You look lonesome," said a young woman. She was a dark woman with a healthy glow over regular features, someone more attuned to the scrub brush than the cosmetic pad. Face and body gave out a glow of health.

Remo looked back toward where America was. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"My name is Helena. I saw you board with the Oriental."

"How? There were so many people boarding through so many entrances, how'd you spot me?"

"I used binoculars. I thought those trunks were interesting. Korean, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Remo.

"They're very interesting. They look as if they cover many dynasties and many periods."

"You're an expert on Korea?"

"Yes. And many things."

"Where do you teach?"

"I don't. Father wouldn't let me. I've never been to a school. But I read a lot and when I see the name of a professor on a book I like, I get him."

"Get it," Remo corrected.

"Him," the woman said. "The professor. But Daddy makes me keep it quiet. He says no man likes a woman who thinks. What do you think?"

Remo looked at the young woman questioningly. He raised an eyebrow, then shrugged and looked back down at the Atlantic way below. The sun was going down pink over America. Darkness lay ahead.

"What do you think about women who think?" Helena asked.

"I don't dwell on those things."

"What do you dwell on?"

"What do you care?"

"I care. I ask."

"I dwell on being what I should be to the fullest. Happy now?" said Remo.

"It sounds philosophical."

"Nah, it's as simple as breathing."

"You're a beautiful person, I think," said Helena.

"And you're a windy twerp. What are you, a reporter or something who sneaked aboard?"

"No. Just a human being. That's what I work at."

"You make it sound like an accomplishment instead of an accident," said Remo. He knew he had never planned on becoming a human being before he was born and neither had anyone else.

"Sometimes it's very hard just to be human, don't you think?" asked Helena. The way she asked it, and with the red from the dying sun warming her face and her fresh even smile, she became almost beautiful in the ocean evening.

"Not if you've ever tried to be an aardvark. It's really hard being an aardvark. If everyone would just try to be an aardvark, they'd see how easy it is to be human." Remo left the deck, the Atlantic having been spoiled for him by Helena's mouth. She followed him into the off-white carpeted hallway, and down an elevator and onto the South American deck.

"Did I say something that offended you?" she asked.

"I don't remember asking you to come along," said Remo.

"I think you're crying out for help. I think deep down you are a very decent person. I sense these things," Helena said.

Remo tried to read a directional sign, encased in clear lucite. Behind him a wall quietly opened a crack.

"I think you're afraid of loving," Helena said.

"Where's the Middle East deck? I got lost in this junk heap."

He saw the reflection of the wall in the lucite. Helena was in the midst of telling Remo what a truly kind and gentle soul he was when she saw him flip backward on his feet. He was reading the map on the wall and then he was going backward as though a train had run into him. And more surprisingly the wall he went toward was opened as if it were a passage. There were men inside. They had knives. They were beginning a rush out into the corridor when the gentle American with the lost soul tore into them like an iron blade through wet grass. He was quiet as he moved and Helena heard grunts and the soft snap of breaking bone muffled by torn muscle. She thought she recognized some of the men, but she could not be sure because they were moving around her, like loose electrons. The American seemed to move so slowly and the others so quickly, yet it was his blows that struck the men with knives, and their knives that lunged at air and slashed at places where the American was not.

Helena had seen karate exhibitions before but she had never seen anything quite so pure as what this man practiced.

Then one of the men looked at her and his eyes widened. He growled a few guttural words and the men slid back behind the wall, dragging their wounded. The door slid shut behind them, leaving two in the final sweet stillness of the ultimate anesthetic.

Why hadn't they used guns? Remo thought.

"Was that an exhibition?" asked Helena. "It was beautiful."

Remo looked around. Was what an exhibition? Where was there an exhibition?

"You're a beautiful person. What's your name?" Helena asked.

Remo cocked an eyebrow.

"You can trust me. Don't be afraid. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

"Girlie, that's the dumbest thing I have ever heard from a human mouth. Dumb, girlie."

Remo calculated that if he headed straight down the corridor, he would come to one of the staircases. Everyone used the elevators, but he did not feel comfortable in them. Besides, walking twenty or thirty flights was nothing. He tried to remember how he had gotten to the outside deck, but he had wandered so aimlessly that he could not recall. His main attention had been on the walls and closets.

He wished, for once, that he had a mission on this ship. If someone had told him to clean up and get rid of the gangs hiding in the ship, he would do it. If someone had told him to get rid of all the delegates who did not speak good English, he would do it. If someone told him to get rid of Helena for the good of mankind, he would do it. But all he had been told, by Chinn, was that he should not be late getting back to the Iranian consulate so that he could escort Ambassador Zarudi to the grand party to be

held that evening in the central-decks stadium to honor the builder of the ship, Demosthenes Skouratis.

Remo found a staircase. Helena asked why her statement about fear was dumb.

"Because fear, like breathing, is necessary. Fear is a good thing. It's what keeps people alive. Too much fear, unnecessary fear, is what you meant. That's a bad thing." Remo found an exit from the stairwell but it led to a conference room that held about a hundred delegates.

"You don't read Arabic, do you?" Helena said. "Would you like me to translate?"

"No," said Remo.

"This is the United Nations Agricultural Committee."

Remo saw that all the delegates were not delegates. Most were bodyguards. The delegates had these men positioned around them like body armor, an incredible waste of manpower. They created small clusters. There were about twenty clusters.

Helena explained that the Agricultural Committee had just unanimously passed two resolutions: one decried the loss of agriculture in what it called occupied Arab lands, and the other condemned the Western world for famine in the Third World and Communist countries.

Helena smiled at the vote. Remo wanted to get back to the Iranian consulate.

"Do you know what's so funny?" Helena asked.

"I wasn't paying attention."

"Well, the countries in charge of agriculture can't feed themselves. When the Algerians kicked out the French, they were exporting agricultural products. Now, after Algerian rule, they have to import enough food to eat."

"I know the UN's nonsense. Who doesn't? You don't take the Bronx Zoo seriously, why take this seriously?"

"Because I would hope for more from the United Nations."

"Why? It's made up of people, isn't it?"

"You've given up on the human race, haven't you?"

"I have eyes and ears," said Remo.

"I think if there's one thing the UN was offering, it was hope. That's why I want more from the UN-because I have hope."

"And an acute inability to see what a waste of time is."

"I do hope," said Helena. "I hope the backward nations stop inventing new words to disguise their backwardness and end their own backwardness, instead of expecting civilized man to feed their swollen populations forever. When they talk about the unequal distribution of wealth, they're really complaining about the unequal distribution of character and the work habits they don't have. Europe isn't physically rich. Its workers make it rich. Same with Japan and the United States. What the Third World rants about is that the industrialized nations have stopped running their governments for them and now they're starving. Well, they were victims of famine when civilized man colonized them, and now they're victims of famine again because the colonizers have been chased out."

"So what?" said Remo.

"So whole nations with an illiteracy rate just this side of the Stone Age, nations that select their leaders by the fastest knife or the longest penis in the country, are running the symbolic parliamentary body of the world. It means quite simply that there will never be a world body for food or health or science. It's like you let children loose in a temple and they spread their excrement on the holy tablets."

"Lady, I don't care. And I don't know why you do, either."

"Because the world is taking a giant step backward. Did you notice, they were very careful to have industrialized nations build this ship and navigate it and operate it.

British, American, Scandinavian. That's the crew, especially around the atomic engines."

"You seem to have the world figured out," Remo said.

Helena laughed, a thin mirthless laugh, and her eyes clouded over. "Figuring out the world is no problem. Getting through the day is. Don't leave me, please."

Remo looked at her longing eyes, the pleading in her face, and he put a chair between the two of them and got out of the conference room before she could follow. What did he care if half the world didn't know how to use a contraceptive or thought it was too much bother and wanted the other half to support its spawn? Stupidity wasn't new to the world. He had heard the same argument put forth by Americans who either knew nothing of world economics or could keep an incredibly straight face while talking stupid.

Helena stumbled out into the hallway after Remo.

"We're soul mates, don't you see? Since I first saw you through binoculars, I knew we were soul mates. Don't leave me. I'll throw myself off the bridge. I'm a sick person. I need you. I'll make you rich."

"You've known me five minutes and if I leave you're going to kill yourself-and you think I need to be told you're sick?"

Remo found another stairway and while some people were not that helpful in aiming him toward the Iranian consulate, others, when properly asked, offered to lead the way themselves. Properly asked required releasing the thumb from the person's thorax. It was either ask that way or depend on someone's honest goodwill, which might have left him wandering around the floating city for weeks.

When he got to the Iranian consulate, Helena was waiting for him.

"Liar. I don't like liars," said Remo.

"What?" said Helena, her face like shattered porcelain, her eyes two worried drops.

"You said you were going to kill yourself."

"I was, but I decided to live."

"Rash judgment," Remo said.

He finally got rid of her by entering his apartment, where Chiun was talking to the ambassador. Zarudi had been receiving many inquiries about his two new security men. There had been rumors that someone had encountered the Scythian terrorists and defeated some of them. Was it either Chiun or Remo?

"The hand is silent as the night," Chiun said, and the ambassador bowed.

After he left, Remo said, "The hand is silent as the night. What the hell does that mean?"

"It's good for the customers," Chiun said. "They like it."

"I don't know," Remo said.

"You will wash the pain from your blood."

"What are you talking about?" Remo asked.

"You have not left America easily."

"I don't mind leaving America," Remo said heatedly. "I don't mind not working for a place that is so fouled up. I just don't care."

All that night, Remo kept repeating that he did not care.

He did not care that night when he and Chiun went to the first night of the two-evening celebration and shipwarming party. He even allowed someone to put a glass of champagne in his hand, until he realized what it was.

"You know, it's good to change around employers," Remo told Chiun.

"Then why have you poured that drink in that man's pocket?" asked Chiun.

"Oh," said Remo. But he didn't care. He certainly didn't care about leaving America's employ.

He didn't care when he saw Helena sitting in the main box on the balcony, overlooking the giant auditorium-stadium. She nicely filled a fine black dress with a single silver

and diamond pin just below her soft rising breasts. She was alone and Remo wondered what she was doing in a box seat that was obviously designed to be the royal box. From the Iranian box forty feet away, Remo yelled, "I thought you were going to commit suicide."

"I have a reason to live," yelled back Helena.

"Sorry to hear that," said Remo.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Under the new Freedom-of-Information Resolution by which the United Nations had abolished press coverage of its activities and barred all journalists from Ship of States, there was no television coverage of the shipwarming party.

But cameras were at work. From hidden locations around the stadium, they zeroed in on Remo and transmitted his image to the secret city of rooms deep inside the hody of the ship. At least one camera kept transmitting back television images of Chiun.

The ship had initially been flooded with TV cameras so that delegates could be spotted anywhere and marked against daily progress sheets. Observers had been told that when all the sheets were programmed after just a few days' observation, computers could then calculate where anyone would be with a high probability of being correct. People followed rhythmic patterns with as little imagination as a tree, the difference being that trees never thought they were anything but servants of the weather, growing leaves by the sun, dropping them at frost. People, however, thought they acted from free will. Yet there were times of the day when they would need company and other times when they needed to be alone, times when they felt alive, and other times when they felt drowsy, and all these came from an internal clock that they could not read.

Except for Remo.

Since the incident at the elevator and in the passages, Remo had been given a constant track, eye observed and taped, because it was possible to get a rhythm on someone from an intense four-hour observation.

Oscar Walker believed that. He was betting his life on it. Number One had said he wanted it and Oscar Walker had promised it and now, deep in the ship, Oscar tried to organize all the information taken since midafternoon when there was the first warning report on Remo.

The problem for Oscar Walker in the twenty-seventh year of his life was that there was too much information on this person and much of it clearly did not read out properly. Cambridge University had been nothing like this. They had never told Oscar that there were human beings walking around with a breathing rate more akin to a three-toed sloth than to an apparent thirty-year-old man. More confusing was that the breathing rhythm was exactly that of the old Oriental in the Iranian section, an apparent eighty-year-old. Two new security men, Iranian hired, high potential.

Oscar Walker went over Remo's record personally. Yes, he trusted his computers but there was nothing like human eyes reading human messages in print.

The first man Remo had met in the elevator that day and then taken his gun away... the gunman had had three years of training in Britain's Special Air Service. Well, so much for his being careless or a stranger to difficult service. SAS were just the finest commandoes in the world. Even if Oscar were British himself. He was not so British as to get himself killed by a miscalculation.

Oscar went through the records of others lost to the Iranian-employed killing machine, Remo.

This Remo had a cume average of 2.7 years per on the K which translated to mean that every person he had killed from the secret units on the ship had had an average of 2.7 years of anti-personnel experience. This average was lowered because he had killed

several inexperienced television monitors in the melee. Moreover, he had not used weapons but his hands. All right. No trouble. Oscar Walker could deal with that. Remo's whole body was a weapon. That read out fine and took care of the peculiar breathing rate.

But why hadn't Iran reported through any of the normal channels the ship within a ship? Nothing. All the messages in and out had decoded normal.

Yet the recorded conversation between Remo and the old Korean of similar breathing pattern, had shown Remo was aware that the inner ship had been the secret access route of the Scyth group to get anywhere in the ship to perform terrorist acts. Yet Remo only told the old Korean... his name, Oscar saw, was Chiun... and the old Korean had done nothing.

Number One himself had ordered a special attack on Remo that afternoon. An assault had been arranged. He had been followed by a team, moving with him and waiting. In the corridor, the cameras were running and microphones were working, and the team came out through the wall and assaulted Remo. Oscar Walker had watched on television. A monitor told him: "They'll kill him, so I don't think you've got to worry about analyzing his movements, O.W."

Oscar not only had trouble analyzing the movements he had trouble seeing them. The cameras were well-lit, aimed from many angles. But the subject had not been attacked in the hallway; he attacked himself, and Oscar Walker had never seen such an attack. He played the tapes and then replayed them, and then replayed them in slow motion and all he saw were flashes of hands. He slowed the pictures down even more and still all he saw were the flashes of moving hands, moving, even in super slow motion, in a blur too fast to focus on. And then the attack team had seen the girl and fled.

Oscar Walker's telephone board lit up.

"Do you have a fix on that person yet?" asked a voice.

"No sir," said Oscar Walker.

"Number One wants it. He'll be needing it before midnight. Midnight is when he leaves the party. We want something before then."

"Yes sir," said Walker and he knew what the word "want" meant. It was not used often but when it was, it could be very important. It could mean life.

Walker ran several series through the facts and then he ran the facts back through the series, and tried juggling all available information in every pattern and every pattern came up going nowhere. No fix. There was no prediction of what biorhythmic clock ran these two men, Remo and Chiun. None.

Biorhythm. Walker remembered his early interest in the subject way back when, in his college days that now seemed so long ago and so safe. It was the word that first attracted him to the small employment advertisement. Biorhythm. He had majored in biology and with the economic disaster that had been Great Britain for the last decade, he did not even expect to get anything close to his major field of study at a living wage. He had majored in biology and computer science, and had hoped to be lucky enough to find work as an insurance clerk.

"I can't really believe there is someone in the United Kingdom willing to pay a living wage for work in biorhythm," Walker had said.

"We're not paying you for work in the United Kingdom."

"I thought it looked too good," said Walker. "Where? The South Pole? Underground somewhere where I go blind? Where do you expect me to work?"

"You're going to St. Martin."

"In the Dutch Antilles? The vacation resort?"

"Yes."

"I don't have money to pay you for a vacation. I've got to be paid, not pay you."

The employment officer smiled. When Oscar Walker found out what he would be earning, he tried very hard not to look startled. Because if he could keep calm, they might not realize they were offering him four times a normal starting salary, He was flown first class to Christiana Airport which looked like a Liverpool bus station surrounded by slabs of sun-bleached concrete. A chauffeured limousine took him to a resort near Mullet Bay. His suite was better than a hotel. He had a maid, a butler, a cook and a woman with very big breasts and willing thighs. The woman did not talk about liberation. She had no need to be communicated with. She did not require endless foreplay. She was there. For him.

And if she had neurotic worries, thank the Lord she shared them with someone else. She was a gem. She gave him a warm body and a closed mouth and Oscar Walker knew then that he would kill for the people who provided him this.

Shortly thereafter, he found out that this was just what they had in mind.

Everyone else he met was earning the same bloated salaries. But just in case money was not sufficient to earn loyalty, there were people who disappeared. Like the middle-aged action group leader who thought he could make a large bundle by selling the story of the secret luxury training grounds to Fleet Street. He was getting tired of the gross repetition of his attack moves.

"Worse than the bloody SAS," he said.

That day he did not return for classes and Walker was called in by his superior to explain why he had not reported the man's complaint to higher-ups.

So they knew everything he did.

Initiation was simple and frightening. He was kept awake two days without sleep and then at midnight in a small grove of trees, he was given a pill to swallow. The world moved in strange and luxurious shapes, in colors his eyes had never seen before. Oscar Walker assumed he was drugged. So he did not mind too much when someone handed him the head of the man who had planned to tell the Fleet Street press about the secret training center. The head fit in his palm.

He swore loyalty to Number One in this drugged state. Number One's face seemed familiar, white hair, royal bearing, a very handsome man. Oscar Walker thought the drug might have had something to do with this perception that warm insane evening with the strange colors and the small head that fit into his hand. He slipped off to a delightful sleep that had him dreaming while awake. He dreamed there was no greater love one could have than his love for Number One.

He had seen Number One's face before. He had seen it while at Cambridge. He had seen the face before Cambridge. He had seen that face in newspapers when he was a youngster, that silver hair. That face was always with a woman. But in that sleep on the night of the initiation, he did not know the name that came with it.

Waking up from that sleep was like waking up with more life and breath and sunlight than he had ever known. It was waking up to the brightest morning of his life. It was waking up on a soft pillow that stretched from sunlight to sunlight with a bath of salt air all over him and waves lapping against something very close. He was aboard a ship and the pillows were silk and the air was salty. He was alive and awake. He was on silk pillows on the deck of a yacht. Small islands were far off. He saw them between his bare feet. They got smaller as the day got hotter. He looked around finally, realizing the drug had not fully worn off. There were other men lying on pillows also. Their eyes looked funny as if they were blacker than they should be. The pupils were dilated.

Women with oiled bodies served fruits on silver trays. Oscar Walker saw his reflection in the bottom of the silver tray. His wide black pupils blocked out the blue of his eyes.

Later in the distance, he saw another yacht. Shakily he got to his feet. He could read

the name on the other yacht. Ulysses. And then he realized who the man with silver hair would be. Aristotle Thebos.

He was Number One.

"Love Number One. Love Number One. Love Number One," he heard someone shout. And it was his voice. He was shouting. And then all the men on the deck were shouting "Love Number One."

And Number One appeared under lights on his great ship and told them he would feed them and protect them and lead them to power in the world.

Everyone was given something small to hold and throw overboard as an offering to Number One. Oscar Walker was throwing his offering when a hand stopped his and made him look at it. It was a head. A small dark head the size of an orange. He had not dreamed the head. Heavy white fibers cushioned the small dark eyeless ball. White hairs. It was the former SAS member who had complained and threatened to expose the training camp.

Someone grabbed Oscar Walker's hand and made him throw the head into the sea. From that day forth, he loved Number One with all his heart, so that when he had to do a biorhythm fix on this killer Remo who was an enemy of Number One, and he could not get a fix, it hurt him to have failed. He trembled and looked at the hand that held the head on the dragged night.

The telephone panel lit up again.

"Negative," Oscar Walker said softly.

And the words he feared came back over the speaker.

"Report to Number One."

Trembling, Oscar Walker took three tranquilizers and washed them down with a double martini before leaving his computer console. If he was lucky, he might pass out before looking into Number One's eyes and telling him of failure.

A sliding metal panel opened in one of the secret passageways and Oscar Walker stepped out onto a platform that was only a few feet above the level of the Atlantic Ocean. Behind him the panel slid shut. Two men ushered him onto a waiting launch. There was a small table on the launch set before a high throne-like chair. Oscar floated into a folding chair at the table. He felt the tranquilizers and the martinis begin to soften his body. His mouth seemed to want to operate without his knowledge. His lips moved from side to side without waiting for him to tell them to. He thought that was funny and laughed.

There was a television monitor on the launch and men were looking at the televised image of the party from the great stadium and auditorium. An image of a diplomat came on. Walker recognized him.

"He's going to spill his drink," said Walker, pointing to the screen. His voice sounded thick and far away.

"What did you say?" someone asked.

"That man's going to spill his drink. It's amazing he even got out of bed this morning." Faces moved closer to the screen to watch. The large tuxedoed diplomat with a row of medals over his chest, bowed stiffly. He held a glass of champagne and raised a toast, all over his medals.

There was laughter on the launch and Oscar Walker felt good that he had been able to bring some humor into everyone's life,

"When will he have sex?" someone asked, laughing.

Oscar Walker floated in his daze of booze and pills but he knew the answer.

"Two days from now he'll want to pork a bloody orange rind. He'll wake up like a goat," said Oscar Walker. He slumped into his chair. Then there was another voice. It was Number One's voice. Oscar Walker forced his eyelids open. Number One was sitting in the throne-like chair facing the small table.

"Love Number One," Oscar Walker mumbled.

"And the Iranian security team. This Remo and Chiun. When do we even the score with them?" Number One asked. His voice was steely and chill.

"Remo and Chiun?" asked Oscar Walker with a boozy smile.

"Yes," said Number One. "When can we move against them?"

"Not on the best day you ever lived," said Oscar Walker before he passed out. They were the last words he ever said because, even though he came to, he found it impossible to talk under the Atlantic, as the heavy chains around his ankles pulled him slowly down to the bottom of the ocean. He felt sorry about not being able to speak. He had wanted to hear his voice say, one last time, "Love Number One."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Demosthenes Skouratis was already sailing under full power toward the Ship of States when the first newspaper stories arrived.

They came across on a facsimile machine mounted in the largest cabin on the yacht, the one Skouratis used as his floating office. The machine was hooked up to Skouratis' offices in national capitals around the world and around the clock, and whenever a new edition of a newspaper came off the press, facsimiles of the front page and financial pages were radioed to Skouratis wherever he might be.

The first nighttime editions reported that Aristotle Thebos was sponsoring a two-day celebration for Ship of States and its builder, Skouratis. Each story carried the same quotations. Thebos regretted that Mr. Skouratis had not shown up for the first night's party, but no, he did not believe that Skouratis felt the Ship of States was unsafe and had, therefore, refused to set foot on it. Skouratis was never afraid to set foot on any of his other ships and so Thebos would never believe that of the great shipbuilder, Skouratis. Perhaps Skouratis would attend the second evening's celebration.

From New York, from London, from Paris, the news stories were basically the same: Thebos, implying by denying it that Ship of States was unsafe and that Skouratis was afraid to set foot on the giant vessel.

Skouratis had read the stories carefully. As surely as if he had Skouratis on a string, Thebos was dragging him toward the giant United Nations ship.

"Child sticker," Skouratis swore in Greek, then crumpled the front pages and reached to drop them into a wastepaper shredder basket. But he remembered that all of them were filed each day and he carefully smoothed out the sheets and placed them in the file basket on his desk.

Then he lit a long Cuban cigar and looked through the windows at the soft rolling swell of the Atlantic outside the Tina. And he smiled.

The first round of the page-one battle had gone to Thebos. But Skouratis would see how Thebos liked it in the game in a few more days, when he was on the receiving end.

But that was still a day or two off.

Right now, Skouratis was on his way to a party, and at full speed. He looked at his watch. The first night's party was still underway.

No matter. He would be present for the second night's festivities.

CHAPTER NINE

There had not been a better party since closing night aboard the Titanic.

A female foreign minister from one of the African countries, who had been selected for vaginal muscle control by a national leader who had himself been chosen for genital heft, was the admitted star of the proceedings when she ensconced herself in a stadium broom closet and offered to take on all comers for five dollars each. American.

There was a long line in front of the closet, which created a terrible problem for the

French ambassador who wanted to wait in that line, but didn't want to abandon the line that was queued up to receive souvenir key chains made of pure gold and inscribed with the name of Demosthenes Skouratis by his fellow shipbuilder, Aristotle Thebos. The Frenchman solved the problem with typical Gallic savoir faire: get the gold, the broad could wait.

Besides, judging from the grunts from the closet, she seemed to be ready for a long evening.

Aristotle Thebos looked down from the velvet-lined royal box overlooking the gigantic arena and watched the Indian delegation wrapping sandwiches in handkerchiefs and stuffing them into the pockets of their ill-fitting clothes.

"There they are," he said aloud. "The leaders of the world. Doesn't it make you feel better to know that they are responsible for keeping the world safe?"

Helena smiled softly. "The power of the world, Father, is right where it always is. In the hands of those who are qualified to use it. Thank the Lord."

Below them, United Nations delegates scurried about, from caviar to cognac, from souvenir to slot, congratulating themselves on their foresight in moving their headquarters away from a city where prying journalists seemed to think they had some kind of obligation and right to report on what other people did.

Two fistfights broke out. Three Asian diplomats who had been engaged in a contest to determine who could chugalug the most Courvoisier from beer mugs were passed out in a corner.

Thebos looked around the auditorium.

"The only thing that spoils my pleasure is that the shoeshine boy is not here tonight."

"He will not come at all, Father," Helena said.

"Oh, no. He will be here. After he reads the press, he will be here." He smiled, a brilliant smile of long, white even teeth that illuminated his face and made it seem even tanner than it was. "If he has seen early editions of the press, he is already on his way. But he is for tomorrow. For now, I am going back to the yacht. The older one gets, the more quickly one tires of watching the clowns at a circus."

"I, too, Father."

Their bodyguards led the way as they left the royal box, forming around them a wall of mean muscle and surly bone.

Then, somehow, Remo was behind the bodyguards and walking alongside Helena.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"I thought you didn't like me," she said.

"I don't. But you've seen the alternatives." He nodded back over his shoulder toward the banquet hall, which was beginning to resemble a Roman arena after a riot.

"Hey, You. Move out of there," one of the bodyguards yelled, then came toward Remo, hands outstretched.

"Go away," Remo said. "Can't you see I'm talking to the lady?"

The guard put his hands on Remo's shoulders. Remo slapped them away. The guard tried to raise his hands again but they would not lift.

"What is all this?" Remo asked the girl. "Why do you rate all these gorillas?"

"Who is this person?" Thebos asked Helena.

"Me first," Remo said. "I askad my question first. You wait."

"This is my father," said Helena. "Mr. Thebos."

Remo snapped his fingers. "Oh. You're the one who gave the party."

Thebos nodded.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Remo said.

"Ashamed?" said Thebos. "Helena, who is this person?"

"Ashamed," Remo said. "Giving these people a party is encouraging them. Ashamed."

"Who is this?"

Thebos, Helena and Remo had kept moving slowly forward, up the large, wide, automatic escalators, surrounded by guards. The guard who had put his hands on Remo's shoulders was left far behind, still staring at his hands, unable to move them and unable to see anything wrong with them. Thebos turned and stared at Remo, trying to recognize the face.

"I'm Remo," said Remo.

"He is Remo," said Helena. She shrugged her shoulders,

"That is all hardly illuminating." Thebos had to skip as the escalator reached the top deck. Helena stepped out easily. Remo just kept sliding as the escalator deposited him on the thickly carpeted floor. Without moving his feet, he slid forward smoothly for three feet before resuming walking.

"I work here," Remo said. "I'm with Iran. That's what they call it now. Chiun, though, he calls it Persia. I think I would have liked it better when it was Persia. The melons were great, Chiun says."

Thebos stopped.

"You are Remo," he said, as if he had just heard the name for the first time.

"That's how it comes out," Remo agreed.

"And you are with Iran?"

Remo nodded, then looked up to see Thebos' cold eyes on him. They were hard, gray eyes, as deep as glacial ice, and they measured Remo by the inch, weighed him by the ounce, sized him up for the minutest trace of character, and apparently found him wanting.

"Guards," Thebos called out. "Remove this person." He smiled at Remo. "I'm sorry," he said, almost apologetically, "but Helena and I must leave now and you are bothering us."

"I'm not bothering her," Remo said.

"He's not bothering me," Helena said.

"You are bothering me." Thebos backed away as the guards reached Remo. Well trained, they moved at him from the front, back, and both sides as Thebos pulled Helena away to give them working room.

Remo vanished in the mass of black suits that converged upon him. The suits seemed to rise up like a healthy dough in which the yeast had just begun to work. The suits pulsed once, then moved down again into a heap. Thebos and Helena could see arms flying, legs winding up to deliver kicks, grunts of exertion.

Then Remo was standing alongside them, looking back at the guards. He nodded to Thebos.

"Nice fellas. Come on. I'll take you where you're going."

He grabbed Helena's elbow gently and steered her away from the mass of scuffling guards. Thebos followed. Every step or two, he turned and looked back at the bodyguards who were still battling with each other.

"How did you do that?" Helena asked.

"What?" said Remo.

"Escape from them."

"Oh. That. Well, there's really nothing to it. You see, you wait until they move in a rhythm and then you join the rhythm, and it kind of like pulsates and when it goes outward, you go outward with it, but they go back in and you keep going and you're gone and most people's senses aren't good enough to realize there's one less person in the pileup. Leave 'em alone, they'll be fighting a long time before they find out I'm not there. It's like a bullet, you know. You can't get hurt by a force when you're moving in the right rhythm with it. If you moved in the same path as a bullet, just as fast as it moved, it wouldn't hurt you. You get hurt when a bullet's going one way and you're not going with it. You could even catch a bullet if you wanted to. But I don't recommend that because it takes practice."

"How much practice?" Helena asked.

"Fifty years. Eight hours a day."

"You're not even fifty years old."

"Yeah, but I had Chiun for a teacher. That takes forty years right off the top."

The main deck was more than a hundred feet above the waters of the Atlantic. Remo looked around for steps to take them down to the Thebos launch tied up alongside the huge ship and while he did, Thebos quickly pushed Helena into an elevator on the deck and it started down toward the platform just above the level of the water.

"Good night, Remo," called out Helena, as the elevator sank below the deck railing and her face disappeared from view. Her face seemed wistful and disappointed.

Remo leaned over the railing and watched the elevator move rapidly down the side of the ship toward the launch.

Thebos and Helena stepped out onto a platform that led them onto the boat. Dammit, Remo wanted to talk to her. She or her father might have some idea of what Skouratis was doing with this ship; why he might have built all those secret passages and rooms. The crew of the Thebos launch untied and with a whoosh of powerful inboard engines moved away from the Skip of States toward the Thebos yacht, sailing slowly along five hundred yards away.

On the main deck, even a hundred feet above the water, Remo could taste the wet salt droplets on the tip of his tongue. His face felt damp from the thin ocean spray, so diffused at the great height that it had no more substance than wet fog.

Beneath him, the Atlantic looked black and cold. The brilliantly painted white launch disappeared into the blackness of the night as it powered away from the United Nations ship and its lights.

Damn, thought Remo.

He kicked off his black loafers, and vaulted the rail. On the way down to meet the Atlantic, he slowed his breathing and forced the blood flow of his body away from the skin's temperature and deeper into his internal organs. His skin temperature dropped as he dropped, while he made sure the cold surrounding blanket of ocean water did not suck the life-preserving heat from his body.

He knifed into the Atlantic feetfirst, plunged down twenty feet, then arced his body so he turned a large, lazy, underwater somersault and came up swimming toward the Thebos yacht. Ahead of him, he could hear the launch's engines.

Helena Thebos sat in a deck chair at the rear of the launch. Alongside her, Thebos answered her unspoken thought.

"He is a very attractive man, I suppose," Thebos said. "But very dangerous."

"Some say that of you," Helena said.

"But, of course, in my case, it is incorrect," said Thebos, with a small chuckle.

"Unless you are unlucky enough to be a pretentious Greek shoeshine boy who has never learned not to insult his betters through his pretensions. This Remo is something else though. There have been many deaths on that ship because of him."

"How are you aware of that, Father? You have not been on the ship until tonight."

"I have heard stories," Thebos said vaguely. "And do not forget that eight of our best men are back on that ship. Seven of them are trying to catch each other. One of them cannot move his hands or his arms. He is dangerous, this Remo. Believe me."

Helena Thebos was silent. Her fingers rested on the polished chrome railing of the launch. She felt a light moist pressure on her fingers as if a damp minnow had leaped from the water and brushed her hand. She pulled her fingers away.

"You speak of Skouratis," she said. "I do not understand what you intend with him, Father."

"Nothing, dear," said Thebos.

He looked straight ahead and Helena recognized the look. He was staring ahead, through days, weeks, months or years to some uncharted future that only he could see. A small smile played along the sides of his mouth. She put her fingers back on the railing and recoiled almost immediately when it was touched again by something damp. She looked at her fingers, then leaned toward the railing and looked down at the water, expecting to see a loose rope flapping against the side of the launch. Instead, she saw Kemo's teeth. He was smiling at her. Then he raised a finger to his mouth for her to be quiet. She looked toward Thebos to see if he had noticed anything, but Thebos was still staring ahead toward a world where his fantasies were fact, his power unquestioned, his status unequalled.

Helena looked back at the water. Remo was gone. Gone. Had she imagined it? She looked around the water near the boat. No trace of him.

She smiled. Imagination and desire were powerful drugs. She could better understand her father and his private reveries.

When the launch returned to the yacht Ulysses, crewmen clustered around to help Thebos and Helena from the small boat.

Helena lingered on the deck of the yacht, looking around in the water, then sighed. Imagination.

But her fingers still tingled.

Thebos was speaking to the pilot of the launch. "Go back," he said. "You will find eight of our lunatics aboard the big ship. Bring them back."

"Where will they be, sir?"

"Probably fighting with a ghost on a lower deck," Thebos said.

Helena turned away as Thebos kept talking.

"Good night, Father," she said.

"Good night, dear."

Thebos let his eyes follow her as she walked away. Tall and lissome, as her mother had been. But her mother had been a businesswoman in her own right, a woman of unfailing judgment and driving talent. Men had often told Thebos that they would rather deal with him than with his wife—not because she had a better business head than he, but because her overwhelming beauty made them worse businessmen. Helena had inherited some of the beauty and all of the intelligence, but from neither father nor mother had she inherited any business sense at all. How he wished for a son. But his first wife had died long ago trying to give birth to a boy who died also, and the succession of Thebos' wives had been no more successful. No sons to carry on the fight against Skouratis. Just Helena. Thebos smiled. At least he had a daughter; Skouratis had nothing. The one daughter he had once had was a suicide soon after marrying Thebos. It was one of the things in life most worth remembering.

Behind him, the launch started again and moved away from the yacht across the black ocean toward Ship of States.

Thebos went to bed. Tomorrow Skouratis would arrive and tomorrow all things would be made right. All things.

And he would be Number One. Without question.

Helena's personal maid had prepared the bed in her forward stateroom and now slept in a small connecting room, attached to her mistress by a call button connected to a small earphone she wore while she slept. This tradition came from decades of service to the Thebos family.

The small night-light was on in the room when Helena entered. Without real hope, she glanced about the room but it was empty.

Remo had been a hallucination, a mirage, the result of drinking two glasses of Ouzo instead of one, Too bad.

She sat at her dressing table, taking off her jewelry, then looked up startled when the bathroom door opened and Remo strolled out wearing one of her soft velvet shower robes. He met her eyes in the mirror. "I'm glad you had this," he said. "My clothes were soaked and I hate making it in wet clothes."

"Making what?" said Helena.

"Love."

"Oh? We are going to make love?" asked Helena. She stood and turned to face Remo who was tying the bathrobe's belt into a knot around his waist.

He looked at her with inkwell-deep eyes. "Naturally. Aren't we?"

Helena paused. "Yes," she said softly. "But not naturally."

"I've heard about you Greeks," Remo said.

Helena laughed, a small, tinkly, soft sound that, without being loud, managed to contain all joy. She shook her head. "Naturally means once. And we are going to make love more than once. Many times more than once." She removed her gold-wire earrings.

"Think I'm up to it?" Remo asked.

"You will be, American. You will be."

"Good. But first we'll talk."

"No. First, we'll make love. Then we'll talk." She used a long-handled wooden device to pull down the back zipper of her evening gown.

"We'll talk as we go," Remo said. "If your father hates Skouratis, why's he throwing him a party?"

Helena shrugged. The motion slid her black gown down off her shoulders.

"One never knows what my father is doing. I think he is really impressed by Skouratis' ship."

"I don't believe it," Remo said.

"I don't want to believe it," Helena said. She slid both arms out of the sleeves of the gown. "Skouratis is a crass, heavy-handed, evil man who belongs in a barnyard. I have warned my father: who sleeps with sheep smells like sheep dip."

"Yeah, well, Greeks probably know more about that than I would," Remo said.

"I hate that man. He contaminates all he touches."

"He built a pretty good boat," Remo said.

"A ship, not a boat. Ptaah. A stunt. It may never cross the ocean." She stepped out of her gown. She was wearing silk lace panties and a thin demi-bra that pushed her breasts upward and inward.

"The boat's like a city," Remo said.

"Ship," Helena corrected again. "Who cares?" She turned to her dressing table and lit a dark brown cigarette. Even across the room, Remo could smell the deep pungent tobaccos.

"Do you know there's a ship inside that ship?" asked Remo. "Like an underground city."

"The whole thing should be underground," Helena said, taking another deep drag. She giggled. "Or under water. Maybe with luck it soon will be. Along with the zoo it carries." She laughed aloud. "Noah's zoo survived; this one fails; one out of two isn't bad."

"You don't know anything about any secret passages on that ship?" Remo said. "Remember those guys who came out of the wall today at us?"

"Just more of Skooratis' idiotic security measures," Helena said. She placed the cigarette in an ashtray and reached behind to unhook her bra.

"Did you mention it to your father?" Remo said. "Does he know what Skouratis is up to?"

"He has no idea," Helena said. She dropped the bra onto the floor. She took a last drag off the cigarette before stubbing it out in the ashtray. Then she lifted her arms in

welcome and walked across the room toward Remo.

"Time for bed," she said with a smile.

Remo shook his head. "I better get back," he said. He untied Helena's bathrobe. Under it he was still wearing his slacks and tee shirt.

"What?" said Helena.

"I've got to go now. It's a long swim," said Remo.

"You are leaving me?" Her tone tested new heights of outrage.

"Unless you want to swim back with me."

"Listen," she said. "Because you pulled a pretty good trick, don't go thinking that it was real. I know you let the launch tow you over on a line. Now don't be foolish. In the morning, I'll have the launch bring you back."

"Sorry, I'd rather swim," Remo said. "I never get any exercise any more. Besides, I don't think your father would like the idea of my spending the night."

"Father lives his life and I live mine. We made that agreement when I became a woman."

"I've seen fathers before. They honor agreements like that only when they're talk. Put them into action and they renege."

"Try me," said Helena.

"Sorry. Gotta go," Remo said. He slipped on his black loafers, which he had put under Helena's bed. "See you soon."

"You are a swine," said Helena.

"Probably."

"I detest you. Hate you."

"Most do. It must just be something about me."

"I hope you drown." Her small shapely breasts quivered as anger shook her body.

Remo walked to the door and placed his right hand on the side of her face. "Now don't get in an uproar," he said.

She slapped his hand away.

"Begone, pig," she said. "Back to the sty with the rest of your species."

"Well, if you're going to be nasty..." Remo said. He walked out the door. Behind him, he heard Helena shout a Greek phrase. Without knowing Greek, he knew it was an obscenity, and he knew which one.

He smiled "You too," he said aloud, and then vaulted over the railing of the yacht into the cold Atlantic.

CHAPTER TEN

When Remo stepped off the elevator onto the main deck, water puddling about his feet, the deck was deserted except for one man. From far off came the sounds of singing and revelry, the last dregs of the Thebos party for the delegates as it dragged down into morning.

The man on deck stood thirty feet from the elevator, his back to Remo, looking out at the ocean.

Under his arm, he carried a tubelike roll of papers. He wore a blue brocade tuxedo jacket that looked like the hit of the night at a teeny-bopper wedding.

From behind, Remo could see that the man's thinning hair was trimmed short, immaculately, not a single hair out of place. The man leaned forward on the rail, not in leisure but at attention, as if concentrating to hear some secret word from the wind.

Remo could not see his face. He did not have to.

"Hiya, Smitty," Remo said, walking toward him. "What are you doing here?"

Dr. Harold W. Smith, head of CURE, turned slowly. "Did you have a nice swim?"

"Not bad," said Remo. "I try to do ten laps of the ocean every night to stay in shape. What are you doing here? Why are you wearing that stupid jacket?"

"I thought you didn't like my gray suit," Smith said.

"After ten years of seeing one guy in one suit, of course I didn't like it. But I didn't expect you to go out and dress up in a clown's outfit either."

Smith sniffed, a pecksniffian sniff. "I always try to dress like the natives. I didn't think this would be out of place here on party night."

"If you want to dress like the natives on this boat, wear a fig leaf," Remo said.

"Ship, not boat," Smith said. "Speaking of clothing, I'm surprised to see you still wearing a tee shirt and slacks. I thought you'd be wearing silk bloomers and slippers that turn up at the toes by now."

"All right," Remo said. "Now we're even in the snot department about clothes. What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Remo. That's a government secret."

"You've got secrets from me? Now?"

"I just can't go around telling everything I know to any Iranian bodyguard I meet," Smith said.

Remo paused and swallowed. "From me? Secrets?" he said again.

Smith shrugged, a small sad lifting of the shoulders that looked as if the man were trying to readjust the weight of the world on his back, to make it more comfortable.

"Okay. Then I'll tell you what you're doing here," Remo said. "You're here because you think something's going to go wrong on this boat and you're going to try to prevent it. You've got that big roll of papers under your arm because those are probably diagrams of this boat..."

"Ship," said Smith. "Oceangoing's a ship, not a boat."

"I don't give a damn," Remo said, "whether it's a ship or a boat or a goddamn rub-a-dub in a tub. You've got those diagrams because you think there's probably something flukey about this scow with those terrorists and murders and everything. Right so far?"

"Not bad," Smith conceded.

"Okay," said Remo. "Now I'll tell you some things. Something bad is going to happen on this barge but I don't know what. And those diagrams aren't going to show you one damn thing about this boat, 'cause it's riddled with passages and rooms that nobody knows about. And what I want to know is why don't you just collect the American delegation and all of you get off of here before anything goes wrong?"

"If something happens to this ship," Smith said, "it would be a tragedy to the world."

"The world survived the deaths of Laurel and Hardy, it'll survive the loss of these clowns. Come on, Smitty. You've seen these dips tonight. You're going to save them? Get out with the ambassador and his staff. Worry about America."

"That's not the way we do things," Smith said. He paused. "Sorry, Remo, but that's one of the things you've never understood about... my country."

"That's nasty, Smitty. That's really nasty."

"Your choice, not mine."

"So you're going to stay on this boat—all right, ship, goddammit—and you're going to risk your life trying to find out what's going to happen and try to prevent it and all for this bunch of money-grubbing, free-lunching phoney bastards in striped pants who'd steal the pennies from your dead eyes."

"Yes," said Smith.

"Then Chiun is right."

"Oh? What is it that Chiun is right about?"

"That you're a lunatic. That you've always been a lunatic. And you always will be a lunatic."

"I can understand someone thinking that way. Chiun and you and other mercenaries who work only for the money always have trouble understanding people who aren't working just

for the money, I guess that does make them lunatics to you. How do you like working for Iran?"

"It's okay," Remo said. "They're nice people. Iran grows good melons and nobody gives us stupid assignments."

"I'm glad to see you're getting along so well," Smith said.

"Listen, Smitty. You're here to secure the ship, right? But that's what you wanted Chiun and me to do. Okay, we had our problems, you and me, but Chiun and I are here. And we're going to secure the boat. So why don't you just leave? It's what you wanted us to do anyway. We're doing it."

"Almost, Remo, but not quite. You see, you're here working for Iran and for all I know the Iranians may have a hand in anything that's going to go wrong with this ship. Nothing personal, but I can't trust you as an impartial objective agent when you're working for somebody who might just turn out to be on the other side."

"You are the most pain-in-the-ass man I've ever met," Remo said.

"I'm sorry," said Smith, "but you'll have to excuse me. I've got a lot of work to do." He turned back toward the rail and began looking at a single sheet of paper he extracted from the roll of papers under his arm.

Remo walked a few steps away in wet sloshing shoes, then turned back.

"You're a lunatic," he said.

Smith nodded without turning.

Remo walked a few more squishy steps, then turned again.

"And your jacket's ugly."

Smith nodded.

"And you're a tightfisted penny pincher and I hope the American delegation right now is eating rubber bands and wasting staples by shooting them at the wall."

Smith nodded again.

"Are you going to turn around when I yell at you?" Remo yelled.

Smith turned around.

"Give my regards to the Shah," he said.

"Aaaaaaah," said Remo, once, long and loud, before he stalked away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I don't want to hear about it, Little Father."

"Of course not," Chiun said. "Why would you wish to hear about something upon which our lives de pend?"

"My life doesn't depend on the state of Persian-goddammit, Iranian-television. I don't care if they have soap operas or not. So they don't. It's not going to take one day off my life."

"Typical. Typical. Unfeeling callousness toward your teacher, unconcern for his misery, caring only for your own comfort. Give you an ocean to splash around in at night and you do not care what happens to me at all."

"Look. It was your idea to come to work for Iran. So stop complaining."

"And it was your idea not to tell me to what depths the once-proud Peacock throne had fallen. Persia was a great land with great rulers. This Iran that you call it, well, why did you not tell me about it? Why did you not tell me how backward it was? Why did you not tell me that they have no daytime dramas? That they have little television at all?"

"Because how the hell was I supposed to know?" asked Remo testily.

"Because it is one of the things you are supposed to know," said Chiun. "Why do you think I let you hang around with me? Because your eating habits fill me with love and respect? Because your big-nosed features are as a dew-fresh morning rose to me?"

"My nose isn't big," said Remo.

"You are an American. All Americans have big noses," Chiun said.

"And all Koreans look alike."

"That is not bad when the alike we all look is a beautiful alike. You should have known about Persia going bad."

"I don't do that kind of work. Smitty always did that kind of work."

"Do not go blaming your inadequacies on the poor, maligned Emperor Smith whom you betrayed by fleeing from his service," said Chiun.

"Oh. So now it's the poor maligned Emperor Smith. Taking his place alongside Herod as one of the great martyrs of history, huh? How about 'that lunatic' Smith that you've been carping about for years? Huh? How about that?"

"I never should have listened to you, Remo," Chiun said, his face and voice dripping hurt, his arms slowly folding in front of his seated body as a signal that this conversation was ending. "I never should have turned my back on the Emperor in charge of keeping the Constitution safe, just because of your greed. My ancestors will judge me harshly for this."

"No one'll ever know. Just doctor the Sinanju records the way you always do."

"Enough," Chiun said. "Have you not heaped upon one aged man enough abuse for one day? Have you no mercy? The Persians always were heartless. How quickly you have become one of them."

Remo stomped toward the door, his salt-stiffened clothes creaking as he moved. He paused at the door.

"Little Father," he said.

Chiun did not answer.

"Little Father."

Chiun turned angry hazel eyes toward him.

"Little Father, I have something to say to you," Remo said, lowering his voice, sounding sad.

Chiun nodded. "Penitent, you may speak."

"Blow it out your ears," Remo said, "and rub it in your hair." He skipped quickly out the door.

They were supposed to be looking. They were supposed to be on the alert. But the two guards who prowled the corridor in front of the Libyan mission's offices and apartments did not notice the hard-line set to Remo's mouth. Nor did they see that his eyes were so glowering dark that they seemed almost all pupil.

Instead they noticed only a thin Westerner wearing splotchy-looking clothing walking down the corridor, talking aloud to himself,

"I'm getting tired of being everybody's fall guy," Remo said. "You hear that?" he yelled. "I'm tired, you hear? First Smitty. Then Chiun. Smitty blames me for leaving and it's Chiun's fault. Chiun blames me for leaving and it's still his fault. Everybody blames me. Who do I get to blame? Huh? Who do I get to shovel the blame off on?"

The two Libyan guards moved in front of Remo as he ambled down the corridor, head down, feeling the soft rug give under his water-soaked loafers.

"Hold it," said the larger one. He wore a pinstriped black suit, a black shirt and white tie. His hair was greased back and black. His skin was swarthy. He put an arm out and a big right hand on Remo's shoulder.

Remo looked up at the man, a full four inches bigger than he was,

The man let go a barrage of words in Arabic.

"Talk English, stupid. I'm not one of your goddamn rag merchants," Remo said.

The big guard smiled. "I asked what you were doing in this corridor, little man with

large mouth. This corridor is off limits after 8 P.M."

Remo smiled. It was not a nice smile. "Just going for a walk," he said.

The other man moved up alongside the first. He wore the same costume, individualized by black-and-white wing-tip shoes.

"He is an American," the second man said.

The large guard smiled. He squeezed with the hand he had placed on Remo's shoulder.

"Oh, an American. Is that true? Are you a Fascist, racist, imperialist dog?"

"No," said Remo. "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy, born on the Fourth of July, with the Stars and Stripes forever."

"I think we hold this one for questioning in the morning," said the big Libyan guard. He squeezed even harder with his right hand, but failed to notice that Remo gave no sign of feeling the pressure.

"How are things in Libya?" Remo said. "Your brave skyjackers kill any babies this week?"

"That is enough, swine," the second guard said. "Take him, Mahmoud. We will lock him in one of the interrogation rooms."

"Yes, Mahmoud," Remo said. "Take me. Do you know I've been walking these corridors for fifteen minutes, pissed, really pissed, just looking for somebody to take it out on? Do you know what a favor you're doing me?"

Mahmoud looked at the smaller Libyan and shrugged. The American might be deranged.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you, Mahmoud?" Remo asked. "What's your name?" he suddenly asked the second man.

"Ahmed."

"That's right. All you wogs are named Mahmoud or Ahmed."

"For your insolence," Ahmed said, "I will take charge of your interrogation myself."

Both guards now had pistols out from the shoulder holsters that lay inside their heavily padded suit jackets.

"Let's go," Mahmoud said. He removed his right hand from Remo's shoulder and, with his left hand, poked his gun barrel into Remo's stomach.

"What a gift you two are," said Remo. "A real pair of winners. You know what you can do with that gun?"

"I can fire it," Mahmoud said. His thumb cocked the hammer of the gun. His left index finger felt the hard cold metal of the trigger under the ridges of his fingertip. And then the gun was in the American's hands.

"And now you, Ahmed," said Remo.

Ahmed jumped back a step and tried to fire at Remo. Remo removed both the pistol and Ahmed's trigger finger with one move of the side of his right hand.

He held both guns in front of him, then juggled them in the air in his right hand.

Ahmed's index finger bounced down, onto Remo's palm and Remo dumped it onto the carpeted floor.

Ahmed looked at the four fingers of his hand, then up at Remo, then back at his hand. He opened his mouth to scream, but he found his mouth filled with gun butts.

"You be quiet for a while, Ahmed," said Remo. "First Mahmoud."

The big Libyan was on Remo then from behind, both hands stretching out for the thin American's neck.

Remo spun as Mahmoud closed on him, and drove two fingers into the bodyguard's wrists. Mahmoud felt his hands freeze in position, the fingers splayed wide as if he were holding an imaginary basketball, getting ready for an underhand foul shot.

He tried to close his hands but they would not move. He tried to drop them to his sides, but they were locked in place. He saw his hands for the first time in his life, really saw them, big hands with deep furrows in the skin and callouses alongside the fingers. Ugly hands, but workingman's hands. Mahmoud's work was killing.

But he wanted no more killing; he wanted nothing to do with this crazy American. He backed away and Remo pushed him down into a sitting position on the floor next to Ahmed. Remo stared down at the two men as if surveying the south forty, looking for the best place to erect a barn.

He leaned over and removed the two guns from Ahmed's mouth.

"That's better," Remo said. "Now you two don't like Americans very much, and that's not right."

Mahmond's head shook vigorously from side to side; Ahmed said, "No, no, no, no, no."

"Nope, nope, nope," Remo said. "Don't spoil everything by talking. Now it's all right for an American not to like America. But it's not all right for you. You understand?" Mahmoud and Ahmed nodded, so fast the hacks of their heads bumped against the wall behind them.

"Good," said Remo. "Now we'll just have to think of some way that you don't forget that. Ever."

Ferenzi Barlooni, the Libyan chief delegate, had had too much champagne. He was asleep on the floor, just inside the door to the Libyan wing, when something pried at his ears, some sound insinuated itself in his head and forced him to wake up.

He did not know how long he'd been sleeping. He squinted his eyes and shook his head, trying to clear it. But the strange sound was still there. The guards. It must be the guards. Well, he would settle that in short order. They would think twice before ever again disturbing an ambassador's sleep.

Angrily, he stalked to the door and flung it open. He looked out into the hallway. His two guards, Ahmed and Mahmoud, were on the floor, sitting against the wall. And they were singing. What kind of drunkenness was this? Guards, singing on duty.

Both men looked up at Barlooni and smiled sheepishly, then returned to their singing.

For amber waves of grain,
For purple mounted majesties,
Above the fruited plain.

America, America...

Except for them, the hallway was empty.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Remo found the storage closet in the passageway near the Lebanese mission, went inside, then didn't know what he was doing there.

He didn't give a doodley-doo about secret passages in the ship. He didn't care if spies drilled holes in the bottom and sank it. He didn't care if the whole damned Iranian delegation drowned, if Smith was swallowed by a whale who suffered heartburn for the rest of its life, or if all the delegates wound up as chum for sharks.

He didn't care. He and Chiun would survive. To hell with everybody else. To hell with Chiun, too, come to think of it.

So why was he in this broom closet, ripping a hole in a steel wall to gain entrance to the secret passages? The only person on the ship who cared about the passages was Smith and Remo didn't work for Smith anymore. He didn't work for the United States anymore.

"I am a Persian," he said to a ripped piece of sheet steel in his right hand. "Hear that? I am a Persian. Could an American rip a piece of steel like this?" he asked, tearing back a large panel of the wall.

"Long live the glorious Peacock throne," Remo said, and tore back another steel panel.

"Three cheers for Reezie Paleezi, Shah of shahs, King of kings, hirer of assassins."

Remo stepped through the rip in the wall and found himself back in the small room in the heart of the ship. It was lit only by a red overhead bulb. Ahead of him was a metal door without a knob, the kind of security door in which one inserted a key and the key itself

served as the door handle.

Remo kicked the door off its steel hinge pins.

"To the great glory of Persia, land of history, home of the melon, garden spot of the Far East. Far East? Mideast."

He grabbed the hinged side of the door, and pulled the heavy steel plate into the room and tossed it onto the floor.

"So much for Greek shipbuilders."

The corridor outside the small room was empty. Remo went down it slowly, kicking in each door along the way. All the rooms were empty. The underbelly of the ship was wormed through with passageways and rooms.

In one of the rooms, Remo found a half dozen sleeping bags on the cold metal floor and some open but empty cans of pork and beans.

But where had everyone gone? The last time he had been here, the area was filled with killers, technicians, with men with jobs to do. Now there was nobody.

Midships, Remo found the computer room, metal and gray, smelling of new electrical cable. Next to it was a covered garbage pail filled with sheets of paper and empty cans. Atop the computer panel was a bottle of gin, another bottle of vermouth, and a bottle of pills made out by a London pharmacist to Oscar Walker.

Remo saw a small stack of papers on the side of the console and sat down before the machine to read them.

He saw his name written on the top sheet.

"REMO. Nationality: American." The sheet had room for comments in four categories.

The first category was labeled "Diurnal Rhythms." After it was neatly printed in ink, "None noticeable. Subject operates at peak at all hours." Remo nodded.

The second category was "Biorhythms." A printed comment followed: "None. No apparent critical days. No obvious down periods." Remo nodded again.

The third category was "Physical Characteristics." After it, was written, "Vicious, cruel, violent, extremely dangerous."

"Vicious?" Remo said aloud. "Violent? I'll show you vicious, you son of a bitch." He punched his fist through the face of the computer. The machine sparked and sizzled.

The final category was entitled "Emotional Makeup." The comments read: "Unpredictable, arrogant, abnormally strong response to minor intrusions."

"Minor intrusions," Remo said. "I'll give you a minor intrusion, you bastard." He intruded his hand into the hole he had punched in the computer and pulled out a great handful of wires and transistors. The machine gave an audible sigh and stopped. Remo tore up the sheet with his name on it and glanced at the next. It was Chiun's.

Remo read it aloud. It read exactly the same as Remo's. "Unpredictable, arrogant, abnormally strong response to minor intrusions," he read.

"Right," said Remo. "Right, right, right and right." He carefully folded the analysis of Chiun and put it in his pocket to show Chiun later.

Remo read through the rest of the pages quickly, looking for an analysis of Smith. He was disappointed. There was none, only reports on diplomats Remo had never heard of and did not care about. He threw them all on the floor.

When he got back to the door, he was smiling. "Right. Chiun: arrogant, vicious, nasty, kvetch, carping, petty, insensitive, nasty, conceited and not nice. Now he'll see."

Farther down the corridor, Remo kicked in the door that led to the banks of television monitors, dozens of screens that covered every area of the ship. Remo turned them all on. He caught four orgies in progress, nine drinking bouts, and twenty-two diplomats snoring alone in their beds before he busted the screen of each television monitor, and left the room in a bitter cloud of acrid smoke.

He checked every room. But there was no one left. Except for an occasional sleeping bag

or a can of food, there were no supplies, no weapons, nothing left that could give all the rooms and passageways a purpose.

He had found only the TV monitors and a stupid computer that had misread his character entirely. Now Smitty could have a time with that computer, Remo thought. Smith knew computers.

A large circle of the main passageway brought Remo all the way back to the small room with a mop and bucket and the wall through which he had entered. He went back into the maintenance closet, then into the hallway. On his way out, he jammed the closet lock so no one else could enter.

Most of the passageways on the ship were deserted. Guards should have been on duty but the copious overflow from the evening's party must have reached them, and Remo could hear snoring as he passed along the corridors.

On another level near the front of the ship, Remo found what he was looking for. Smith was walking slowly down a passageway, taking a few steps, pausing head down to stare at one of the large diagrams of the ship he held in both hands.

Remo recognized him from behind and came up on him silently and quickly.

"Smitty."

Smith turned. "Hello, Remo. Going for a swim?"

Remo ignored that. "Looking for something?" he asked.

"The secret of this ship," Smith said.

Remo smiled. "There's a string of passageways from front to back of the boat."

"Ship," Smith corrected. "And it's fore to aft, not front to back."

"Who cares? And there's some empty rooms. But no weapons. And a big computer."

Smith's face brightened, almost showing interest. "A computer? Where is it?"

He had him. He had him. After all these years, Remo had him.

"I can't tell you," Remo said.

"Why not?"

"It's a state secret. An Iranian state secret," Remo said. "See you, Smitty."

With a spring in his step, Remo turned and walked away, whistling. But by the time he got back to his stateroom, the happiness had dissipated and he went to bed, but did not sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At high noon, the Ship of States was flanked on both sides by sleek white yachts. Aristotle Thebos, aboard the 212-foot Ulysses, had gotten word of the arrival of Demosthenes Skouratis aboard the 213-foot Tina, and had called a meeting in a belowdecks conference room of all the men who had been working in the secret rooms inside the United Nations ship.

He explained to them very carefully what had to be done, and stressed that correct timing was essential.

Aboard the Tina, Skouratis was preparing to hold a similar meeting with some new crew members. He had been up before daybreak, checking the facsimile machines, reading the front pages of newspapers around the world.

The stories had not changed since the previous night. They all still contained Thebos' muted challenge to Skouratis to come to the United Nations ship.

Skouratis read them and smiled. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, The New York Times and the Washington Post and the London Times and Paris Match, tomorrow they might be carrying a different kind of story. One Skouratis would enjoy.

If there was a tomorrow.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Heavyweight fighters often wait in their dressing rooms hoping to be last in the ring and gain a psychological edge over their opponents by forcing them to wait for their arrival.

Aristotle Thebos knew this and was surprised when the captain's launch left from Skouratis' yacht Tina, which was cruising along on the port side of the Ship of States, and headed for the big United Nations vessel.

He waited until Skouratis' launch was near the docking station near the big ship's waterline before setting off in his own launch toward the UN ship.

The Skouratis launch pulled alongside the platform leading to the ship's outside elevator and waited there a minute for Thebos' launch to arrive. The two launches tied up together at the docking platform, gently bumping in the soft, rolling swell of the Atlantic.

Thebos, immaculate in a white dinner jacket and black satin-trimmed trousers that looked as if they had been painted on him, stepped onto the stern of his launch and leaned over the railing toward Skouratis' launch.

Looking down from the top deck of Ship of States, Remo saw Helena Thebos step out after her father. A half dozen men scurried behind her.

"Demo," Thebos called into the Skouratis boat. There was no answer.

"Demo, my old friend," Thebos repeated. "Come out."

A scruffy sailor stepped onto the stern of the Skouratis launch. He wore a blue-and-white striped shirt with a rip at the shoulder and grease-stained white trousers.

"He ain't here," the sailor said. "Hear me? He ain't here." He moved up close to Thebos, who recoiled as if dirt were catching. "He ain't here," the man said again, then laughed.

He untied his boat's lines and, a moment later, went back into the cabin and sped away from the big sailing city.

As Remo watched, Thebos punched his right fist into his left palm. The Greek nodded once to himself, vigorously, as if he had just become convinced of a point that had been doubtful up till now. Remo saw him whisper something to Helena.

Four hundred yards away from the Ship of States, Remo saw the Skouratis launch cut back on its motors and begin slowly to turn in lazy circles, as if waiting for something.

Down below, Thebos helped Helena out of the launch and onto the elevator platform. He turned and gestured toward the group of men on his launch and seven of them, all carrying attachÉ cases, followed Thebos and his daughter onto the elevator platform where they were hidden from Remo's view by the curving sides of the giant ship.

There was a pause of ninety seconds and then the elevator started moving up the side of the ship. Remo watched as it came up to his level at the main deck. The doors opened smoothly and Thebos and Helena stepped out alone. They paused in front of the elevator and a crowd of almost a hundred persons, taking the early evening air on the deck, applauded.

Helena saw Remo only a few feet away. Remo waved. Helena turned away in a gesture of rejection.

The empty elevator closed its doors automatically and started back down to wait at midships for the next call from either above or below.

The diplomats on deck continued clapping for Thebos and his daughter, who acknowledged the applause with smiles, nods and waves. Then the clapping stopped as another sound took over, the whirring of helicopter blades buzzing over the big ship. All eyes turned upward and saw a bright yellow helicopter, with the name Tina emblazoned on its underside, hover over the ship, then slowly settle in for a landing on the helicopter pad.

Remo watched Thebos and saw the man's lips tighten in a thin line. Then Remo glanced

down and saw Thebos' launch pulling away from Ship of States with only its pilot aboard. Skouratis' launch was still halfway between the UN ship and Thebos' yacht, cutting lazy loops in the water, like a soldier marking time.

The helicopter touched down on the landing platform, the size of Roseland's dance floor, and the engines were cut and the blades slowly whirred themselves to a stop. The crowd on deck advanced toward the chopper. Left behind were Thebos and Helena.

"Don't worry," Remo said to her. "I still like you."

"Begone from me," she snarled. Her voice caught her father's attention and he turned, saw Remo and smiled. "Remo, isn't it?" he said.

"None other," said Remo,

Thebos pulled Helena roughly away and they followed the crowd to the helicopter whose door was opening slowly. And then Skouratis hopped out.

He had won the battle for late arrival and had obviously decided not to fight Thebos in the clothing arena. Skouratis wore a rumpled gray suit, ill-fitting and baggy at the knees, and his hair was wild and shaggy in a thick clump atop his lined face.

He stepped down onto the wood-and-steel landing platform, raised above the deck, and looked around at the crowd below. They cheered.

"Viva Skouratis."

The small dump of a Greek smiled, and the smile broadened as he saw Thebos and Helena approaching the platform.

"Hello Telly," he called out.

"Demosthenes," acknowledged Thebos coldly, stopping at the bottom of the steps with his daughter. "I am glad you could come."

"I wouldn't have missed tonight for the world," Skouratis said. He smiled at Helena and Remo saw the power that emanated from the man. It was a power won not by beauty or by brains or by financial muscle alone. It was a power that glowed from a man who knew who he was and what he was, as if that knowledge gave him an edge over almost everyone he would ever meet.

"Helena," Skouratis said. "You have made the Ship of States the Ship of Beauty. Telly, we will have to rechristen her."

"You will have to, Demosthenes," said Aristotle Thebos. "It is your ship. Yours alone." Skouratis laughed raucously as Thebos visibly winced. "Today mine," said Skouratis.

"Tonight Helena's. Tomorrow? Who knows."

Then, with agility that surprised Remo, he hopped down the small flight of steps and took Helena's arm. "It is the custom of Greek men to dance with other men," he said to her. "But tonight I shall dance only with you because your beauty is immeasurable."

Remo watched Helena's face soften. She glanced up and caught Remo's eyes, looked cold, and turned back to Skouratis, a half head shorter than she. She blinded him with a smile and kissed his forehead.

"And someone said gallantry was dead," she said.

"Someone who never met you," answered Skouratis. "Come, Telly, let us go."

And, clearly the leader, Skouratis moved away from the helicopter platform with Helena on his arm and Thebos, looking as wilted as his clothing looked fresh, following them. The news of Skouratis' arrival had swept the ship and the main deck was filled now with thousands of persons who pressed in on Skouratis and Thebos as they tried to make their way to the large auditorium for the evening's party.

Remo backed up a step to make room for them. He felt as if he had backed into a building. He pressed back harder. Nothing moved. His shoulders hurt.

"Ox," came a voice from behind him.

"Sorry, Chiun," Remo said, without turning.

"Sorry? Because you almost disabled me by crashing into me like a cannon-shot? Just a

sorry?"

"My deepest, most profound apologies, Your Excellency, for allowing my unworthy form to so much as touch yours."

"Much better," said China. "Who are these people?"

"That's Thebos and his daughter. They gave the party last night. The little one is Skouratis. He built the ship."

"If you must have anything to do with these people, be careful of that ugly one."

"Why?"

"He would use your eyes for marbles. He is a man to watch carefully."

"And the other one?" asked Remo, nodding to Thebos.

"He would steal your eyes from your head, but only at night, only in a coward's manner. He is a weasel, the other is a lion."

"Remo. Master of Sinanju."

Smith stood alongside them. He carried his roll of maps under his arm.

"Hiya, Smitty," said Remo. "Find any secrets?"

"I'm working on it. And Chiun. How are you? How do you like your new clients?"

Chiun looked uncomfortable. "Actually, they are Remo's clients. It was he who suggested to me that we leave your gracious..."

"Chiun," said Remo.

"I understand," Smith said. "Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that Iran is really pleased with your work so far."

"As well they should be," said Chiun.

"Oh?" said Remo.

"Yes. I bumped into somebody from Iran that I knew a long time ago. We talked about security."

"And?" Remo said.

"And he said that Iran was lucky. They had hired..."

"Hired?" said Chiun, his voice squeaking with outrage.

Smith nodded. "Hired... the two most vicious, sadistic killers-for-money that they had ever seen. Murderers, I think he said. Yes, that was it. Murderers-for-money."

"They called us murderers?" Chiun said.

"Sadistic?" said Remo.

"I have to leave," Smith said. "I truly hope that everything stays well with you." He turned and melted into the crowd still milling about the deck, vanishing like a pebble into pea soup.

"Did you hear," said Remo, "what your sweet Persians think about us?"

"Iranians," said Chiun. "Obviously they are not Persians any longer. Persians knew the difference between assassins and murderers. They knew the difference between hiring people-hiring servants like doctors-and giving an offer to worthy men like those from the House of Sinanju. Oh, no. These friends of yours are no Persians," Chiun said.

"Friends of mine?"

"I no longer want to hear you discuss them," said Chiun. "I am disgusted with this evening's events. I will return to my room."

He moved off and the milling crowd seemed to envelop him, but he cut a path through them like a rip saw through redwood. He moved through the people like the dorsal fin of a shark cuts water, surrounded by the people but not impeded by them at all.

When Remo reached them, Skouratis, Thebos and Helena had paused at the railing on the main deck to look out toward Thebos' yacht. Remo noticed Skouratis look directly at his small launch, still circling several hundred yards away from Ship of States, and then nod.

Guards escorted the three down the escalator of the ship toward the main auditorium and

the crowd swelled in behind them, leaving Remo on deck. He looked out at the Skouratis launch, a dull gray speck out across in the night, across the Atlantic. The boat had stopped circling and was now motoring toward Thebos' yacht. And then, as Remo watched, he saw two small trails of air bubbles, white against the black sea like talcum specks, move slowly away from the launch and head toward the Thebos yacht.

Remo leaned against the elevator entrance until the crowd on deck had thinned out. Something gnawed at the back of his mind. He had sealed off the entrance to the below-ships passageways but there must be other entrances. He reached his hand up and touched the elevator frame over his head. Something. There was something in his mind, something he should know, remember, but he could not find it. All he had was an instinct that it was important that he keep his eyes on Skouratis and Thebos tonight.

The two men and Helena were in the royal box on the auditorium's mezzanine when Remo got there. Three armed guards stood watch at the door.

The Iranian box was too far away to be a good surveillance spot so Remo slipped in through the door leading to the box next to the Thebos' seats.

The auditorium box seats had been laid out around the oval perimeter of the large auditorium in order of importance. The royal box was in the middle of one of the long sides of the arena, hanging from a mezzanine deck with balcony seats above it, and ground-level seats below. Near the royal box were the boxes assigned to other countries by the United Nations General Assembly. These included India, Libya, Cambodia, a handful of African states.

Across the auditorium from the royal box were the boxes assigned to nations considered to be of secondary importance: Russia, China, France, East Germany.

And in the worst boxes, at the far ends of the auditorium, were the lowest-ranked nations: America, Israel, Great Britain, Japan, West Germany.

Remo looked around and decided that the UN had worked out a new equation. A country's importance was in direct relationship to its inability to feed itself.

Remo was in the box of the Indian delegation. The Indian ambassador occupied it with two young Western women. They sat in deep plush seats at the front of the railing, both blondes, each wearing low gowns that bared a pneumatic wealth of cleavage, while the ambassador poured champagne for them into crystal goblets.

He turned as he heard the door close and Remo came down the steps and sat in a straight-backed chair from which he could see across the three-foot-high wall separating India's box from the Skouratis-Thebos box seats.

"I beg your pardon," the ambassador said.

"It's all right," Remo said. "You won't be in my way."

The Indian smiled at the two women, a smile that apologized for the intrusion and promised quick resolution of this petty minor problem.

"I don't think you understand. This is a private party."

"Now, look, Mahatma," Remo said, quietly, "I'm here and I'm staying here. Now drink your champagne that somebody else paid for and play with your women that somebody else paid for and watch the party that somebody else is paying for. But leave me alone. Interrupt me again and that's something you will wind up paying for."

Remo's dark eyes narrowed as he looked at the ambassador, wearing a Nehru jacket and short knee-length trousers and silk stockings and slippers. The ambassador met his stare, then turned to the two women. Both of them had looked at Remo and were still looking at him.

"Oh, let him stay," said one.

"Yes. He won't be any bother," the second blonde said.

"If you insist," the ambassador said. "The women say you may stay."

"How lucky for you," said Remo. He leaned over the railing atop the low wall and tugged

on Helena's sleeve. She was sitting on the right side of the box, Skouratis sandwiched between her and her father in purple-velvet chairs. She turned and her face soured when she saw Remo.

"You do not know where you are not wanted, do you?" she said.

"Yes, I do," said Remo. "I'm not wanted here. Gunga Din just told me but, against his better judgment, invited me to be his guest for the evening. As long as we're going to be neighbors, I thought we might as well be friends, you and I."

"Go away, American." Helena turned in the chair, her back firmly toward Remo, and put her left fingertips on Skouratis' neck. The swarthy Greek looked up at her and smiled. He leaned close and whispered to her and she laughed. Thebos meanwhile was leaning over the railing, signaling to people on the auditorium floor below.

The crowd hushed as an amplified drum roll reverberated through the auditorium. People settled back into their seats. Remo stood up to look down into the pit of the arena, where he saw five men, dressed in gladiatorial costumes, move out onto the floor. Some carried swords; others spears and nets. Thebos was restaging the Roman games.

Four of the gladiators were white. The fifth was a black man, a huge black man whose muscles had been oiled and who glistened under the high-intensity overhead lights. As the men moved around the arena, a tremendous roar of awe and approval greeted the black warrior.

Remo glanced at Thebos who was sitting back in his velvet chair, his face displaying a satisfied smile. Around the balcony, ambassadors and their guests in VIP box seats moved forward in their armchairs to lean over the rails and watch the combat below. The crowd in the lower seats roared its approval. The five gladiators moved around the arena in a line until they were below Thebos' box, and then they pointed their weapons toward him in a salute. Remo saw Thebos nod to the gladiators. Skouratis, his arm around Helena's shoulders, moved his chair forward. Helena glanced back to see if Remo was watching. When she saw he was, she moved even closer to Skouratis at the rail.

Thebos had an expression below the smile on his face as he looked out onto the crowd. Remo analyzed it for a moment, then knew it for what it was. It was pity. For the gladiators? The look deepened when the crowd roared again. No, pity for the delegates. The descendant of the glory that was Greece smiled as he acknowledged the delegates' warm reception of his reminder of the brutal and stupid grandeur that was Rome. How appropriate, his face said, that one pack of illiterate ignorant brutes should cheer the memory of another.

Remo agreed. He moved up to the railing, pushing aside the Indian ambassador who huddled there with his two blondes, his hands busy in their laps, watching the action below. The five gladiators paraded once more around the arena. Then they squared off to battle. Two small white men faced each other. The black giant, holding a spear and net, faced two men, both armed with sword and shield.

The crowd expressed its approval of the black man; they cheered as he paraded before them; roared as he flexed the muscles in his huge back. Silence descended on the crowd, like the dropping of a curtain, as the two white men approached the black man. One fainted with a sword. The black man slipped trying to jump out of the way. He fell backward, hitting his head on the floor with a loud thunk and dropping his spear. One of the two white men danced in lightly and touched the point of his sword to the black man's belly, then looked up for a referee's judgment. The referee nodded, a clean kill. The crowd boomed. The two white men who had faced the black ignored them, and faced off against each other. The black man got up rubbing the back of his head, then turned a slow circle, facing the crowd, his arms raised overhead in a gesture of victory. He was loudly cheered. Remo glanced at Thebos. The Greek was leaning far back in his chair, laughing uproariously, and Remo decided that he was not a nice man. Nice was not

shoveling it in the faces of diplomats too stupid to know what it was. Skouratis was not laughing. He was still talking to Helena, his right hand looped over her shoulder, his left hand on her knee. He whispered easily into her ear. Remo watched for long minutes. She did not once turn to see if he was looking. After the gladiators had left the arena, the lights dimmed, and when the giant cake came out, the whole arena stood on tiptoes to see the largest cake ever baked. The cake was white, like the hull of the Ship of States, on which they were all headed toward Africa. A John Deere tractor hauled it on a flatbed, six times the length of a mobile home. In the program, guests were informed that enough egg whites had been used to keep three American farms working a half year, along with fifteen tons of flour and eighteen hundred pounds of sugar. The cake itself had to be applied over aluminum rigging that held it, otherwise the center of the cake would have been as hard as rock from the pressure of the tons of cake above it. There were real lights on the superstructure of the pastry ship and each deck had sugar and marzipan coating, the entire production of that sweet from Belgium and Luxembourg. The cake itself, rumor had it, cost two hundred and twelve thousand dollars to bake. So immense was the model ship that the cake pieces, used like building blocks, could not be baked but had to be air blown into molds. The engineer who designed it got paid twenty-one thousand dollars in commissions, the usual ten-percent architect's fee. It was the size of a double garden apartment in Queens. An orchestra greeted it with a Greek tune. Only one thing differed in appearance between the giant ship grinding its massive way toward Africa and the sugary model on the arena floor. And this was black letters, each the size of a forty-year-old oak. Besides the lights and the aluminum superstructure, they were the only uneatable things on the cake ship. And when the ship was towed to the center of the floor, imbedded lights in the black-plastic letters flashed on, as if offering a message from the gods in dark space. And the word was: SKOURATIS. It flashed like lightning in the arena. And from all the loudspeakers came the voice of Aristotle Thebos. "Skouratis," he said. "Forever let the greatness of this ship bear his name. Demosthenes Skouratis. This party honors Skouratis. This cake honors Skouratis, as does this great ship. Let this ship be forever Skouratis and Skouratis be the ship. From this day forth, the class of this ship shall be known as Skouratis. This vessel, this gift to the world of Demosthenes Skouratis, shall henceforth be known as Ship of States of the Skouratis Class." Applause rose like the thundering of gravel rolling down into a galvanized-iron valley. And when Remo again looked at Aristotle Thebos, he was leaned far back in his chair, laughing so hard that tears streamed from his eyes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"We want Skouratis! We want Skouratis!"

The chant started small, then built up and welled through the vast auditorium until it rattled off the high ceiling and seemed to echo the crashing of the waves outside the safe walls of Ship of States.

The chant started small because it had been started by just two men. They sat in low seats opposite the royal box and all night long Remo had watched them watch Aristotle Thebos. And when the cake came in and Thebos had delivered his speech, Remo saw him signal toward the two men with a motion of his right index finger. As Remo watched, one man left the other and walked quickly to a spot about forty feet away from his seat. And then they started:

"We want Skouratis."

Around them, voices picked up the chant until it was no longer a chanted request, but a roaring demand.

Skouratis looked to Thebos. There was a look of embarrassment on his ruddy, wrinkled face. Thebos nodded and Skouratis stood.

Behind his back, Thebos again gestured to his two men down in the lower seats.

Above the cheers for Skouratis, who stood at the front of the box, waving his arm in greeting to the crowd, came two voices again:

"Down here. Cut the cake! Down here. Cut the cake!"

And it too became a roar. "Down here. Cut the cake!"

With an apology to Helena Thebos, Demosthenes Skouratis waved a reluctant agreement, then turned to walk up the steps leading from the royal box. He paused and gestured to Thebos to accompany him.

Thebos shook his head. "Go," he said. "It is for you, Demo. Go."

As the door opened in the back of the royal box to allow Skouratis to leave, a man with a face like cement leaned inside. Thebos saw him and the man nodded.

Amidst the roar of voices, Thebos whispered to Helena and Remo listened. The secret was focusing the ears the way people focused their eyes. If you could narrow down the angle from which your ears took in sounds, then even a whisper could not be lost in a hubbub of background noise because the background noise was thinned out.

"I knew the shoeshine boy could not resist a birthday cake," Remo heard Thebos say. He saw the Greek look to his daughter for approval, but she was silent.

"You go back to the yacht now," Thebos said. "Then send the launch back for me."

"Father, I want to stay," said Helena.

"I am afraid I do not care what you want to do. You must get back to the yacht. Now. Time is very important."

Helena Thebos looked as if she was going to say something more but changed her mind. Without another word, she stood up, leaned over the railing of the box for a last look at Skouratis who was advancing toward the huge cake, a giant silver knife in his hand, then she walked up the carpeted steps toward the door in the rear of the royal box. She wasn't going to leave. Remo saw a set in her shoulders, a glint in her eyes, a forward thrust of her chin. She had no intention of being a dutiful daughter and returning to the Thebos yacht.

He got to his feet and followed her out into the passageway. Thebos' guards clustered around her.

"That's not necessary," she spat out. "I can find the way to the deck without you. Stay here."

She pushed through them angrily and stalked off down the corridor. Remo fell into the cluster of guards outside the door to the Thebos box, waiting there, moving in and out through them so no one would notice him or get a fix on who he was, until Helena turned at the end of the passageway.

When Remo saw her again, she was walking down the stairs instead of going up to the deck and to the elevator to the waiting launch.

Helena went down two flights and, with an assurance born of moneyed breeding, pushed her way through clusters of people until she was standing on the level floor of the auditorium, under the overhang of the royal box, hidden from her father's view.

Her eyes were fixed on Skouratis. He looked up from the cake cutting, saw her and smiled, a thick-lipped possessive smile. He waved to her, swinging over his head the giant knife spotted with dots of whipped cream.

Remo came alongside Helena. "I thought he was just a shoeshine boy," he said.

She looked up startled. "It does not concern you."

"Papa's going to be unhappy that you didn't do what he told you."

"I have often made Papa unhappy. I think that after tonight I will make him very unhappy again. Very unhappy."

She kept her eyes on Skouratis and smiled in his direction when their eyes again met. There was no understanding women, Remo thought. She had hated Skouratis, really hated him. And he was ugly, ugly as a frog. And here she was, mooning and goo-goo eyed, looking at him as if he were the incarnation of Hercules and Achilles together.

"What about last night?" Remo said to her.

"What about it? It meant nothing and you mean nothing. Now will you please leave me alone?"

"Yes. Stop bothering the nice lady," said Chiun from someplace that seemed to be inside Remo's ear. "Things to do on this vessel, always things to do, and I must do them all because you are busy mashing people."

"All right, Chiun. What is it?" Remo said.

"You had better come with me. Your Emperor Smith has been hurt."

"Smitty?"

"Is there any other Emperor Smith that you know?" Chiun asked.

They went through the crowds as if they were not there, Chiun leading the way, Remo moving along with him as if tugged by Chiun's slipstream.

"Where is he?"

"In our room."

"Where did you find him?"

"Hidden in the bowels of the ship."

"The secret passages?"

"If you call them that," Chinn said.

"What were you doing there?"

"I did not choose to watch these animals eat cake tonight. And there are no television dramas, no beautiful stories aboard this ship. And so I thought to find the source of the secret television in our room. Perhaps, I thought, that is where there may be television worth watching. And I found it, a room, hidden in the middle of the ship."

"I know. I've been there. What about Smitty? What happened then?"

"What happened then was terrible," said Chiun.

"Yeah?"

"Terrible."

"Dammit, you already said terrible. What was terrible?"

"What was terrible was that the television was broken. There was this big computer and it had a big television screen on it that tapes are played through. But some lunatic had broken it. Ripped out wires. Broken the screen itself. And the same in another room of television sets. Terrible."

"I know about that. I did it. What about Smith?"

"You did it?"

"Chiun, later we'll talk about television. What about Smith?"

"I found him on the floor in one of those secret rooms. He had been beaten."

"Badly?" asked Remo.

"I would say very badly. It looked as if he had been struck in the head but the striker obviously did not follow through because Smith's head was still intact. There were also marks on his chest and stomach but again the attacker did badly. The skin was not perforated so the force of the blows was inadequate to the task. Yes, I would say he had been beaten very badly."

"Goddammit, Chiun, I'm not interested in a critique of others' styles. I'm interested in Smith. Is he all right?"

"He will live. He is unconscious. I let him remain so because the body needs rest at

times like these. I should think you would pay attention when I point out the errors of other people's attacks, since you are so likely to make those same mistakes yourself." They were outside their room now in the Iranian wing of the ship and Remo slipped past Chiun and into the room where Smith lay, unconscious, on a mat on the floor. Blood trickled down the left side of his face from a head wound. His clothes had been ripped open, either by an attacker or by Chiun, who had been feeling for his injuries. Remo knelt alongside him.

"Chiun, you say he'll be all right?"

"I didn't say he would be all right. I said he would live. All right is not nasty, lunatic, penny-pinching, unappreciative."

"Okay, Chiun. Okay." Remo removed Smith's left shoe and pressed his thumbs into the arch of the thin man's foot.

Smith groaned.

"Not too much haste," Chiun cautioned. "Slowly."

Remo relaxed the pressure, then began again. Smith's breathing became quicker and more shallow. From deep blood vessels buried inside the foot, Remo could feel the man's heartbeat quicken, speed up.

Smith opened his eyes. He moved his head to look around the room, then groaned.

"It's okay, Smitty. We're here," Remo said.

"Remo, Remo. You have to hurry," Smith gasped.

"No. Don't hurry. Chiun said to go easy."

"No. Must hurry," Smith gasped. "Ship is being blown up. Set afire."

Remo dropped Smith's foot. It bit the floor with a thud that forced Smith to wince.

"What?" Remo said.

"Secret passageways in middle of ship. Heard people planning explosions. They caught me."

"How the hell'd you get in there?" Remo asked, remembering how he had sealed the entrance door.

"Used crowbar to open closed door."

"And they were already inside?"

Smith tried to nod and groaned again. There must be another entrance to the passages, Remo realized.

Smith struggled up to a sitting position. "Remo. Go stop that fire. Thousands die. Thousands die. Thousands."

"Will you be all right?"

"Fine. Go."

Remo dashed past Chiun into the passageway and ran at full speed toward the stairs leading to the upper deck. Chiun was at his side.

"I am proud of you, my son," he said.

"Why?"

"For doing the right thing."

"What right thing?" Remo asked.

"Running away. We will get ourselves upstairs and commandeer a small boat and be far from this evil vessel before anything happens."

"Wrong," said Remo. "We are going to dismantle those bombs."

"Then why are we running away from them? The bombs are hidden below us."

"I'm getting us some help," said Remo.

"Who needs help?"

"Good. I'm glad you said that. Chiun, you go down and start taking apart those bombs. I'll be right there."

"Orders, orders, orders," said Chiun, even as he turned and sped down the stairs toward

the belly of the ship.

Remo got to the deck just in time to see Aristotle Thebos step hurriedly onto the elevator, close its door and head down below toward the platform where his power launch waited.

The deck was crowded. The seas were smooth and some of the diplomats and their staff had taken a break from the party and come up to the deck for fresh sea air. They were clustered around the Skouratis helicopter.

Remo looked over the side of the ship. Thebos stepped onto the little dock, next to his launch. There were a half dozen men there, carrying attachè cases, waiting for him. The launch was just tying up.

Where had the men with the attachè cases come from?

Remo had no time to worry about that. He moved through the crowd toward the Skouratis helicopter. The crowds of people had hidden it from view. But close up, Remo could see it had been wrecked. Wires were torn, and the motor had been dismantled. Parts were strewn over the wooden deck. Skouratis and Helena looked up from the deck at the pilot who was inspecting the damage. Skouratis had his arm around Helena's shoulders.

She had disobeyed her father and, unless Remo missed his guess, she planned to disobey him even more and spend the night on Skouratis' yacht.

"Greek," Remo said, moving up alongside them.

Skouratis fixed him with a malevolent squint while asking Helena: "You know this person?"

"Ignore him, dear."

"This ship is going to blow, Greek, and it's your doing," said Remo. "Let's go."

Skouratis tried to signal to his guards in the crowd but his right arm wouldn't move.

Remo held the elbow in a pincer between his thumb and middle finger.

"Don't yell, don't signal, just move," Remo said. He shoved Skouratis in front of him as if he were a child's push toy on wheels.

Two guards moved toward them. "Tell them it's all right," Remo said.

"It's all right," Skouratis told the two men who moved aside to let them pass.

"What do you mean this ship is going to blow?" asked Skouratis, as Remo pushed him into a hatchway leading to the steps going below.

"What I mean is, your goons have set their bombs and if it goes, you go."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Skouratis said.

"We'll see."

Below, Remo found the broom-closet door pried open, where Smith had used his crowbar. The rip in the inside steel wall had been enlarged by Chiun and Remo pushed Skouratis through the opening.

In the inside passageway, Skouratis looked around in bewilderment. "What is this?" he said.

"What I don't understand is why you'd want to blow up your own ship?" Remo said.

"Damn you, crazy American. I don't know what you're talking about. What the hell is this place?"

"And you don't know?"

"No, I don't. I never built this. This was oil-storage space. It was never changed over when the ship was remodeled. There should be no corridors here, no rooms."

"There are now," said Remo. "Corridors, rooms, computers, closed-circuit TV. And bombs."

Chiun came down the passageway toward them.

"It is very bad," he said, shaking his head.

"What is?" asked Remo.

"I have found some bombs. I have busted them. There are many more."

"Well, we'll bust them all," said Remo.

"And there is gasoline everywhere. Bottles of gasoline, clothes soaked with it, and radio devices everywhere," said Chiun.

"Thebos," Skouratis spat. "That pimp."

"What's he got to do with it?" asked Remo.

"That's why he's been promoting this ship as mine. He's planning to sink it, and me, too. The Skouratis disaster. That pandering piece of garbage."

He pulled away from Remo who was surprised by the small man's force. Remo took a step toward the ripped wall to head off Skotiratia. But, instead, the Greek stepped farther into the corridor.

"Where are these bombs? This gasoline?" he asked Chiun.

"Down there. Everywhere," said Chiun, gesturing along the corridor with his hand.

Skouratis went down the corridor, running at full speed.

"No pimp in patent-leather pumps will destroy a Skouratis ship," he roared. His voice echoed through the metal-walled passageway as if it were the voice of doom.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aristotle Thebos stepped hurriedly from the launch onto his yacht Ulysses and took the pair of field glasses that were immediately extended toward his hand.

He leaned over the railing and focused the glasses on Ship of States, moving majestically through the gathering night gloom, dipping, rising, crushing wave and swell under its giant prow.

"How many minutes?" he asked.

One of the six men who clambered onto the yacht from the stern of the launch looked at his wrist-watch.

"Three minutes more," he said.

"And the helicopter will not fly?" asked Thebos. "Are you sure?"

"Not unless they can find a way to fly a helicopter without an engine," the man said.

Thebos laughed and lowered the glasses. He turned to a uniformed officer aboard the yacht.

"Tell Miss Helena to come on deck. It is time she learned that the shipping business is not all polite smiles and whipped-cream cakes."

"Miss Helena, sir?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Miss Helena has not returned to the yacht. Isn't she with you?" the officer said.

Thebos dropped the field glasses. They bounced on the railing of the yacht, then slipped into the cold Atlantic.

"You mean she's still..."

No one answered. Thebos turned away and watched the United Nations ship. His hands gripped the rail like two vises. Only a few minutes more. No time to return for her. His daughter would die before his eyes.

"Too many of them," Skouratis yelled, ripping wires from a cluster of dynamite sticks.

"Too many of them." He straightened up and looked around. Throughout all the corridors were explosives and fire bombs, each set with individual timing devices. "We can't get them all."

Remo and Chiun were tearing wires, too.

Chiun said, "Remo, we have obligations to think of. It is time we left here."

"Not yet," Remo said.

"If not now, not ever," Chinn said. "This is none of our affair. We have done the best we could for those Persians who do not have television and who consider assassins to be

killers."

"Pipe down and keep tearing wires," Remo said. "We're not doing this for any goddamn Persians."

"For whom, then? No one else has contracted with us for our services."

"I'm doing it for me," said Remo, ripping out a string of orange-coated wire that connected a clock to a half dozen taped-together dynamite sticks. "For America."

"For America?" Chiun asked. "The next thing you will tell me we are giving up our lives for the mad Emperor Smith."

"Right. For Smitty, too. Keep working."

"I will never understand you people," Chiun said.

"At least we don't all look alike."

Skouratis stood up. "No use," he said. "They're going to go and we can't get them all in time. They'll just tear this ship out of the water."

In frustration and anger, he pounded his fists on the steel bulkhead separating the passageway in which they stood from the engine compartments. Tears rolled down the furrows in his cheeks. "That swine. That Greekling swine," he said.

Remo could hear it—the first swish of fire. It started with a muffled thump around a twist in the corridor, and he could not see it, but he smelled instantly the acrid gasoline fumes. Then he saw a twist of smoke curling around the wall and down the corridor toward them.

"My ship! My ship!" Skouratis yelled.

"We'd better go," Remo said.

Skouratis shook his head angrily. "No. I stay. My ship." Tears ran down his cheeks in a steady trickle. "I stay."

"There still may be time for us to get out of here," Remo said.

Another muffled whomp shook the steel walls. Another bomb.

"Come on," said Remo.

"Wait," Skouratis said. "We can drown it. Drown it. Smother the explosions and fires."

"Drown it?"

"If we can get water in here, it'll smother everything," Skouratis said.

"Fill the ship with water, it'll sink," Remo said.

"No. It's all compartments. We can flood this and it'll still be safe." He stopped for a second. "Why bother? We can't get water in here in time."

Chiun cackled a laugh. "In an ocean, there is no shortage of water." Another bomb exploded.

The crackling of flames grew louder. The corridor began to turn gray with smoke.

"Where's a wall that has water outside it?" Remo said.

"Over there," Skouratis said. "But we can't..."

"Yes, we can," said Remo. "Show us."

Skouratis ran down the corridor. He was just a little old man in a rumpled gray suit, but he charged into the mist of smoke like Alexander leading his troops into battle. He stopped at the curve of the corridor and pointed to the thick steel wall. "There. The ocean is right beyond that. But it's three inches thick."

"Steel is steel," said Remo.

"But people are real," said Chiun.

"You better get going to the door to get out of here," Remo told Skouratis. He looked upward and, high overhead, saw a sliding panel that looked like an elevator door. And he realized what it was. From the small dock at water level to which launches tied up, a panel opened to get into the ship. That was how the terrorists boarded the vessel. And he remembered the small gang of people who got off Thebos' launch onto the dock, but when the elevator reached the main deck, only Thebos and his daughter were on it. The

rest were Thebos' demolitions men and they had gone into this secret part of the ship through the panel, to plant their bombs and fire devices.

Remo nodded. Later he would take care of Thebos.

A bomb exploded behind them. The concussion pushed Remo toward the wall. "Get out of here," he yelled to Skouratis. Alongside Remo, Chiun ran his fingertips over the wall. "It is just steel," he said confidently. "Now!"

Like pistons, his and Remo's fists thrust forward against the steel wall, hitting it not in unison, but in a steady sequence of blows, each only milliseconds behind the last blow. The blows went into the core of the metal as vibrations and, as the steel vibrated to each blow, another blow shattered those vibrations and set up different stresses inside the steel. The metal creaked, as if groaning in pain. Remo heard Skouratis' steps moving out of the corridor.

The blows of their hands-left, right, left, right-continued against the wall and, under the press of muscle and bone, the steel turned mushy and brittle and chips of it flew off, and finally Chiun spun on his feet and drove forward with his right fingertips. His hand bit through the steel as if it were a slice of American white bread and his hand was out into the cold Atlantic, and when he withdrew his hand, green seawater poured in through the hole.

Remo and Chiun each grabbed one side of the rip in the steel and twisted it back, as if it were the top of a sardine can. The water's flow erupted into the compartment with the whoosh of a giant fire hose and the pressure pushed Remo and Chiun back against the far wall.

Chiun said, "We go now."

"Right on, Little Father," said Remo. The two men ran and the flow of water lapped around their ankles as they moved toward the exit. Behind them, around them, they heard the muffled thump of explosions, but then they were through the huge rip in the wall leading to the maintenance closet. With their hands, they pulled the torn metal back to almost close up the hole, then escaped out into the corridor where they again sealed the closet door.

The corridors were filled with people, running in both directions in panic. Diplomats trampled each other, bodyguards fled ignoring their responsibilities to protect anyone else.

"See what happens when you hire cheap help?" Chiun said,

"Let's go up top," Remo said.

On the main deck, they found Demosthenes Skouratis talking to the ship's first officer. He gestured with his finger and, while Skouratis wore no uniform, the first officer understood the voice of command.

"After everybody is out of the central wing, then seal off all bulkheads leading into other sections of the ship."

"That will allow the central wing to fill with water," the officer said.

"That's where we want it kept. The ship will float. Now! Hurry!"

Skouratis saw Remo and Chiun. He was spun around as two diplomats pushed roughly by him, racing toward the lifeboats at the stem of the vessel. Chiun tripped the two men who skidded on their faces.

"I don't know how you succeeded," said Skouratis, "but I owe my ship to you."

The sounds of battle came from the stern of the boat. Men in formal dress, bodyguards in business suits, women in long gowns fought and clawed with each other, trying to struggle into the lifeboats.

"Look at them," Skouratis said. "Like ants, they flee in panic. And they run the world."

"Most men live lives of ants," Chiun said. "The only world they run is the world of ants. Real men run their own lives."

"You are very wise, old man," Skouratis said.

Below their feet, they could feel the muffled thump of more explosions. Remo felt someone at his shoulder and turned to see Smith. The blood on his face had dried in a smear.

"What happened?" Smith said.

"It's all right, Smitty. The ship's safe."

"Good, Remo. Good." His voice trailed off and he began to crumble. Remo caught him in his arms and leaned him in a sitting position against the wall of the deck.

He looked up as a pistol shot resounded, a small pop in the open ocean. At the stern of the boat, the Indian delegate had gotten his hands on a gun and had just shot a Cambodian delegate. He was now ripping a life jacket from the corpse. Two women screamed.

"Just a minute," Remo said to Skouratis. "I gotta go straighten this out."

"How will he do that?" Skouratis asked Chiun, as Remo strolled toward the stern of the ship. "There are many men there."

Chiun shook his head. "No. There are many ants there. There is only one man. That is Remo."

As Skouratis watched, Remo strolled into the swarm of men fighting over life jackets and battling each other for the lifeboats. Skouratis felt as if he were watching a child stack wooden blocks as he saw the seething mob slowly form up into straight lines, and their voices lower.

As Remo came back toward Skouratis and Chiun, there was a sound that washed over the deck from the men at the stern. It was a song. They were singing.

God bless America,
Land that I love...

"I won't ask you how you did that," Skouratis told Remo.

"Just my native charm, I guess."

The first officer joined them. "Everything is secure, Mr. Skouratis."

"Good," the Greek said. "You have done well. You are a good sailor." He pronounced the word with the reverence usually reserved for speaking God's name.

"Thank you, sir." The young officer's face flushed with warmth and pride.

Suddenly, a pair of arms were thrown around Skouratis' neck from behind.

"Oh, Demo. I was so worried." It was Helena. She tried to kiss Skouratis. He turned and pushed her away.

"Your father is a pimp," he said. His voice dripped hatred.

"I am not my father."

"No. But you are a Thebos. And the slime that runs in his veins runs in yours. That pimp tried to destroy this vessel."

"I didn't... I don't..."

She stood there as a supplicant in her white gown, her hands raised gently near her hips, looking for solace but finding none in Skouratis' eyes.

"Another thing," he said coldly. "Tomorrow, in the press of the world, will be a story that will seem to indicate that your father was my secret partner in the building of this ship. I want you to know that is not correct. I engineered that story to embarrass your father. But this is a ship. It was built by a seaman. By me. Skouratis. What could your father have to do with such a thing? Pimps build nothing, except stupid daughters. Begone, piece of filth."

Helena backed away as if his words were blows. Her face went white, then red. "Shoeshine boy," she spat. "My father will crush you like the beggar in the streets you deserve to be. And I will help him. There will be no rest for the Thebos' clan until garbage like you is swept away. Pig."

Skouratis waved his hand at her, as if dismissing a naughty child, too stupid to be punished.

Helena backed away a few more steps, stared at Skooratis hard as if impressing his visage on her memory forever, then walked away without a look back. Her shoulders were straight; her back a ramrod. She was a person with a mission, a mission that would sustain her all her life, because the mission was hatred and when everything else died, hatred still lived.

"You didn't exactly win any points there," Remo told Skouratis.

"It had to be done," the Greek said.

"Of course. It had to be done," Chiun said.

"She hates you, you know," Remo said.

"I want her to. What would life be without a Thebos whose nose I can rub in dung? And there is no joy in it if they are just victims. They must hate me to make my moment even sweeter."

Remo looked over toward the Thebos yacht, barely visible a thousand yards from Ship of States, cruising easily along through the Atlantic.

"I'd think he hates you enough," Remo said, "without your getting the daughter turned against you, too."

Skouratis looked at his watch.

"Too late for him. Too late." The words died out in a tremendous explosion. A thousand yards away, the center of the Thebos yacht erupted in a giant ball of fire.

The force of the blast shot flames skyward and against the flames could be seen bodies flying into the air. Then there was another explosion and the stern of the yacht blew into the air.

Remo saw Helena Thebos move to the rail and scream.

"Too late for Thebos," said Skouratis, smiling slightly. "It is always too late for a pimp."

"How the hell did that happen?" asked Remo. As he watched, the Thebos yacht exploded again. It broke into sections and they dropped into the water like jagged stones.

"Who knows?" said Skouratis with an expressive shrug. "Perhaps all the explosives he had stored on board?"

Then Remo remembered something he had seen earlier: two thin streams of air bubbles leading from the Skouratis launch to Thebos' yacht.

"Or maybe some underwater mines planted by frogmen?" Remo said. He looked at Skouratis carefully.

"One never knows. The sea is a risky mistress," Skouratis said. He turned and looked out at the ocean, which had swallowed up Thebos and his ship.

"Good-bye, pimp and panderer. You were never of the stuff to be a seaman."

Helena Thebos stopped screaming. She shouted at Skouratis. "Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!"

"A pimp's death is not murder. It is garbage removal," Skouratis said coolly.

"Now I know what they mean," said Remo.

"What do they mean?"

"Never turn your back on a Greek," Remo said.

Skouratis laughed, then leaned closer to Remo and said, "I like you and the Oriental gentleman. Would you work for me?"

Cbiun's eyebrows raised and, as Remo started to speak, Chiun tapped him on the shoulder.

"Remo. Please leave this to me. I should handle all such negotiations."

"Not this time, Little Father. The last time you did it, you had us working for Persians." He turned to Skouratis.

"Thanks, but; no thanks," Remo said.

"You have a job?" asked Skouratis.

"We have a job," Remo said.

"With whom?" asked Chiun. "Whom do we have a job with? I would like to know of it. This is the first I have heard of it. Who has a job?"

"Ignore him," Remo said. "We have a job." Remo's lips were pressed tight. Skouratis shrugged.

"Just for my own curiosity," he said, "whom do you have a job with?"

Remo pointed down to where Dr. Harold W. Smith slumped unconscious against the deck railing.

"With him."

"Oh," said Chiun. "Remo, you are gross."

"Shhhhh," said Remo.

"If you ever change your mind," Skouratis said, "you need only call on me."

"Thanks," said Remo.

"We will," said Chiun. "We will. We most certainly will."

"Don't count on it," Remo said.