

JASON STRIKER

MARTIAL ARTS

SERIES VOLUME II

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Bamboo Bloodbath & Ninja's Revenge

Piers Anthony and

Roberto Fuentes

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BAMBOO

BLOODBATH

Chapter 1

RUNNING THE LINE

I took hold of the lad's arm, tugged gently. He resisted, whereupon I caught his left ankle with my right foot and swept it out from under him in a de-ashi barai foot-sweep. His weight was on that leg; he fell with a cry. He was ten years old.

Instantly I was on top of him, pulling his arm back in a jujigatame cross lock till he shouted "Mate! I yield!"

I leaped at the next. He was twelve, and he weighed about ninety pounds. I caught him with his hands down and pinned them to his sides. I lifted his feet from the tatami, the judo practice mat, twisted him to the horizontal, and set him down. There was laughter in the dojo, the practice hall.

The next one was a fifteen year old, obese; he weighed almost as much as I did, but it was mostly fat. I went over his head with my right hand, forcing him to bend almost horizontally; then I grabbed the back of his belt and went down in a fast sumi-gaeshi, or back rolldown. He went over me; instead of letting go I rolled on top of him and grabbed him in a yoko-gatame holddown.

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So it went. I was "running the line" with my judo students, starting with the novices and working my way up to my black belts. The object was to throw each one as rapidly as possible, until I had met every one of them. This gave each student the

instructor's individual attention, if only for a moment, and that was important. It also served to illustrate that I was still the master here; every so often they needed a reminder that the old man still had it.

Still, there was room for variation. Sometimes I played with a beginner, a small kid, going in hard but not throwing him, making it look as if he was really resisting, and even on occasion (but very seldom!) letting him throw me. On the other hand, when I met a cocky brat too big for his britches, I did the opposite, throwing him several times very quickly with a variety of moves-or even with the same move, making him look ridiculous. Sometimes I would strangle him a couple of times for good measure. Never hard, of course.

It always started fast, but as I encountered the more experienced students at the other end, it slowed. They were harder to throw-my instruction would have been worthless if they weren't-and I was no longer fresh. The last two or three could be real bastards. But I had to throw them, and in reasonable time, or I would lose the respect of the group.

I grappled with a green belt. He had good promise, but was too timid to know it. So I eased up, trying a couple of moves I knew he could block, making him look good. Instruction is more than merely physical; I tried to inculcate confidence and courtesy, too. Then I put him down with a harai-goshi-a sweeping loin hip-throw-and moved on.

One after the other, I put them down. I lost track of the number; I wanted only to get on through and proceed with the formal class session. Each time I ran the line it was rougher, because all my students were getting better, learning my tricks, and I had too many students at the moment. In time the size of the classes would

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whittle down. Then I would have to worry only about paying the rent.

Hardly looking. I tried a foot-sweep on the next okuri ashi barai. He fell, but did not release his hold on my sleeve. The kimono stretched tight across his chest as he twisted, and pulled halfway up to his shoulders.

She!

He? One white globe of flesh showed under that twisted shirt.

I have taught many women self-defense, but this particular class was all male. What was woman doing in the line?

My surprise interfered with my concentration, and her yank on my sleeve pulled me down so that I barely avoided falling on top of that handsome breast. I have quick reflexes but this was happening in mid-throw. I spun to the side, rolling on my shoulder while the girl raised her legs and flipped to her feet. There was another tantalizing flash of her bosom, her breasts bouncing together, before the shirt fell back, covering it.

I sat up on the mat, bemused and dismayed. No student should have thrown me like that, especially not a girl, and most particularly not a strange one. Of course I had been trying to disengage

when she made her move, but who would believe that? My students were already chuckling at my embarrassment-those whose eyes had recovered from the girl's startling display of anatomy. It would be hell to get them oriented on basic judo practice after this.

She looked my way, enjoying the commotion, and now I got a good look at her face. She was a platinum blonde, her long hair almost white, and her green eyes were heavily painted with deep shadows. She was using some kind of far-out makeup, with white lips and powdered skin, the powder perhaps concealing a tan. She had long false eyelashes and longer silver nails.

I knew I had never seen her before; but something about the bones of her face, and particularly her manner, nagged me. I have a fair memory for distaff beauty-and she was a beauty, despite the baggy judogi uniform, or gi, she wore.

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Then it clicked. "Thera Drummond!" I exclaimed. Her hair had changed completely, from moderate-length brown to long blonde, and she had put on weight in provocative places, but it was her.

She smiled. "At your service, Jason Striker. Your memory must be fading with age, like your judo skill. Can I give you a few pointers in technique?"

"She's got pointers, all right!" one of the black belts commented

admiringly. That wasn't strictly true, as she was manifestly bra-less under the gi; I like the soft rounded bouncy effect of the unbound bosom, but "pointers" is not the applicable description.

"Let me give you a hand, old man," Thera said. "I'll raise you."

"She sure will!" someone called. "Stiff and tall!"

I needed no assistance to stand, either way, but I played along.

Class discipline was already a shambles; I could only aggravate it by getting stuffy. What was Thera doing here? I hadn't seen her in months, and had thought she was away at college. I reached up to take her proffered hand.

A mistake! She wasn't through fooling with me, as I should have known. She didn't pull, she pushed, with the result that we both went sprawling, with her on top of me. Possibly by accident, but more likely by design, her left breast landed in my face with tangible impact. It was a good breast, long since graduated from the orange league to the grapefruit league or even beyond, and I suppose she wanted me to know it.

"Hey, I'd take a fall for you anytime, Jason," she said, twitching her shoulder so as to make that breast move an enticing inch under the gi, but no more than an inch. "Let's try that again."

There was more vigorous laughter from the line, even from the ten year old. The students were enjoying this, and their eyes were taking in every detail.

I disengaged my nose from her anatomy. "Cut it out, Thera!

This is a class!"

"You look tired," she said mischievously. "Why not let me

finish running the line?"

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"Yeah, yeah!" the husky black belts at the end of the line agreed eagerly.

I moved Thera off me and stood. "I'll talk to you after the class." I said.

She caught my hand. "Jason, it can't wait."

God, she was as passionate as she was beautiful. But I had had prior experience with her, and regarded her as one of my three top prospects for avoidance. Nothing but trouble could come of this, tempting as she was physically. "It'll have to."

"Jason, it's my father!" she said urgently.

Her father: millionaire industrialist Johnson Drummond. He had once paid me a pretty figure to tutor his pretty daughter in self-defense, and he hadn't cared what else she learned in the process.

He was tough and unscrupulous, but I understood why; it was the natural mode of the born moneymaker. But in his daughter the same qualities were not so appealing.

"He knows where to reach me," I said. I turned to the class and bowed to the next student in line, signaling the resumption of our exercises.

But Thera just wouldn't let go. "You must come with me now!

His life is in danger!"

"So you came to play games with my judo class!" I snapped.

"I shouldn't have," she admitted. "But I just couldn't resist,

and at least I got your attention in a hurry. Now I'm serious. You've got to come talk to Daddy."

I had to get rid of her, that was certain. I couldn't do it while there was a male audience for her to play to; she'd be running around the dojo naked pretty soon if she thought that would help her get her way. "Army, take over. Randori!" I called. That meant it was time for the students to pair off for mock fighting. Some tried for throws while others did mat work, while Army watched. Sometimes he would stand over a pair on the mat, so as to prevent others from stepping on them accidentally. It gets crowded when a whole class goes at it, and we don't like accidents.

"Now, Thera, come to my office," I said.

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"Sure thing," she said, jiggling after me. One student was so busy watching her motions that he paid too little attention to those of his opponent, and got ignominiously thrown. God! Before the day was out the rumor would be all over town: Jason Striker was seducing sexy girls in his office. Thera was trouble when just passing through.

In the office I put it to her succinctly. "I am the trainer for this year's American judo team," I explained. "We're a fifth-rate judo nation, but this time we hope to put up a respectable showing. The meet is only three weeks off. I'll be happy to help your father -but not right now. It's all I can do to keep up with my regular classes. This team assignment has priority."

"But he's been threatened! We can't wait three weeks!"

"Let him hire a bodyguard. He can afford it."

"Jason, you just don't understand!" she said. "They're going to kill him! Horribly!"

"Is there a nice way to kill?" I asked dryly. But my resolve was wavering. I did owe Johnson Drummond a favor or two, and Thera was not the type to go into hysterics over trifles.

"He's sent for Diago, but you know how it is, it takes a while to locate Diago."

I knew. Diago was a top flight martial artist, distantly related to Thera-something of a black sheep-and he was in trouble with the law. He had to stay hidden whenever he was in the States, and he could not afford to trust many people. Drummond had resources, but locating Diago was bound to be slow.

"Dad's going to be killed tonight or tomorrow. I know it. He's afraid of everyone. He's dismissed all the help, and he won't talk to strangers. But he trusts you, Jason."

"Sounds like a case for the police," I said uneasily.

"They don't provide bodyguards for private citizens, and anyway, it wouldn't work. This isn't ordinary murder! And Dad would be sure the policemen were really killers in disguise. He could be right; the killer may have them in his pay."

"That's paranoid," I exclaimed.

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"Maybe if you ever had more money, you'd know what it could

do, Jason. We know. We can't trust the police-not for this. Those who trusted the police are dead."

This didn't add up. Drummond was no coward, and neither was his daughter. They weren't paranoid, either, just imperiously rich.

"What good could I do?" I asked. "If what you say is true, he'll think I'm in the pay of his enemy, too."

"No! I told you, he knows you and he trusts you. He was going to offer you a lot of money to be his bodyguard, but I told him that'd drive you off in a huff. So I came myself." Her eyes looked pleadingly into mine, and it was effective because I had the feeling she was not putting on an act. "Jason, please. Will you?"

A lot of money . . . It was true that I tried not to let money influence me too much, but it happened that I was unusually hard up at the moment. That seems to be chronic in the trade; few teachers make fortunes, and martial arts teachers are no exception. Many go broke, in fact.

Thera pulled on my arm, making me face her. Her eyes were teary, a fetching effect. "Jason, it's not for me! If it's money you want, you can have it; Dad will pay anything! If it's something else, well, I know you liked me once, and there won't be any strings."

"Shut up!" I yelled explosively.

She actually got down on her knees before me. "I love my father. I don't want him dead! What do I have to do to make you help him?"

Brother! She was pulling out all the stops. I realized I'd probably

be better off to check this out now, rather than suffer her further blandishments. And, in truth, I had liked her once. Maybe it hadn't really worn off.

"All right, I'll go talk to your father," I said.

"I knew you would!" she exclaimed, delighted. She tried to kiss me, but I fended her off "My car's right outside."

"We'll use my car!" I said, remembering the way she drove.

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Better to face an armed berserker . . . "It won't be as fast, but at least we'll get there alive."

Docile enough, she acquiesced. She stepped into a dressing room and changed out of her gi within a minute. She had always been quick at manipulating her clothing. I just had time to give more instructions to Army and dive into my own street clothes. My students, seeing me dressing on the run, shirttails flying, chuckled knowingly. What could I say?

We drove sedately across town toward her father's estate.

"Was it really so bad between us, Jason?" Thera asked wistfully.

"It's past history," I shrugged, "I've known other girls before and after you. Some better, some worse."

"But things are changed now. I'm older-"

"Age has nothing to do with it! You said you wanted to marry me-"

"And you said I'd have to be a black belt in judo and get two

years of college-"

"And long before you did either, you fornicated with my friend
and top student-"

"Who is dead because of you!" she cried angrily. "I loved him!"

That hurt. There was too much truth in it.

"I'm sorry, Jason," she said after a moment, contritely. "I didn't
really love him. I thought I did at the time, but-well, he was
available, and you weren't, and I was young. The more I learn
about men, the more you stand out. I was wrong . . . but I'm learning.
Learning how right you were the first time, and how right I
was to want to marry you. You're teaching me yet, just as you
taught me judo. Can't we-"

"No!"

"I guess you meant it when you said you'd met someone better."

"Yes. A Chinese girl. Kung fu,"

"Why didn't you marry her, Jason?"

"She's dead."

God, that memory hurt!

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Thera sighed ruefully. "I just keep striking out! Well, tell me
about the worse one."

That was easy. "Latin. She's married. She tried to kill my fiancée,
and maybe succeeded, and I-oh, forget it!"

"So you really aren't currently attached."

"I don't know."

"Oh, so you're holding back on me!" she said with a mock

affront. "There's yet another girl."

Actually, I had been thinking of my Chinese fiancée; I loved her yet. But I felt too ornery to say that to Thera. "No girl. She's a woman. A drug addict. I call her the Black Karate Mistress."

Thera laughed. "Now you're pulling my leg! Here-I'll help you." She lifted her right leg and crossed it right over her left and into my lap-a fair contortion, in a car. But then, she had always been athletic. All my girlfriends tend to be; I'm attracted by physical competence.

I was pulling her leg in a way-but there actually was a woman such as I had described. That was a whole separate story, however. Or so I thought at the time.

"For God's sake!" I exclaimed as my hand, reaching for the gearshift, smacked into her shapely calf. I picked up her leg by the ankle glanced across-and was treated to a striking view of her firm inner thigh beneath her short skirt. Her panties had "I LOVE YOU" embroidered in red-right in the crotch.

I almost drove off the road.

"A black woman-and an addict," she murmured as I finally got her leg out of my way. "I really hadn't figured you for that, Jason. You're so . . . so strait-laced, really."

"It's my judo ethic," I said, nettled. It was not the first time I had been accused of being stuffy. "Don't make it more than it is. She attacked me and injured me-damn near castrated me!-and then she saved my life. I don't know whether she hates me or loves

me."

"Or you her," she murmured. "Unfinished business."

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"No business of yours!" I said angrily. "Who gave you leave to pry into my romantic life?"

"By the authority vested in me as one of your has-beens, I pry," she said.

I tried to stifle it, but the laugh burst out anyway.

"Come on, Jason. How many of those girls did you actually lay?"

"What?"

"Don't pretend you don't know the word. You're not that sheltered. How many did you run the line with-all the way?"

Running the line-an apt analogy! "All of them," I said. The strange thing was the confessions Thera was prying from me were cathartic. I should not have answered her at all, but I couldn't help myself.

"Don't you think I deserve an equal shot?"

"Now just a-"

"After all, you said some were worse than me."

What next! "Thera, I-"

"I'm no virgin; you know that. Why not permit me the same lapses you've indulged yourself with? How can you hold my fling with Jim against me, when you've done the same with at least three other girls since then? I don't even profess the same moral

standards you do; mine are looser."

She was beginning to make sense. It alarmed me. All I really had against her was that "fling" . . . and I had done worse myself.

Was I really a male chauvinist or hypocrite?

Reaching for her blouse, she said, "Let's stop right now and-"

That was too much. She had overplayed her hand. Theoretically we were going to save her father's life. "I'm no casual stud for nymphos," I said harshly, to cover the fact that I had been more than a little tempted. Sighting down a well-formed leg has a peculiar but powerful effect on me. In fact, I become tempted to augment vision with touch.

She sighed. "Damn! Almost had you that time."

A fair analysis. Still, she had made me think, and to re-evalu-

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ate my personal inclinations. On that basis, I had to deem Thera a current prospect, rather than a defunct one. She really had done me less injury than I'd supposed, and she had a lot to recommend her.

We pulled up at the estate. There was no guard at the gate-evidence that Drummond really had dismissed his help. It seemed foolish, if his life were really in danger; but the pressure of fear can do strange things to people. Drummond, evidently, was not accustomed to an immediate, personal, physical threat to his existence, and didn't know how to handle it.

The door was locked-an almost pitiful precaution, considering

the number of large plate-glass windows in the house. Any serious murderer could readily enter.

"Daddy, it's me!" Thera called. "I brought him,"

In a moment Drummond opened the door himself. He was a husky, well-fed man, but now he looked haggard. He could not have slept well or eaten well in several days.

He shook my hand vigorously. "God, am I glad to see you, Striker!" he said. It was the obvious truth.

"Thera would not take no for an answer," I said.

"Whatever she offered you, consider it doubled! Striker, I want you with me!"

"She mentioned money and sex," I said, nettled again. These people thought anything at all could be bought, if the price was right. The irony was, ninety per cent of the time they were quite correct.

"I'll go fix us something to eat," Thera said quickly. She strode out of the room without a backward glance.

Drummond smiled briefly. "She's a big girl now. Age of consent.

I could wish my daughter were more circumspect, but . . ."

He shrugged. "How much?"

"Don't worry. I turned her down."

Again he smiled, even more briefly. "I was referring to money.

"So was I."

"Striker, name your figure!"

I thought of Thera's figure, but resisted further by-play.

"Drummond, I didn't come here for money or sex, even though I know you've got a lot of the one and she's got a lot of the other. I came because you've bailed me out a couple of-times and I figure I owe it to you. I don't know whether I'll stay. But if I do, it won't be for a fee."

"Yes, Thera said you'd be that way." He sat down in an easy chair, gesturing me to do the same. "But I'm a money-oriented man, Striker. I've got to pay for what I get, or I don't trust it."

"Thera said your life had been threatened."

"I want-you for three days; twenty-four hours a day. When I sleep, I want you next to me; when I sit on the pot, I want you there. The moment I am alone may be my last. Once the time is up, I'll be safe. Shall we call it five thousand for the duration?"

Five thousand dollars for three days' work! He was one-tracked on money, all right! "No fee, I told you! What was the nature of this threat-mail, phone, personal?"

"You have assumed the training of a number of new students,"

he said. "They were formerly at a rival studio-"

"Dojo, not studio," I said. "Associate, not rival." I didn't see the relevance to his problem, but at least he was off the subject of money. Just as well; his money, like his daughter's body, was underhandedly tempting. Five thousand dollars would magically convert my estate from red to black.

"Why do you train them?" he inquired.

"Their original dojo went out of business. These things happen."

"Why did they all come to you? Surely some would have preferred other dojos?"

"They had to come to me, or lose their money. They're all on contract. Look, we're wasting time! Why are you afraid for your life?"

"On contract. Does that mean they have to train with you. as in baseball?"

Why his questions? "No," I explained, "they're paying, not

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playing. Martial arts interest tends to be transitory, so many senseis-trainers, to you-can't earn a living on drop-out students.

The bills have to be paid, even if no students show up. So they require a contract: so many lessons at such and such a price for the package. It's a good deal, for the serious student."

"And the drop-outs?"

"They have to pay for the full course anyway. They know that when they sign. Without contracts, many dojos could not stay in business; they need to be assured of a regular income."

"Do you use such a system in your own dojo?"

"Contracts? No. My students pay only for the lessons they receive. That's just the way I work. Now, if you'll just answer my questions-"

"In a moment, Striker. You have many drop-outs?"

"The usual percentage. But I don't think any of them would be a threat to you, if that's what you're driving at."

"So you don't make much money," he said.

Oh-so that was it. I sighed. "Not much. But I'm choosy about how I make it, so if you don't mind-"

"That is why I trust you, Striker. You can't be bought. You will take money only for services rendered and you will not - render an illicit service."

I smiled. "Yes. Now we understand each other. So you can stop trying to pay me for-"

"Not quite. I require a service of you, and I will pay." He raised his hand to forestall my objection. "But who do your inherited students pay?"

"A finance company. It took over their contracts when their dojo closed."

"And the finance company pays you?"

"No," I said shortly.

"Then why do you train them, if you receive no payment?"

"It isn't right to make them pay for nothing, when they are not at fault. That sort of thing gives the field a bad name."

"So you train them for nothing? Because of principle?"

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"I'm not the first to do that. There are some bad apples in the arts-fake senseis who put on a big show and sign up many students, then deliberately skip town and open a new dojo under another name and start all over. These unscrupulous operators hurt

the business for all of us. I'd like to see them all in jail! But meanwhile there is the problem of the students. A responsible sensei will-

"What finance company is involved?"

"General Loans, Inc. But don't blame them; they made a business investment, and they advanced money to the failing dojo in good faith. They have a right to-

"I own General Loans."

"I'm not surprised," I said, surprised. I hadn't known he was into that kind of enterprise; but of course he was into everything that had the smell of money. "Well, you made a good investment."

"I shall reimburse you the value of those students' contracts- the amount you should have earned if they had signed with you I think this is the ethical thing to do, since you are already training them, and since you are not at fault in the failure of the other dojo. Do you agree?"

But then General Loans would be taking a loss!"

"If a finance company keeps money at the expense of innocents -and you, sir, are a financial innocent-it looks bad. That sort of thing gives the field a bad name. Sometimes a sacrifice has to be made for the benefit of the industry . . . as you pointed out just now."

"I-" But he had me, oh so cleverly. He'd known all about training contracts and my connection with his company, of course; Johnson Drummond knew all about all of his business interests. Which was one reason he was rich.

I should never have tried to debate the ethics of finance with a professional. He had destroyed my position as readily as I would have destroyed his body, had he attacked me with a knife. It meant a sizable payment-enough to relieve me of my present difficulties and keep me flush for some time. Five dollars per lesson for

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each hundred-lesson contract, and twenty transfer students . . . \$10,000 total!

"Now I ask you as a friend," Drummond said. "Will you stay with me for three days-at no charge?"

What could I do? "Tell me your problem."

For answer, he handed me two pieces of paper. One was a check for \$10,000, already signed. The other was a crudely scrawled note on a torn fragment of a grocery bag. "TWO MILLION. TWO HUNDRED THIRTY-FOUR THOUSAND, EIGHT HUNDRED FIVE DOLLARS. EIGHTEEN CENTS."

There was no signature-just sketch like a child's drawing of a dog, hardly recognizable. And overall, a smudge.

I looked up. "A practical joke!"

He shook his head. "No."

"There's no-no inducement. Your daughter has not been kidnapped, no bomb has been planted. And no instruction for delivery of the money. Just a figure chosen at random. How do you know it's even a threat?"

"That figure is not random. it represents precisely ten per cent

of my immediately liquifiable assets as of last month."

Immediately liquifiable assets . . . That would be savings accounts and the like. Only a small portion of his actual wealth, most of which would be invested in real estate, stocks, bonds and God knew what else. And still a figure a thousand times the size of what I could ever make in a year. But what point to dwell on that? "A tithe," I said.

"But how could anyone know your worth, except you?"

"Only my accountants. I thought they were absolutely trustworthy.

You can see why I have been firing people recently."

"Yes."

Thera returned with a tray. "It's not much, but I never was much of a cook-and it's getting scary in the far corners of this house." She saw the note. "Yes, that's real, Jason. It's the way the Hyena operates."

I shook my head unbelievably. "If I received such a note, I'd throw it away and go to bed."

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"You could afford to," Drummond said. "You have wealth to rival mine-only yours is all invested in physical combat expertise.

That's why I want you with me . . . when the Hyena comes."

Thera had brought hot chocolate and sweet rolls-not my idea of good nutrition, And she was right; the drink was thin and the rolls were burned. She was no chef. "What's this about a hyena?"

"I suppose you would not be in a position to know,"

Drummond said. "He doesn't bother with anyone worth less than

ten million dollars."

"See that paw-print?" Thera asked me, pointing to the smudge.

"That's the key. It's genuine. We had it checked out."

"An actual hyena print?" I asked, bemused.

"Yes," she said. "Lab, zoologist, the works. A real live hyena stepped on that paper, and not long before we got it. The mud wasn't dry yet."

"But we don't have hyenas running loose around here!" I protested.

"Precisely," Drummond said "Coincidence is out of the question."

"I haven't seen anything in the newspapers about big shakedowns.

Are you sure-"

"It has been hushed up until the police can catch the Hyena.

Assuming they're not already in his pay. But word gets around, in business circles as elsewhere. I know of six strikes by the Hyena, and I suspect that's only half the total. A lot of people must have quietly paid up. Now he's coming for me." And there was no doubt Drummond took the threat seriously.

I set my inedible roll aside. "I guess I just don't think the way a millionaire does! If I were threatened, I'd go to the police-or at least double my guard. Or use electronic defenses. Or skip town for a while. You're just sitting here, wide open for an invasion!"

"You're a liar," he replied. "If you were threatened, you'd stand and fight."

Good point! But I tried again. "If you really believe you have no protection, why don't you simply pay off and be done with it?"

"Why don't you take money for bodyguard duty?" he asked in turn.

"Dad's ornery about payoffs," Thera said. "Matter of principle involved, he claims. I never could understand it myself -but he'll die before he pays one cent of tribute."

I could understand it, put that way. I had thought Drummond was unscrupulous, but I saw now that he had his scruples and held firmly to them. I respected him more for it.

"And I told you about bringing in the police or other strangers," Thera said. "Dad backed the wrong political machine last time out, and those scandals didn't help."

Her remark didn't help me. Political machine, scandals . . . Where were Drummond's scruples when he was involved in that?

"And I do have protection-now," Drummond finished. "The best."

I got up and paced the floor. "You overestimate what I can do. One hood with a gun could take me out with no trouble. Or they could lob a grenade in here."

Father and daughter shook their heads in unison. "The Hyena doesn't use firearms," Drummond said. "Not unless there are police or armed guards about. That's why we have none here."

I pounded my right fist into my left hand. "Two or more of us here are crazy! Even if there were honor among extortionists-and there sure as hell isn't--how would your attacker know you didn't

have a gunman planted in ambush? He can't-"

"He knows," Drummond said. "The way I know money, he knows murder."

"You'll have to explain it to me in concepts of one syllable!

There's a piece or three missing from this jigsaw."

"Let me do it, Daddy," Thera said. "Jason, sit down."

I sat down. She planted her exquisite posterior on my lap and spoke quietly into my ear, as though this were a love tryst. Her warm breath tickling the hairs of my ear was sexually exciting- but what she said was something else.

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The typical "Hyena" case went something like this: the businessman received a note, naming a tenth of his available assets; and the financial assessment was always uncannily accurate. If he paid, he put the exact amount, in cash, in a satchel and dropped it from an airplane over a certain wilderness area, buoyed by a small parachute so that it would not burst on impact with the ground. That was the end of the matter-provided he made the payment exactly ten days after receiving the note.

If, in paying, he tried to set a trap of some sort, he would be killed just as though he had not paid. On one occasion the victim had not known about a secret police stake-out. But the Hyena had known, and had come for the kill. So the police were generally left out of it. In fact, they were seldom notified.

If the person refused to pay, the Hyena would come for him within three days of the deadline. No one had seen the Hyena and lived. Instead their mauled bodies were found, chewed and scratched as if by some vicious wild animal. Sometimes hyena dung was found in the area-and once the victim's bones had been cracked, as though a beast with extraordinarily powerful jaws had sought the marrow within them.

No hired protection sufficed; one way or another, the Hyena nullified every measure. But if the victim braved it alone, he was the only one killed, and none of his family were touched. One man had fancied himself an artist with the foil; he had been found stabbed through the heart by that weapon, but not otherwise mauled. The Hyena seemed to be a sportsman, of sorts.

"That's his way of running the line," Thera concluded, touching my ear electrifyingly with her lips. I was appalled at my body's readiness to be aroused despite the sinister material being fed to my mind.

"My deadline passed this morning," Drummond said. "The Hyena will come tonight-or tomorrow, or the night after. My daughter refuses to leave me here alone. So I have had to seek help-special help. If only I had been able to locate Diago in time! He could have handled the monster!"

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Probably true. Diago was a top-notch judoka, seventh dan, with a phenomenal kiai! yell that could stun a roomful of attackers. I had had adventures with him, and had thought at one time

he was dead, but he had shown up again alive. An excellent choice-
but Diago wasn't here.

"Let me get my nunchakus." I said. "They're back at my dojo."

"You stay with Daddy," Thera said, giving my crotch a last
hot nudge with her derriere. God, she could wiggle! "I'll fetch
your-what did you call it?"

"Nunchakus. Like two billy clubs chained together. It is a deadly
hand weapon, good against one person or a crowd, and I know
how to use it. If the hyena comes armed with sword or club-

"So long as it's not a firearm," Drummond said as Thera
bounced up and out. "I think we can fight him off-but we've got
to go by his rules."

"If you say so," I said dubiously. But the truth was, I didn't
much like guns myself. A gun turns the traditional ninety-sevenpound
weakling into Superman, negating twenty years of discipline,
leading to irresponsible threats and murder. Banish guns
and a lot of trouble in our world would disappear. That's my view,
anyway.

This Hyena sounded like a demented but highly skilled martial
artist, possibly a kung fu adept, who had turned his deadly
talent to extortion-successfully, so far. Probably he had had many
years of rigorous training; and such training necessarily inculcates
the martial discipline and ethics along with physical proficiency.
So he followed certain rules, because they were part of his being-
such as meeting weapon with matching weapon. This was not a

thing outsiders could understand well, but I understood it.

I was intrigued. I had encountered some of the best, in the course of my career, with and without weapons. I was ready to take my chances. Probably the Hyena had not come up against a competent professional martial artist in the course of his extortions. I was a fifth-degree black belt in judo, and a third in karate—a true third, as I had been rated in Japan by Mas Oyama himself. Which,

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frankly, is plenty competent. I had taken my share of titles in competition, and I had a good deal of practical experience.

Yes, we would see! Perhaps we could both solve the mystery and eliminate the menace of this dreaded Hyena. And then I could return to my training duties with the American judo team.

I heard the roar of Thera's car taking off. She had a spare, of course; her first car had been left at my dojo. The luxury of riches . . .

There were still a couple of hours until dusk, and the Hyena never struck by daylight, so there was time. "Come on, Drummond," I said. "It could be tonight. I hope it is, because we're fresher now than we will be in a couple of days of waiting. I want to check over this house—all the doors, windows, dumb waters, secret panels, other potential entrances. Chimneys, too. We'll lock everything and nail boards wherever we can. We'll do a thousand dollars' worth of damage to your furnishings, but I want to hear him coming."

"It won't work," he mumbled. "All that's been tried before.

He's like a cunning wild animal; he gets in no matter what, and he doesn't make noise."

"Maybe-but let's encourage him to come in the way we want him to. If there's a fight, I want to know the terrain; maybe we can trap him in a cul-de-sac."

"I hope so," he said without much hope. "Look, Striker-I don't really expect to come out of this alive. But you may be able to get the Hyena while he's getting me, or to trap him before he gets away. That will stop his extortions, and that alone seems worthwhile . . . Take care of my daughter . . ."

He hid courage, when it came to the crunch. But this would take more than courage. "She'll be with us, remember? We may all die."

"I hope not." He shrugged. "What I'm saying is, if you and she survive me, I want you to-well, if you'd just move in for a while, until she settles down-"

"I can't do that!" I said. "I've got a team to train!" That was

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only half my objection, of course. Drummond evidently wanted to marry his daughter off to someone who could control her, but I wasn't interested. Oh, the notion had its points . . . But Thera was only eighteen years old, and big money was not my bag.

"Guess you'll just have to see that I pull through, then," he said with a wan smile.

I nodded. "I intend to do that."

We checked out the house, making it as secure as possible.

The structure was sound, but there was so much glass that the job was reasonably hopeless. Drummond had electronics devices galore, including closed-circuit TV coverage of every room, even the bathrooms. That made me pause a moment, for I had used a bathroom.

But neither of us had much faith in this system. Electronics could be nullified by other electronics-or by a cut in a power line. And the other victims had had similar devices.

Dusk came. I was satisfied that no quick entry could be made without our knowledge, and I was now thoroughly familiar with the layout. Much of the glass was of the so-called unbreakable type, and it was in double sheets with a vacuum area sandwiched in between, for insulation and frost-free viewing. Hard as hell to break or cut through silently! I had also set up several little boobytraps for the potential intruder, mostly makeshift: a bucket of silverware perched atop a partly opened door; a spring device behind another door that would release a kitchen knife against whoever opened it; nails, and thumbtacks scattered in dark passages and near windows, several broken glass bottles outside the house; a concealed trap in the earth near the front door-with a knife standing inside, point up; old Christmas bells hung from the bushes, to make tintinnabulation when brushed against; ankle-high strings tied to noisy tin cans . . . A real pro would not be fazed, unless he laughed himself to death; but an amateur would be in trouble. Again, there was a subtle design to it all: to bring the intruder

to me, at the place of my choosing. Which was the tremendous family room. It was really a combination living room, den, and dining room, with a functional fireplace, soft sofas, and a huge

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black mahogany dinner table complete with ornate silver candleholders.

These things were used, too; there was plenty of wood, and the candles had been burned part way down. Fancy cigarette lighters were all about.

It was not that Drummond could not afford separate rooms for these various functions; it was that he could afford to ignore convention and arrange his house for his private convenience. He, didn't even have a wife to say him nay, evidently. I did not know whether Thera's mother was dead or divorced-but judging from her lack of concern and Drummond's silence, it was probably divorce. She must have been some swinger, since he had kept the child.

There were floor-to-ceiling mirrors set in the walls, so that the room seemed three times as big as it was; in fact, it looked palatial. A huge crystal chandelier hung over the table. Bronze and marble sculptures were set artistically about, and there were a number of paintings. The entire floor was covered by a deep white carpet-hell on the cleaning woman, I was sure-and a plush pool table stood at one end.

I shook my head, half in admiration, half in wonder. If I had a

million dollars to spend; I would not have invested in such things as rugs and mahogany tables. But the room had a certain comfort and elegance, and I knew I could quickly become spoiled by such surroundings. Too bad it was about to be the scene of a death struggle.

Last, I gave Drummond himself some tips on self defense. It takes years to really master this subject as it does with any discipline, but a little common sense goes along way in a pinch.

Drummond was a stout, strong man, somewhat handicapped by rich living but still capable of striking with power. Certainly I did not expect him to sit passively in the face of murder threats.

"Don't try to use a knife," I cautioned. "The way you describe the Hyena, he would merely take it away from you and cut off your nose with it. Stick to things a trained fighter wouldn't use; that puts you on a more even basis if he tries to match weapons.

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Pick up one of those silver candlesticks and bash him in the face. Silver is heavy, and it'll really hurt! Or grab some of your ivory pool balls and start throwing. They're potentially lethal. Of course, your best bet is to get out of his way-I mean to run; like hell!- but in this instance I think you're safest right here with me. If he tries to finish you while I'm still functioning, I'll be on him in a hurry."

He nodded emphatically in agreement.

"But if I'm done, you run! If you do go outside, grab the lid from a metal garbage can. It makes a hell of a good defense against

a knife. It's like a big shield."

"That's right!" he agreed, gaining confidence. "I can defend myself-without formal weapons. Especially if you have wounded him. That's the best way."

We were ready, except for one thing. "Where's There?" I asked.

"She should be back with my nunchukus by now." I was also concerned lest she stray from the front walk in the dusk and step in to my pit trap.

Drummond looked nervously at his watch. "She might have had trouble getting into your building."

"My dojo is open. There's an evening karate class there. All she had to do was go in and ask for the weapon."

"Would they give it to her?"

"She knows where to phone for confirmation!"

"Yes . . ." he agreed "Perhaps we should phone there, just to be sure." He picked up the phone.

His face became set. "The line is dead he said, his voice the same.

"Uh-oh." I felt a prickling at the nape of my neck. Had the Hyena been at work even while we prepared to repel him? "She couldn't call . . ."

Then I had a worse thought. "Could she have returned here-and been intercepted by the Hyena?"

Drummond set down the receiver and paced nervously, skuffing the rug. "I should never have let her go alone!"

"She can take care of herself," I said. "I taught her how to disable a man who tried to . . ." But right now I didn't believe it.

A first-degree black belt cannot stand against a higher degree unless there are special circumstances. Everything favored the Hyena.

We had been fools. I could have phoned the dojo and had a student deliver the nunchakus. Now-well, maybe she was just late. A routine disruption of the phone service could account for that, preventing her call, complicating things.

Suddenly the lights went out.

"I have an emergency generator that should cut in automatically,"

Drummond said nervously. "Unless that has been disabled . . ."

The lights stayed out. That was answer enough.

"Light the candles!" I said. "And make a fire in the fireplace."

"Yes!" he agreed as if clutching a life raft. In a moment he had an ornate candelabra lit; it was a monstrous silver artifact with four arms. There was a candle in each, plus another in the center. The baroque whirls in the silver resembled waves of the ocean, and in the flickering light of the candles those waves seemed to move.

There seemed to be waves across Drummond's face, too, and the mirrors made of the entire room a ghostly sea.

Then he touched a lighter to the logs lying stacked in the fireplace. The tinder ignited readily, and soon there was a blazing fire that threw its own brand of light all across the room and the

ghost-rooms. It was one of the most impressive effects I had ever seen; the room must have been designed for this.

Drummond stopped suddenly, squatting by the flame. "I heard something!"

I listened intently. Was there a sound-or were we overreacting?

The wood was crackling merrily.

Then I heard it: a gentle, hurried rapping on the distant front door. The acoustics of the house brought that faint sound to us as if it were a few feet away.

"Thera!" I exclaimed, vastly relieved. "She must be trying to

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get in without arousing the Hyena!" She could not use her key; we had not only locked the door, we had barred it. It was made with a big iron bar in the back: old fashioned, but about as secure as it was possible to get. Impossible to pick this lock!

"Yes!" he agreed gratefully. "I shall let her in immediately, before . . ."

Before the Hyena caught her. Yes indeed! She was in deadly peril. But I held him back. "No-I'll do it"

I trotted to the door and cleared it.

It burst open in my face. A man charged in, slamming me back with his shoulder. Several others followed him, all masked. Half a dozen killers, at least.

I had a stunned moment of realization before my reflexes threw me into action. We had blocked every entrance-and then innocently

opened the front door to the Hyena.

Because he had knocked.

Chapter 2

HYENA

I leaped at the first intruder, the one who had shouldered me back. He was wearing a ski mask: a brightly knitted stocking affair that covered his head and face down to the throat, with only two holes for the eyes, one for the nostrils, and a slit for the mouth. It made him completely anonymous and somewhat unearthly. He looked a little like a TV puppet, one of the Muppets.

But he had tiger's claws on his hands. Those claws were like brass knuckles, except that their business side was inside-razorsharp projections passing over the fingers, making them true claws that could take the eye out of a victim or tear the flesh from his bone. Such a strike would give the impression that a wild animal had mutilated the victim.

He struck with those claws in a descending arc, trying to rip open my face. I countered with a seiken jodan-uke, an upper block with the forefist. As part of that motion I drew back my other hand, the gesture creating a counterforce that lent more power to my block. That is one of the distinctions between amateur and

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professional fighting; the novice commits himself wholly to one attack, however ill-advised, while the professional takes care that his entire body contributes. Thus he had no follow-up when his

shot was parried, while I was balanced and ready for my own attack even before my defense was made. I delivered a powerful roundhouse kick, mawashi-geri, the ball of my foot ramming into his armpit.

The effect of that kick was electric. He uttered a stricken cry, his whole body convulsed, his arms shot stiffly to the sides and he crumpled to the floor. My foot had connected squarely with the big nerve complex in the armpit. He was dead from shock to his involuntary nervous system.

I whirled, batting aside the clutching claws of the second man as they went straight for my face. The trouble with tiger's claws is that you have to be a tiger; you can't vary your attack much. He followed up with a strike to the side of my head, that I parried with a forefist middle inside block, seiken chudan uchi-uke. I put a twist in my blocking arm for extra strength, keeping my withdrawn arm tightly tensed. Then I used my free hand to give him an oyayubi ipponken, a thumb one-finger fist: my hand was balled, but the thumb was bent with its tip pressed hard down on the second knuckle of the forefinger. Striking with the knuckle of that thumb just below his covered ear, I felt the bone of his jaw give way; the blow had terrible force. It is high on the proscribed list for karate matches, and not in common use. But I was not in any civilized tournament now!

I set up to kick him, but withdrew my foot before connecting.

You do not kick dead meat.

I spun to face the rest, but they were gone. While I had been battling the first two in the hall, the others had gone right on into the house. Drummond could be dead by now!

I charged down the hall and into the living room. It had only been a few seconds.

I saw the pack rushing Drummond, who was behind the pool

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table. His arm moved. The first thug fell to the rug clutching his shoulder. It had been broken by a thrown billiard ball.

Drummond, spurred by a wholly realistic fear for his life, was really acting on my advice. He was a veritable windmill, filling the air with colored balls. Alas, I wished his aim had been as good as his intentions; he could have knocked them all out. Even so, massed as they were-another foolish amateur tactic-the attackers presented a good target. A second man was hit in the stomach and momentarily stopped.

The first man to reach Drummond was balked by the pool table; I could not have placed the millionaire in a better defensive position, considering the nature of the weapons. The thug's head leaned over the table as his body was brought up short, and Drummond hit him with so much force that his cue ball broke.

The man fell to his knee, while Drummond grappled with another.

I had made Drummond wear a heavy leather jacket as an afterthought, perhaps anticipating the tiger's claws, and this now protected his back from the raking metal. Both men fell, rolling

on the floor behind the pool table, Drummond's powerful arms squeezing the man in a bear-like embrace.

I was not idle, of course, while this was happening. I charged toward the action, barely pausing as I passed the thug with the broken shoulder to crush the back of his knee with my heel as he tried to get up. He was on his hands and knees, one leg extended to the rear; it was that knee I struck. Only a second, and his knee cartilage gave way, putting him out of action for good. That kind of injury is extremely painful, and never heals completely.

Now I came to the one who had been hit in the stomach. He was not in top form, as he was still gasping for breath; spittle flew from the mouth-slit in his gaudy ski mask. But he tried to stop me, grasping for my legs as he rose from the floor. With my fingers tensed, I gave him a blow with the heel of my palm, a shotei to the upraised chin and combined it with an o-soto-gari half-leg sweep to his right leg. The combination snapped his neck and sent him tumbling on his back to the floor.

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Drummond and his bandit were still embraced, neither able to obtain a clear-cut advantage. They had now rolled over before the blazing fire, scattering the ornate fire tongs, ash-shovel and black broom across the hearth.

Another killer leaned over the pair of them, trying to get the schaining body of his companion out of the way so as to finish Drummond with some clawing to the face. I leaped high in the air

while uttering a terrible battle cry-TAO!-and landed with both feet solidly on the assassin's back, breaking his spine.

But the last man was already on me, the metal of his handclaw raking the top and side of my head. The pain was terrible, and blood streamed down and into my right eye. Half blinded, I threw him off and staggered back.

My rear crashed into the mahogany table. The silver candelabra toppled and started to fall. Automatically I caught it, afraid the burning candles would set the house on fire.

The man who had raked my face regained his feet. Now he hurdled the tangle on the floor and came at me. The blood was running over my eye, filling the socket and making the tissues burn and sting so awfully I could hardly see.

I threw the candelabra at his head. His ski mask caught fire.

The thing blazed up hideously, yet it was anchored at his neck so that he could not take it off quickly. He screamed and clutched at it-and in doing so tore his face with his tiger's claws so that the bright red of his blood mixed with the decorative colors of the mask. He had no further interest in combat.

I took advantage of the respite to grab the tablecloth and mop my own face with it. The beautiful white cloth was ruined, of course, but my sight was a matter of life and death at the moment.

Drummond was on his feet again, clutching a huge heavy chair.

He had a nasty rip on his scalp-these were endemic in this fight!-right across the bald dome. Evidently that was the price he had paid for wrenching himself from the assassin. Then he dropped

the chair on his assailant. That piece of furniture must have weighed

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two hundred pounds, and the oaken edge of it landed across the man's neck. He didn't even groan; he was out.

It seemed we had weathered the onslaught of the Hyena. Just a bunch of cheap hoods after all. Seven bodies strewn about the stained rug.

"That smell . . ." Drummond said, looking about. I sniffed.

He was right; there was a peculiar odor, some kind of animal scent, cloying and nauseous. The carrion aroma of an ill-kept tiger cage, perhaps. I hadn't noticed it before, because I had been rather busy, but it had to be associated with these hyenas.

Then a shape appeared in the hall, and the odor intensified.

Dumbly I looked, allowing the blood to drip once more into my face.

It was a man-form with a grotesquely powerful body: short legs, small hips, but a torso rising into a barrel-like chest, a mighty back, huge muscular shoulders and a thick neck. But the figure was hunchbacked-and it had the head of some predatory animal.

Doglike, but not a dog or wolf.

This was the Hyena. The real one, not an underling.

He wore a rubber mask over his head, of course. The effect was striking, but I was not superstitious. I had fought his minions; now at last I had come to grips with the master.

I was barehanded, but so was he. I saw that he needed no metal tiger's claws; his own nails were long and sharp. His feet were bare, the toenails, like the fingernails, shaped into deadly claws.

Quickly I removed my shoes and socks to stand barefooted.

"Can't you kick heavier with your shoes on?" Drummond asked.

He knew, as I did, that it was no sense of fairness or appearance that prompted me. The real fight was just about to begin. What had passed before had been no more than the preliminaries.

I laughed, but my eyes never left the Hyena, who stood immobile, sizing me up. He knew, as I did, that an extraordinary encounter was about to take place. "No, I am much faster without that weight hindering my feet. Feel the callus."

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Drummond felt the horny shield of tissue on the ball of my foot and along the edge, harder than any shoe leather. I wore shoes for public appearances but my feet were private killers.

I stepped forward, watching him with my left eye, no longer trying to use my right. It was hard to see him clearly, because now there was only the light of the fire. But I had fought in the dark before.

That animal snout of his opened, and he emitted a startlingly loud, weird, cackling laugh. And I froze in place-for that laugh was echoed outside.

He came to meet me, his little legs seeming to offer insufficient support, but his mighty arms giving an entirely different

impression. Awkward on his feet he might be, but he was a thoroughly trained fighter. I could see it in his manner, the way he carried his upper torso.

The Hyena's hands reached out. I was not eager to grapple with him until I had weakened him somewhat. He was an extremely powerful man, especially in the arms, and he was fresh, while I had just fought several other people. I'm no weakling myself, but I fight with my brain and training as much as with my physical strength. At weightlifting the Hyena would clobber me; at mortal combat he would have to have other assets.

The animal-headed man had other ideas. He jumped at me, trying to grab me with his long claws so as to finish me rapidly. I think he was expecting me to try to batter him with karate and kung fu blows, as I had done with his henchmen.

Instead I surprised him, grabbing both of his arms from underneath, meeting his rush and dropping to the floor while both my feet went to his midsection. I pulled with my arms and pushed with my feet-an unorthodox variation of the tomoe-nage stomach throw. This put my stronger legs into play against his weaker abdomen, a tactical advantage. And it sent him flying.

He should have rammed head-on against the wall, ending the fight. But he surprised me with catlike agility as he twisted in the air. Even so, he crashed into a cabinet full of Sevres china, sending

it to the floor on top of him with a tremendous noise of breaking dishes.

I leaped at him, hoping to catch him with a front kick, *maegeri*, straight at his face before he recovered. There is no polite *donot-hit-a-man-when-he's-down* convention in real combat; you go all out to win, or you lose. If you make an advantage for yourself by throwing your opponent on the floor, you are stupid not to follow it up.

But again the Hyena reacted swiftly. Rolling to his knees, he batted my feet aside. His claws ripped the side of my ankle. I was lucky he had not cut the tendons, as that would have finished me.

This man was every bit as dangerous, as I had anticipated.

He reached out with those enormously long arms and tried to strike me down as he jumped to his feet. I barely managed to step aside or block his many swipes. I could not afford either to be slashed or grabbed, for that was his style, not mine, and no one was going to beat him his way.

We circled each other in furious fight, while I trusted that Drummond was keeping an eye on any undead minions. I did not want the industrialist messing in this fight-the Hyena would kill him with a single strike. It was not just a matter of blocking a slash or kick; I had many years of training that Drummond lacked, so that my blocks were as fast as reflex, yet well chosen. The Hyena would have killed me several times over already, had I not been a thoroughly experienced martial artist. And I would have killed him, had he been less than he was. In moments, we had come to a

mutual appreciation of each other's abilities.

I managed to land a good blow to his upper triceps muscle at the top of his right arm. It was a middle-knuckle strike, *nakayubi ipponken*, with the second knuckle of the middle finger out. His arm went down, as it was momentarily paralyzed. I had scored indirectly on a nerve center under the muscle, crushing it against the bone of his arm.

But he countered with his other hand: a numbing forefist roundhouse strike, *seiken mawashi-uchi*, to the side of my head. It

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missed my ear narrowly; half an inch to the back and I would have been dead. Even so, the force of the blow stunned me.

I fell forward to my knees, on the hearth, my consciousness fading. I had a vision of flames, real flames, for I was staring into the fire. The blood from my prior wound had filled my right eye again and spattered some to my left. That was why I had not dodged the blow; the Hyena had taken advantage of my liability to penetrate my blind side. Now I could barely see his knee coming at my face, to ruin it.

Here was where my trained reflexes saved me. My mind was foggy, but my body knew what to do. I somersaulted backward.

Even so, his knee grazed my nose, and more blood flowed.

I stood up groggily. Had this been a formal encounter, the referee would have stopped the match, disqualifying me because of the threat to my health. There was a threat, all right. But it was

to my life, not my health.

I felt the Hyena's arms around me, pinning mine to my sides.

Now he had me where he wanted me. His fetor was so overpowering

I might have puked, had I not been in worse distress from the pressure. Those arms were crushing me, crushing the air and life out of my body. He was trying to swing me from my feet, so as to break my back more easily.

Two things helped me to stave that off. First, I was taller than he; it was hard for him to lift me without changing his grip, and he did not dare do that. A bear hug cannot be intermittent! Second, my training: tai sabaki. I automatically lowered my center of gravity, tensing my stomach, putting all of my strength into my lower belly. My legs became like iron. It is not true that no man can be lifted against his will, as some supposed experts claim. But the process can be greatly complicated by the proper defensive measures. He could not lift me. While he strained in vain, my head cleared and my strength returned.

Suddenly I felt his awful jaws close in the juncture of my neck and torso. I had thought his animal mask nonfunctional, but I'd been wrong. The Hyena could bite. He started worrying me as

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though I were a tough hunk of meat, a carcass. He was a hunting beast tearing apart his victim, not caring how it might struggle so long as he got his mouthful. The pain was terrible; soon those teeth would find my jugular vein. I felt fresh warm blood flowing

down my chest, and felt his tongue rasping into the wound.

I hunched my neck and contracted my muscles. My neck was twice as strong as that of the normal man, and that was all that enabled me to hold out against this new onslaught. It could not help me long.

I hooked my right leg against the back of his leg in a kosotogake, a small outside hook. I reaped his leg from under him, much as I might do with a student, and brought him down. Nothing wrong with the standard techniques; that's why we teach them. With his teeth and arms committed, he could not maneuver to retain his balance.

I fell on top of him, knocking his wind out. His teeth ripped away from my throat. I had suffered serious injury, but now my blood-lust was aroused. My judo was almost forgotten. My fingers grabbed at each side of his thick neck, and my thumbs went in deep, converging on his windpipe, almost meeting. I could also feel the blood pulsing in his carotid arteries, as I squeezed them shut too. In a moment the flow of blood to his brain would stop, and he would lose consciousness. Not slowly, as is the case with asphyxiation, but instantly.

"AAHHHH!" The scream of sheer agony rang in my ears. But I had his air cut off; how could-?

No wonder! It was my scream. My head was on fire!

The Hyena had grabbed a burning stick from the nearby fireplace, heedless of the pain to himself as he wrenched it through

the protective mesh and rammed it at my face. Luckily for me he had missed my eyes; his own concentration had been suffering because of my choke-hold. But the brand had hit the top of my head, setting my hair on fire.

I let go and jumped away, trying to smother my blazing hair.

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Theoretically, human hair is self-damping and will not really burn.

You could never prove that theory by my experience.

Again the Hyena laughed, as well he might. I was badly burned, bitten, half blind, and he still held that flaming torch in his hands. The damned thing should have gone out when removed from the fire, but it blazed with ornery determination. No doubt Drummond had specially treated wood, to ensure a good fire. Damn him!

He stalked me, waving his light in front of him as an animal trainer does his whip, and I had little defense against it. Then he lunged.

I tried to bat the brand aside with the edge of my hand, using the knife-defense, so that I could follow up by catching his arm and forcing him to drop the weapon. But once again he was too fast; his reflexes were as sophisticated as mine. He drew back the torch and thrust the bright tip of it against my arm, sliding it up so that I was burned in a streak from the inside elbow to the hand.

Yet another painful wound.

"Jason!"

I looked about wildly with my clear eye. There was there; I

recognized her more by her voice than her figure.

"I got it, Jason," she called. "Here."

Something sailed through the air. The Hyena grabbed for it, but couldn't catch it because he already held the hot stick. My nunchakus!

Suddenly the complexion of the fight changed. Now I was armed. Now I had power!

The Hyena approached me. He must not have been familiar with my weapon, for he did not change his style. He held his burning brand threateningly before him, ready to jab at my face again, and to punish any effort of mine to block it.

I delivered a flail-like blow with my nunchaku that hit his extended forearm solidly. A lesser arm would have snapped like a dry stick. His did not; but even that tree-like limb must have

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smarted terribly, for the smash of the nunchaku is deadly. The brand fell to the floor and he cried out, in real pain this time.

I surprised him again, thrusting the end of one stick to his midsection. I heard his grunt of anguish as he expelled all the air from his lungs. I had him at my mercy now.

Then I made a mistake. It was the most elementary blunder, of the type I had warned my students about repeatedly. It was the error of overconfidence.

I wanted him to be afraid, as he had made me afraid. I wanted

him to know I was going to batter him into a shuddering pulp, and that there was nothing he could do about it.

I could have finished him quickly, flinging one stick of the nunchaku out to sweep behind his neck, and catching it so that the cord throttled him. Or I could simply have struck repeatedly at his head until it cracked open like a rotten melon. One way or another I could have finished him in seconds.

Instead I indulged myself in a display of expertise, my nunchaku moving in glittering arcs and figure-eights above me like a bird in flight. The zigzags were so swift that the eye could hardly follow them, especially in this poor light. Yes, disarmed, bruised, and overmatched, he saw his doom in the making!

With an animal cry-no laugh this time!-the Hyena pounded across the floor, away from me. I moved to head him off, and Thera stood her ground in the hall, blocking his escape. But he did not go that way. He ran to the end of the room and crashed through the huge curtained picture window there. He broke into the night amid a shower of glass and tatters of curtain. I had thought that window was truly unbreakable, and that he was trapped; another miscalculation. I had once again underestimated his animal strength.

In a moment he was gone, silently. I tried to pursue him, but the glass edges were jagged and I just couldn't see him in the dark.

It would be suicidal to follow him outside. The Hyena was a creature of the night. He could turn on me and rend me in a moment, even armed as I was. I had to have the light to operate.

And I had not forgotten that animal sound somewhere out there. The awful echo of his laughter. Was I afraid? Yes, I was not ashamed to admit I was. Fear is often healthy; it prevents a man from throwing his life away foolishly.

"You did it!" Drummond gasped. "Striker, you beat him! You took the Hyena and saved my life!"

"I didn't take him," I said. "Your daughter provided me with a new option, and he wouldn't gamble. That's all." That was not all, but I lacked the gumption to admit the truth: that I had foolishly thrown away certain victory.

"But he didn't kill me! It's over! He never strikes the same target twice. I won't have to fear him any more."

"Nice for you," I said. Now I felt the renewed pains of the gashes on my head and foot, the bite on my neck, the burn on my arm and my scorched hair. What a fighter that Hyena was! He had done me more damage in a shorter time than anyone I could remember.

Drummond's account might be settled, but the Hyena-Striker account was just beginning. I knew his type; if I didn't run him down and put him out of commission, he would surely come after me and kill me.

At his convenience.

Chapter 3

THERA

By day, in familiar territory, I could probably take the Hyena. But by night, in his own locale, he could probably take me. He was tough, right through the core. I didn't fear anonymous assassination from that quarter; he would meet me squarely. But if I were the slightest bit off-sick or injured or sleepy or distracted- I would die. Unless I caught up to him at my convenience.

"I knew you could do it!" Thera said. "Oh, Jason, I'm so glad!"

"I wouldn't have done it without your help," I reminded her, and it was no gallantry. But that reminded me. "What kept you, Thera?"-

"They gave me a hard time at your dojo. I tried to call, but couldn't get through. That scared me, so I snuck in, grabbed the weapon, and ran."

"You're lucky they didn't catch you!"

"They did catch me," she said innocently.

"Then how-?"

"Somehow one of those karate students got the idea that there

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might be something between us, if he helped me. His name was Andy."

Andy-one of my best, now, despite his loss of sight in one eye and poor vision in the other. He had been scratched across the eyes during a melee some months ago, by the same black karate mistress I had teased Thera about. Poetic, in a way; that woman had made a profound impression on my life and business. Andy had made a remarkable recovery. Before that episode he had been

just an average student. Now he showed real promise.

No point asking this teen-aged sex bomb just who had put that idea-something between them!-into Andy's head. Andy was normal, but not sexually aggressive.

"So it took a little while," she said.

I let it drop. I didn't want to know whether she had cheated Andy of his high expectations, or had delivered full measure. She had accomplished her mission: to fetch the nunchakus. I could hardly condemn her for that.

"Well, let's clean up in here," I said. "We'll have to see about restoring the phone and power, and getting something decent to eat. And maybe we'd better get a doctor."

"I notified the phone company when I couldn't get through.

They said they'd have a man on it right away."

"Where is he, then?" Drummond demanded. He was an ugly sight, with his clothing ripped and blood caked on his head and shoulders, but he seemed exhilarated. His death sentence had been reprieved, and he had fought valiantly on his own behalf. Reason enough for satisfaction.

"We'd better check the grounds." I said.

"There's something-out there," Thera said nervously. "I smelled it when I came in, and-"

"The Hyena," I said.

"No, he was inside fighting with you. This was-all I could see was two glowing eyes, and the smell was awful. I thought it

was going to attack me, but it just watched. I drove the car right

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up to the door so I wouldn't have to get out, and then I just ran inside."

"It must have been the real hyena," I said. "The one that makes those paw-prints. We heard it laughing, answering its master. He probably has trained it to stand guard, but not to attack except on direct order from him. You're lucky."

She nodded soberly. We checked the grounds. Sure enough, the phone repairman was there, tied and gagged in his truck. The Hyena had intercepted him, but hadn't hurt him. As they had told me: the Hyena didn't bother with people worth less than ten million dollars. He must have known the phone man was only an innocent bystander doing his job, and dealt with him accordingly.

Which verified what I had already learned about the Hyena's professionalism:

he was no berserker, no wild sadist. He was out for money, a lot of it, and he concentrated his energies economically on the ramifications of that one problem.

Soon we had the phone back in order. We used it to order a catered supper, an electric company repairman, the police, and a doctor. (Yes, doctors do make house calls-for millionaires.) The electric company, with typical efficiency, did not get the power restored until several hours later, so meal and medication had to be handled by candlelight. The doctor was rather put out, but Drummond tipped him two bits and shut him up.

The police came while my several injuries were being bandaged, and the officers looked with amazement at the seven dead and injured thugs. "There'll have to be an investigation," the sergeant said.

"No investigation, no publicity," Drummond said. He now had a bandage on his head that made him look like a turbaned sultan, and his bearing was every bit as regal. "These rascals burst into my house intent on robbery and mayhem. I resisted. Fortunately my friend Mr. Striker was here, visiting my daughter. He's a judo instructor, you know. World champion."

I opened my mouth to protest the distortions, but Drummond gave me a warning look.

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"What about the window?" the sergeant asked. "It looks broken from the inside."

"I shall have it replaced in the morning."

The officer shook his head dubiously. "Just as you say, sir."

I knew there would be no complications from the police.

Drummond had implied they could be bought; evidently he had invested a little himself. He trusted them, now that the Hyena was out of the picture. But I had to admit, publicity about this fracas would have been awkward for me as well as for Drummond.

What was the trainer of the U.S. judo team doing in a common brawl, killing several people? So I kept my mouth shut, feeling like a hypocrite.

At any rate, there would be no news from the Hyena hoods; I knew they were nondescript hirelings who would know nothing of the Hyena's real nature or whereabouts. Besides, they would be killed soon if they talked; underworld contracts on informers were easy to come by and hard to prevent.

The police cleared out the bodies just before the caterers arrived. Nice timing, that. We adjourned into another room, lit a new fire in its fireplace, and ate a romantic, candlelight, fire-bright meal, the three of us. I declined the cocktails in favor of milk, to Drummond's evident amusement. I am not a conscious Spartan, apart from financial necessity, but I tend to stay away from alcohol in all its forms, along with cigarettes, coffee, speed, and other civilized vices. It is because I take pride in my mind and body, and do not like to damage either, even marginally.

This moderation also applies to food. I don't like too much sugar, fat, starch, cholesterol, or artificially treated delicacies. But there are limits to my resolve. I was tired, hungry, bandaged from head to foot (several unconnected bandages, fortunately), emotionally tense-and Drummond had ordered one hell of a meal.

It started with a plate of cold cuts-cheeses, ham, salami, olives (black, green, and stuffed), small pieces of bread with anchovies and salmon-and proceeded to clear turtle soup cooked with

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sherry (ah, well, that little bit couldn't hurt me) and Alaskan king

crab cocktails: big pieces of juicy crab with spicy tomato sauce.

Then the main entree of filet mignon cooked rare and very tender.

I lost control and gorged myself on four of them. Next came a salad of palm hearts, and good old-fashioned American apple pie for dessert.

The discomfort of my injuries faded. God-if the Hyena appeared now, I'd simply burp him to death!

Drummond and Thera ate less of the food, no novelty to them, but drank more of the liquor. They put down champagne, Bloody Mary vodka, Barcardi yellow rum with Coca-Cola, light Italian wine; and God knows what else. Ah, decadence!

I finally sampled a little sweet liqueur myself, because my milk and water did not seem sufficient to slack the thirst brought on by my huge meal. It had been a rough evening, and we were in no hurry. I felt better and better as time passed.

"Will you stay the night?" Drummond inquired.

"I should get back," I started, loath to get out of my chair because of my gorging. Then I realized that it was not a hint, and not an idle question. He had said the menace was over, but he didn't quite believe it himself. "I'll stay," I said, relieved for the pretext.

"You can use my room," Thera said, sipping some green absinthe.

"Why make you move? Don't you have a spare?"

"Who said I was going to move?"

The problem was, she was not exactly joking, and I was not

exactly indifferent. She had wrought well, when she showed me her leg and panties in the car; it had put a notion into my baser mind. That sort of notion does not readily leave a man, unless satisfied in the obvious fashion. Now she was waxing suggestive right in her father's presence, and he wasn't saying a word. All of which spelled M-A-R-R-I-A-G-E-and I didn't want it.

"Do you have an encyclopedia here?" I asked, changing the subject.

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"If you have to look it up, you're hardly ready to do it," Thera said. "But nature will guide you, and I'll help, if you'll just let me."

"I want to look up the word hyena," I said. "He may not be back for you, Mr. Drummond, but I know he and I will meet again. I want to be prepared."

"There are several books on zoology in my library," Drummond said, "My daughter will show you."

Undoubtedly. She had been showing me things all evening. I sighed inwardly. "Let's take a look."

We took two candles and made our way to the library. Thera also carried a glass of something, another yellow liqueur. We had to dismantle the barricade of furniture we had made before that door.

Inside was a spacious, pleasant, carpeted room with an impressive array of books, all arranged by subject much as in a real library. Sure enough, there were numerous books on all aspects of

biology, ranging from popular essays on human sexuality to technical texts on zoology. Many of them were worn. Drummond evidently read his books (or maybe it was Thera), and he didn't stop with the illustrated sexual manuals; this library was not just for show. But of course the rich had time to educate themselves, if they wished.

I located a book on mammals. "HYAENIDS-four species," I read aloud, holding the candle as close to the page as I dared. We didn't need another fire. "Order CARNIVORA, Superfamily FELOIDEA. Family HYAENIDAE. Sub-family PROTELINAE. *Proteles cristatus*. Aardwolf." I looked up. "Aardwolf? That's not it!" "I'll say!" Thera agreed. "Any man who has a beautiful and willing girl alone with the lights out, and reads about aardwolves-

"Subfamily HYAENINAE. *Crocuta crocuta*. Spotted Hyaena.' That's it!"

"Bookworm!" she complained, sipping from her glass. It smelled more like perfume than wine.

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"Superficially resembles a big dog, but more closely related to the cats," I said as my eyes squinted at the fine text in the flickering light. "I didn't know that. I thought it was related to the jackal-a cowardly dog."

"I don't know about the animal hyena," Thera said, "but the

human one's no coward. I guess you could call him a dog, though."

"No, it's not a dog," I said. "Not related to the canines."

"A son of a bitch," she said, holding the candle up to her face so that I could see her smile.

Oh, a pun. I wasn't in the mood. "Why don't you go wash a dish?" I suggested, knowing that this rich girl never sullied her hands on such menial tasks.

"I am a dish. You can wash me."

"What the hell are you drinking?"

"Fuji plum wine. Smell it?" She held it under my nose. The aroma was delicious. I wrenched my face away.

"Shoulder height of thirty-one inches, weight 120 pounds, rounded ear tips . . ."

"You're right on the mark about my weight and ears, but a bit short on my height," Thera said. "I'm twice as tall as-oh, you mean that position! We call it 'doggie fashion'-or maybe 'hyena fashion' tonight. Well, since that's the way you want it, we'll put the shoulders at thirty-one inches." She got down on her hands and knees and wiggled her posterior suggestively.

It was pointless to react to her come-ons; it only led to more of the same. I did want to learn about the animal hyena, getting clues to the philosophy of the human one. "Keen sense of smell . . . lives twenty years or more . . ."

"You mean I have only two years left?"

I resisted the temptation to goose her hard with my foot. "Distinguished by an eerie, chattering call, like a cackling human

laugh."

"Ha ha!"

"Unpopular in some areas because it raids graves and digs up

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and consumes recently buried bodies." I waited for her comment on that, but it seemed I had finally shut her up.

"Powerful jaws . . . able to crack virtually any marrow bones."

I looked up. "That explains the chewed-up bodies! He let the live animal go at them."

"The one that was watching me . . ." she said, suddenly sober.

"Feeds mainly on carrion, but is also a formidable night hunter.

No coward-has backed off and even killed old lions." I looked up again. "That's some animal."

Then I discovered that Thera had risen from the floor, set glass and candle on a bookshelf, and was undressing herself. Apparently she had given up dialogue as unproductive, so now was turning to a more basic strategy. She certainly had the figure for it. The flickering candlelight made traveling highlights along her breasts and torso, bringing first one rondure into prominence and then another. Even the shadows were stimulating as hell.

I put my eyes firmly back on the page. However sweetly baited it might be, I was not going to fall into that trap. "Prodigious appetite . . . Leopard forced to protect its kill by dragging it into fork of a tree, out of reach of hyena . . ." I shook my head. "That's some fighter, if it backs off leopards too." But it was dangerous to

take my eyes off the page.

"Powerful forequarters, but weak hindquarters, so incapable of running at high speed . . . peculiar skulking movement . . . intelligent . . . formidable organized hunter."

I stopped then, for Thera had blown out my candle and hers.

"Enough of this dawdling, Jason," she said, putting her warm nude body into my arms. "I let you talk me out of it when you taught me judo, but times have changed." Her hungry, wine-perfumed lips sought mine.

"Thera, I don't want to marry you!" I said desperately. "It's not my kind of life."

She laughed, a bit like the hyena, and I felt her breasts rippling against me. "And I don't want to marry you, idiot! When I was a child last year, I spoke as a child, but now I have put aside

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childish things. You'd be dull as hell for more than a month, with your prudish ways and your dismal karate-class routine. But I promised myself I'd have you, and now is the time."

That put me in my place, all right. I had had quite another impression. But it also released my inhibitions. If all she wanted was a passing affair . . .

Possibly this was just another artifice, an attempt to compromise me into marrying her. But that objection was only a small, distant fling, easily brushed aside. I grabbed her in the dark and applied a kote waza wrist-lock. With my right hand I took her left

hand, my thumb on her palm, my fingers on the back of it. I bent her hand inward at the wrist, forcing her lower body against mine. She was amenable; she yielded to the pressure, though it was token, and thrust her pelvis forward against mine.

Somehow my neck/shoulder bandage covering the hyena's bite got tangled in our embrace and ripped loose. I tore it the rest of the way off and threw it aside, only spurred on by the momentary pain. Yes, it was time.

"I hear something," Thera whispered in my ear as I loosened my belt.

"Oh, so now we're being coy!" My pants dropped, and I ran my left hand over her right breast and squeezed. What sensation!

"No-someone's in the hall!" she breathed urgently.

Then I heard it: a slight noise, as of a hand sliding along a wall. I let Thera go and dropped into combat-ready stance, somewhat hampered by the hobbling trousers around my ankles. Of all times! It wouldn't be Drummond; was it the Hyena again?

Light flooded the room blindingly. My eyes hurt; they had been adapted to the dim candle and then the complete dark. Evidently, the power had been restored in the past few minutes, and we had never thought to try the switch. And here I stood, the Compleat Dunce in underpants. My shirt was hanging open, with the raw wound in my neck exposed.

Through the pain of light I saw a figure, black like a silhouette, framed in the doorway. Not Drummond.

I kicked aside my trousers and charged that figure. And got an expert foot in my midriff that shoved me back but did not cripple me. An intentional miss.

"Take it easy, honky," a low female voice said. "I have no fight with you, unless you want it that way."

"Ilunga!" I exclaimed, my vision clearing as I caught my balance.

She stood with hands on hips: tall, voluptuous, self-assured.

She wore a tight-fitting black knitted outfit, somewhat like a body stocking extending to her neck, wrists and ankles, with a wide leather belt, and she was barefooted. Because her skin was black, it was hard to tell exactly where the clothing left off, and she appeared hazily nude. She seemed to have nothing on underneath; her breasts were clearly formed, including the nipples, and the rest of her anatomy was as specific. She would have been stunning, except for three things: her broken nose, her fierce orange eyeballs, and her knowing sneer.

Thera stood behind me, gloriously naked, shading her eyes with one hand. The contrast between the two women was striking: the one statuesquely white, the other statuesquely black. "You know this person, Jason?" she asked.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded of Ilunga.

"I had to talk to you, Bwana," she said, her tone mocking me.

This was one black woman who catered to no white man.

"Look at her eyes!" Thera exclaimed. "What is she, a drug addict?"

"Yes," I said shortly. "Look, Ilunga-"

Thera strode forward, breasts and buttocks jiggling brightly under her platinum tresses. "So this is Black Beauty! Your unfinished business!"

"Stay clear of her!" I warned. "She's dangerous!"

"She's a horse of a different color, dangerous to our privacy!"

Thera snapped. "Get your tail out of here, Ebony!"

"White trash, I got no business with you," Ilunga said contemptuously.

"I'd as soon cut off your honky ass as look at it, and

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feed all that pork to my dog. But all I want is to talk to him.

Now."

"Well, come and get a piece of my ass, because you aren't talking to Jason right now."

Ilunga glanced at me, the orange flashing as her eyeballs moved.

"Who is this peroxide floozy?"

And of course Thera had used peroxide. I saw that trouble could not be avoided "Ilunga, meet Thera Drummond, judo black belt, millionaire heiress. Thera, meet Ilunga, karate expert, black militant. I wash my hands of what follows, only keep it clean, will you, girls?" Actually, I'd have to see that neither of them got killed or maimed, and I might have to take some more wounds myself doing that. Human females are worse than real bitches, when they get bitchy.

"So glad to meet you, heiress."

"Likewise, militant."

They made a formal half-bow to each other. Good-it was going to be clean. Maybe.

Ilunga aimed a punch at Thera, but Thera batted it aside and grabbed the hand, trying to turn the wrist inward, much as I had just done to her. But it was ineffective against an expert karateka. Ilunga somersaulted forward, escaping the hold. Then she aimed a roundhouse kick at Thera. Thera stepped in and behind the leg, and swept Ilunga's other foot forward in a judo o-soto-gari, the big outside reap. Ilunga crashed to the floor on her butt.

Thera looked pleased-but her smile was premature. Ilunga's leg shot out and caught her in the stomach. Now Thera fell to the floor. Ilunga jumped on top of her as she was trying to get up, landing on her back. Black figure and white figure fused in the struggle. One black hand reached around to catch hold of a white breast, while the other caught at Thera's shaved crotch. I could not identify that particular grip, but evidently it was a pain hold, because suddenly Thera's eyes went wide open and she screamed.

"Maite!" Thera cried, meaning "I yield!"

Ilunga let go immediately and stood back, breathing hard.

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Thera got up without apparent discomfort. The two made another formal little bow to each other.

"All right-you talk to him," Thera said. "You earned it." I could see that she had had a good lesson; probably no woman had mastered her before. She picked up her clothes and left the room.

"She fought clean, so I did," Ilunga said to me, as though an explanation were required. "You must've trained her."

"I did. Thanks. But let's not make small talk." I climbed back into my trousers as I spoke. "You went to a lot of trouble to find me here, and it must be serious."

She told me, mincing no words. It was serious. But to oblige her, I would have had to give up my position as a U.S. world judo trainer, and I simply wasn't ready to make that sacrifice. No point in telling her that, however; it would sound ungracious, and sport judo was not a thing she understood or respected.

On the other hand, I did not want this woman for an enemy, not when I already had the Hyena to contend with. So I compromised.

I gave her a referral. Someone who might be able to help her as well as I could have. With that she had to be satisfied.

Ilunga was gone by the time Thera returned, dressed in a clinging negligee. "Who is she?" Thera asked, almost as though disappointed to find me alone. "I mean, to you?"

"She's the last addict on Kill-13, a devastating martial-arts drug. It gives superior reflexes and power."

"So I discovered! That woman can fight!"

"And virtual immunity to pain. But it's hell on the body; the eyes are first to suffer, and in time the debilitation extends everywhere.

I destroyed the Kill-13 Demon cult, and she helped me.

She saved my life. So I owe her something."

"So she came to collect?"

"Yes. But this time I couldn't help her." I shrugged. "So let's drop the subject."

Thera looked thoughtful. "She's some woman."

"Yes. Now where's my room?"

"You know, when I was grappling with her . . ." She trailed

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off, shaking her head. "Maybe we'll meet again, sometime."

"I doubt it," I said. "She hates all whites."

"All white men."

I glanced at her uneasily. What was she getting at?

"What was that grip she used on you?" I asked curiously. "I don't believe I've seen that one before." Which was odd, because I have made quite a study of judo, kung fu and aikido grips.

"You are not in a position to experience it," she said with a funny look.

Not much of an answer, but I didn't push it. Probably Thera didn't like being reminded of her abrupt loss. "Where's my room?"

I repeated.

She shook her head as if clearing it of some intriguing thought, and I had the distinct impression that I was not the subject of that thought. "This way."

She led me upstairs and into an obviously feminine room.

"Here?" I asked somewhat forlornly. Furnishings are not important, but flowered curtains, perfumed sheets, and an ornate vanity are simply not my style.

She twirled about so that her negligee spread out, showing her attributes in turning silhouette. "I told you: my room."

"But I presumed-after your fight-"

"You presume too much," she said. "First things first. I'm twice as ready now as I was in the library."

So her priorities remained unchanged. I had other things to worry about. I would have to plan how to deal with the Hyena, and I still had a team to train for the world championship competition.

This year it was going to be held in Cuba, and this didn't make me feel any easier.

But this was not three weeks from now; this was now. Tired, wounded, and overstuffed on gourmet food I might be, but she was right. First things first.

I moved to the door. "What're you doing, coward?" Thera asked from the bed.

"I'm seeing that this time there is no interruption," I said,

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closing the door, locking it, and bracing a chair under the knob.

I turned, ambled nonchalantly across the room, and stared at her voluptuous figure under the negligee for a long, blasé moment.

Then I leaped at her.

It was an illusion, of course-but I could have sworn she bounced into the air to meet me.

Next morning I found my clothes scattered all across the room.

And her pretty negligee had a hole in it as though some idiot had

punctured it with a tent peg. I was never able to remember exactly how that had happened, and never got up the gumption to inquire.

Chapter 4

ILUNGA

Ilunga rolled off the bed and hit the carpet silently. She could not see well in the dark, but her hearing was acute. Someone was coming up the stairs toward her apartment. Male, by the tread. She was lousy, suffering from Kill-13 letdown. She picked up her electric cup, popped in a pellet of the demon drug, and turned on the heat. She wanted to be high before she tackled the intruder, but it took thirty seconds for the pellet to vaporize.

The footsteps reached the landing and stopped. Ilunga cradled the cup in her hands. "Come on, come on!" she breathed to it. "Get hot!" Too bad she had to use it at this hour of the morning; her supply was dwindling, and there would be no replacements. She tried to stretch it out by sleeping more, but nothing worked very well.

The man outside walked up to the door, paused another moment, and knocked.

The drug was hot at last. Ilunga brought the cup to her face, opened the spout, and inhaled the vapor. Immediately the thrill of

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it radiated into her head from the nasal cavities, giving her joy and strength. Now she had power; now she could handle the man at the door. She capped the spout, conserving the remainder of the

vapor for another sniff in a few hours.

He knocked again. The kind of man she feared did not usually knock at all; maybe this was legitimate. "Yes?" she said sharply, then stepped aside. On occasion, in this neighborhood, the sound of a voice brought a bullet through the door. Ilunga had many enemies, few friends, and now was stripped of her main power. She had to sell her precious furnishings regularly in order to get money to live on; her brief period of affluence was over.

"It's Danny."

It was his voice, though she could not be certain after two years. She had known he would come back; she hadn't known when or in what condition. "Anyone with you?"

"Not yet. Let me in, will you, Sis?"

She let him in. Danny was seventeen, but looked younger. He was about five-eight and thin to the point of malnutrition. His narrow face was scarred by acne, but his small wispy beard did not help. He wore his hair in a tall Afro, with a black comb stuck in it, a comb that saw frequent use. But his Afro never stayed just right; he had just enough white ancestry, from his mother's side (therefore not connected to Ilunga), to interfere. He wore a small gold earring in one ear, and he had not taken a bath in a week. His left hand had six fingers; they had not had the money to have the extra removed at birth the way other families did.

"Give me five, Sis," and as she put her hands out he slapped one and then the other in black fashion. "You got to help me,

Sis-I'm in bad trouble."

"I'll help you, Danny. You know. that." Danny was her halfbrother, the only man she cared about. She had always protected him. But two years ago he had fallen in with a bad crowd. She had known he would have to learn things for himself, so she had left him alone, even though she despised the men he ran with. It was better for her, too, alone.

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For Ilunga had had a rather special life of her own, that necessitated a solitary existence. She had mastered karate so that she could disable rapists-and she had effectively cured scores of them. A man with his testicles crushed by a good kick was unlikely ever to rape again.

Then she had fallen into addiction, trapped involuntarily by the most potent drug of all, Kill-13. She had become a "Demon"- a member of the Kill-13 cult among martial artists. Now the demons were finished, the supplies of the drug destroyed. The other addicts had died from the ravages of withdrawal; she survived because she had managed to salvage a substantial cache.

Kill-13 was absolute; once hooked on it, the addict had no way off, except death. And in time the drug would destroy her anyway. She knew it, but accepted it, as she accepted the problems of being black, or female, or poor, or alone.

Danny was different, however. He had a future.

"Sis, I want out-and they won't let me go." He walked jerkily

to the couch and plumped down.

She knew how that was, too. She had had no way out of the Demon cult, except destruction. Worse than heroin, worse than cocaine, Kill-13 would not let go, and its supplier was absolute monarch over the addicts. Destruction was what had happened, but by a fluke it had been the cult that was demolished, not her.

That man Jason Striker-he had been the key.

Striker. Male and white, typical of all she hated most. Yet he had power and integrity, and there was something in her that yearned to him, however much she tried to suppress it.

Danny took her silence for condemnation. "Sis, you were right all the time. They're no good. None of 'em. They're horses' asses.

But they'll total me."

She focused on the present. "Who?"

"Blakrev. They put out a contract on any dropout--"

"What's this Blakrev? I never heard of it."

"It's new, Sis. Last six months, maybe a year. No big splash, yet. You're too old."

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"What is it?"

"Black Revolution. We're going to take over, only it's too tough.

Shit, I don't want to kill."

"Sounds like you've been moving in a fast crowd, Danny."

He looked at her, and his face began to crumple. "I'm not like you, Sis. I tried to be tough, so you'd be proud of me, but I get

sick just thinking about it. If I tried to kill, I'd just fall to fuckin' pieces. I just want to be left alone."

He was going to cry, and she despised that in a man. But Danny was weak; she had always known that.

"Danny, that's just an initiation. They want to see if you're really with them, so they ask you if you'll kill. So you say yes, and you're in. They know you don't mean it."

He shook his head. "You don't know 'em, Sis. It's not like that. They mean it."

She didn't believe it, but it was evident he did, and she had learned not to act without checking out the situation. She went to the phone and dialed a number from her head.

"Bettye? Ilunga. Know Blakrev?" She listened for a time, then hung up.

"I've been way out of touch," she admitted. And she had been; the Demon cult had been her whole world. "That's a hard-nosed group. They do mean it." She paused to consider. "Yes, we'd better get you out of it. It's not that I'm against their aim, or afraid of killing. But I don't trust them. They're too new, too tough, too sudden-and they have too much money. There's got to be someone behind it, and chances are it's not a black man. Black men don't have money, not when they're revolutionaries. I'd support a real black revolution, but I'm not about to gamble on a fake one."

Danny only nodded. Obviously he didn't care whether it was real or fake; he had lost what little nerve he had, and just wanted out.

"Now I could go see someone in Blakrev," she said. "Bettye gave me the name of their local wheel. But that's iffy. I might have to kill him, and then they'd have to put a contract on me. Then I'd

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have to kill the one they sent and it would probably be some poor sucker like you, who couldn't get out. No percentage in that." She looked at him obliquely. "So I think we'd better surprise them.

You surrender to the FBI."

"The pigs?" Danny shrieked.

"The one place Blakrev can't reach is in a honky jail cell. You don't have to tell them anything important. They'll let you go after a few days. After that, Blakrev won't touch you. They'll know you're marked and maybe staked out. They need anonymous killers; an FBI record is taboo."

"But the honkies-"

"I know it's bad. I hate 'em myself. Nothing I'd rather do than kill a honky cop. But sometimes we just got to use them, and this is the time."

"And that'll get me out of Blakrev-alive?"

"That's the way I figure it. Best chance, Danny."

He nodded. "You'll look out for me, Sis?"

"Always." She considered for a moment. "But you can't just go down there to the station." She had tried that once herself, and learned a bitter lesson about white policemen, and black girls.

"They'll have to arrest you. So Blakrev knows you didn't sell out.

I'll call."

"Will they hurt me, Sis?" Danny asked plaintively.

"No, not if you cooperate. Tell them everything you know, except for names. For all you know, all the Blakrev names you have are funny, anyway. Everyone talks; the thing is to have a good story. You can string them on a lot with things they already know. You can blame dead people. If they think you've got anything at all, they may try to recruit you as a regular informer."

"No!" Danny cried in terror.

She shrugged. "Then tell them the truth: you're scared stiff, and you'd rather rot in jail than inform and be dead." She dialed the number.

A male voice answered. "FBI. Your name, please."

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Ilunga made her voice harsh, masculine-an easy task, for her.

"Dondo. You got my address."

There was a pause. "Go on."

"Tip for you, if the pay's right. Blakrev contract man hiding out at his half-sister's. She don't know his business. He's armed."

She waited a moment, until she had confirmation of their willingness to pay. Then she gave her own address and hung up.

"Sis!" Danny squealed. "What're you saying! I'm not armed or-"

She put a switchblade into his hand. "You just lie on that couch there brother, and spring it open when they come. Look

mean, if you can, but don't fight." No danger of that! "I'll come in from the bedroom and put on a scene. They'll take you and book you, and when they realize you aren't what they thought they had, they'll boot you out."

"But the money! Who'd you tell 'em to pay?"

"Dondo-the man Bettye mentioned. Local wheel in Blakrev.

When the pigs find out they've been taken, they'll leak his name, and Blakrev will figure him for the tipster and take care of him in its own fashion."

Danny was not wholly obtuse. "Sis, you're smart!"

"I've dabbled in this sort of mess before. Now get some sleep.

We've only got about two minutes. The cops move fast on this sort of lead."

In less time than that, the knock came. "FBI. Open up!"

Fast, indeed! Danny rolled off the couch, touching his thumb to the button. The blade snapped out gleaming. But it shook in his hand, and he tossed it aside and opened the door.

There were two of them, cut from the same mold: male, white, big, square-jawed, with crewcut hair and a lot of beef. Both wore conservative dark suits with loud ties over solid-color shirts. Both were in their late twenties or early thirties. One wore horn-rimmed glasses. They stepped into the room briskly, without further invitation.

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Ilunga emerged from her room in a nightgown and outsized

blue sunglasses to hide her orange eyeballs. She screamed when she saw the men.

"FBI," one said tersely, showing his badge. "We are apprehending your brother for interrogation. He's suspected of being a hit man for Blakrev."

Ilunga staggered and grabbed onto a chair for support, letting her nightgown fall-open to expose one dark breast. "Not my brother! He's a good boy! He wouldn't do anything like that! Officer, you've got to believe me! It's a mistake! He-"

"Shut up, sister," the horn-rimmed one said. He had alligatorskin shoes and his hair was longer than that of his companion; a long crewcut, modishly styled. His face was well tanned. He frisked Danny while the other put handcuffs on him. They led him out the door.

"No! You can't take him!" Ilunga cried, letting both breasts show artfully as she moved. The FBI was used to temptations like this, and always resisted them. "He hasn't done anything!" She broke down, sobbing, as the door closed.

But as the heavy footsteps descended the stairs, she ripped off the glasses. "Fuckin' honkies!" she muttered. "One swift kick in the balls . . ."

She peered out the corner of the window, under the curtain, where the pane had been broken out. She was looking for the third FBI man she knew would be there, on guard for a sneak exit. He was.

The other two emerged, jerking Danny along between them.

She thought they would take him directly to their car, but they stopped on the sidewalk. The third one pinned something to Danny's shirt-a piece of paper. Strange. Then he stepped back. Suddenly a suspicion blossomed. Loud ties? Colored shirts? Alligator shoes? Modish hairstyle? The FBI did not tolerate any of that; deviance from its strict dress code was a more certain route to demotion than graft or incompetence. And no FBI man ever said

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"Shut up, sister." The FBI was as completely square as it was possible to be.

Suddenly Danny threw himself to one side. "Sis!" he screamed-but his cry was punctuated by the sound of a shot.

In a flash, Ilunga realized the truth. These were not FBI men.

They were Blakrev killers! She had missed it because they were white. But they weren't white; one was deeply tanned. In fact, he was a light skinned black man masquerading as a honky. But such thugs would work for anyone with money; they had no politics.

And Blakrev had money.

Even as the realization hit her, Ilunga was galvanized into action.

She jumped through the window, breaking the remainder

Of the glass out with her feet.

It was a ten-foot drop, but she was prepared for it, and her

Kill-13 high made her super-strong. Her two feet struck the head and back of the two men holding Danny. She heard and felt the neck and spine of the first crack. He was finished.

She bounced off, using the two bodies of the men to break her fall. Twisting in the air, she grasped the hair of the second. As her feet touched the pavement she turned his head violently to the side until his neck also cracked.

The third man still held the gun; the suddenness of her action had kept him from firing. Her reflexes were faster and surer. That was the thing about the drug: it really delivered! But now he aimed-and she was not in position to get to him in time. She had miscalculated; she should have gone for him first.

Her hands went to her head. She had two tiny throwing knives hidden in her piled-up hairdo. Her wrists flicked. The knives flashed together, flying toward their target with the precision of twin SAM II rockets shooting down an Israeli Phantom.

The gunman screamed. The two blades were embedded in his eyes, the handles sticking out like telescopic eyestalks.

Now she turned to Danny. He was groaning on the sidewalk, a bullet in his shoulder. Only his sudden motion had kept it from

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his heart. But he was still badly injured; he could bleed to death if she didn't get him to a doctor.

She ripped the paper off his shirt. "I SOLD OUT BLAKREV," it said. They had intended to kill him almost in public view, and leave the body there as a warning to all the neighborhood.

Blakrev was tough, all right. How had they intercepted her call? They must have had a tap on her line, which meant they were

already aware of her relation to Danny, and primed for action.

And they could have heard her conversation with Bettye, too; Bettye would now be a target as well.

She was up against real professionals. More than she could handle alone, especially with Danny wounded. As soon as they learned about the failure of this fake FBI strike, they'd be after Danny again-and now she was right in it with him.

If she got out of this, she'd have a score to settle!

A yellow car came down the street, slowly. "Taxi!" she called, waving. She knew a black doctor who was hot for her; this time she'd have to meet his terms.

The taxi stopped. "I've got to get my brother to a doctor!" she gasped. "Help me get him up-"

The metal snout of an M-3 army submachine gun poked out of the black window of the car. It had a special extra-thick barrel-a silencer.

Blakrev!

Ilunga leaned over the third thug, grasped one of her knives from his eye, yanked it out, and in almost the same motion wafted it at the face behind the gun. Then she dived for the car.

Sharp as they were, the killers had made a couple of mistakes.

They had stopped the car before trying to fire the gun, and they had pointed it at Ilunga from too near. Bullets from a moving car a hundred feet away could have cut her down without a chance, and no special accuracy was needed, with this machine gun. But

as it was, she reached it in a single bound.

"Tao!" she cried, startling the hood with the gun. He was a big black dude with shades-black sunglasses. Apparently her

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thrown tonki had missed him, but that didn't matter so long as it had distracted him enough to delay in firing that all-important moment. Now she hit upward rapidly with her right hand, deflecting the thick barrel of the M-3. She heard a series of small clicks or coughs as the bullets shot out to her right. It was silent, all right.

She grabbed the barrel and hauled on it hard. The man, already leaning toward the window, was jerked half out of it, his head projecting from the car. Expertly, with her other hand, she battered it a couple of times against the sill, breaking open the skin, and finished pulling the weapon from his slackened grasp.

There was another man in the car, the driver or chauffeur.

Unable to go to the aid of his companion because of the cramped interior, he made the obvious move-and it was another mistake.

He opened the front door and scrambled out. He jumped onto the hood, drew forth a wicked ice pick and hurled himself from this vantage on Ilunga.

But he had wasted time, setting up, and now she was ready for him. She dropped to the ground and kicked upward with her right leg in a motion similar to a tome nage. Her foot caught him squarely in the groin with double force, crushing his testicles. That was her specialty; she hardly ever missed.

He was propelled through the air by the force of her thrust.

Stupid but tough, he clutched at his mangled balls with one hand and the ice pick with the other. Amazingly, he found his feet, crouching; few men were able to offer any fight at all after that kick.

Ilunga was also in a crouch, recovering from her exertion. Like a Russian cossack dancer, she shot one leg out from that position, connecting to the side of his jaw and breaking it. Before he could fall, she caught him with a second kick to the other side of the jaw, fracturing it again. For good measure she jumped and fell with both feet on the arm holding the ice pick, one foot on the wrist, the other on the forearm. The limb broke in two places.

That dude was finished. But the other one was tough, too.

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Stunned and half blinded from blood flowing from his cut head, he still had the tenacity to reach for the machine gun. He got it, but as he was turning toward her, she picked up the ice pick and sent it sailing through the air. The point entered his ear and penetrated his brain.

A difficult shot; only her proficiency with the kung fu shuriken, the miniature throwing knives, enabled her to do it. That and her Kill-13 high, that multiplied her power and accuracy.

The thug beside her, amazingly, still hadn't given up. He had crushed balls, a doubly broken jaw, and a shattered arm, yet he

tried to grab her. He was a monster, six and a half feet tall, 300 pounds; perhaps his pain threshold was high. She crushed his throat with her heel, and finally he succumbed.

Just as well. She did not want to leave anyone alive behind her, both because of her fury at their attack on Danny, and her need to conceal her whereabouts from Blakrev.

There was one positive aspect: now she had a car. She halfcarried Danny to it and laid him on the back seat. She had no driver's license and had done little driving, but this was an emergency. She could make do.

She drove to the doctor's house, circuitously to be sure she wasn't being tailed. She stalled the car several times in traffic before she got the hang of it. Apparently she had now eliminated Blakrev's backup party. But she would have to keep moving.

The doctor was amenable. He had no concern with Ilunga's mind or conscience; it was her body he appreciated. And it was an excellent body; she was at pains to keep it in shape. He put Danny under sedation, fished out the bullet, gave him plasma, and took Ilunga into a locked office for payment. She was so glad to have Danny taken care of that for once in her life she didn't really mind the act. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine it was Jason Striker-and then was furious at herself for that effort. What was Striker to her? A honky, the Man . . .

Yet there had been a time. He had just learned of the kidnapping of his Chinese fiancée, and perhaps had known in that mo-

ment that the girl would never be released alive. Ilunga had comforted him, giving of herself in a fashion she had not before realized was possible, and somehow the ugliness of sex had become transformed. Was this what it was to love a man?

But a white man! How was it possible?

Afterward, the doctor asked: "Am I the first to have you-and not get kicked?"

"Yes," she said. It was a lie, but not much of one. Few men had any sexual life after her, and she had done her best to make it none.

But there had been two occasions of rape, and she had never run down all the men involved in those. Too, upon occasion she had had to buy favors, as now. Since it was obviously important to the doctor, and since she wanted Danny to have the best care, she told the lie and agreed with him.

"Your brother should not be moved for twenty-four hours,"

the doctor said, satisfied as much by her statement as her body.

"I'll keep him here. But tomorrow you'll have to take him."

Take him where? Her apartment was a disaster; she could not go near it now. She had always kept her Kill-13 supply with her, so at least she could survive, but everything else was lost. She had no money.

She had only one day to come up with a safe, cheap, secret place for Danny to recuperate. Who would help her? Who could help her, without Blakrev finding out?

In her desperation, she could think of only one man; Jason

Striker.

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Locating him was a problem, but at last she tracked him down: in the mansion of a millionaire, doing bodyguard duty. The house was mostly dark. An older man, evidently the proprietor, sat before a blazing fire in one lighted room with a drink of some sort in his hand. His head was bandaged. She entered silently, avoiding that room, not wanting to advertise her whereabouts unnecessarily,

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ily, and finally heard Striker's voice coming from a darkened room.

"Thera, I don't want to marry you!"

It was almost like a physical attack, the pang of raw jealousy she felt. She had no claim on the man, and wanted none. He was white. All she wanted was his help for Danny. And yet . . .

"I promised myself I'd have you!" the girl's voice said. Then there was only the sound of bodies in clandestine motion. Obviously, Striker was having at some rich white bitch-and Ilunga couldn't stand it. She fumbled for the light switch, determined to expose them.

"Now we're being coy!" Striker said.

Ilunga paused, for an instant imagining that he was addressing her. But that was impossible. She finally found the light and turned it on.

Suddenly she could see; she suffered no blindness because her night vision was so poor that her eyes did not adapt. Her expectations

were fully confirmed. Striker stood there, pants down beside a full-bodied white siren.

Striker was a Nordic giant, about thirty years old, clean-shaven with a crewcut. He was not extremely tall--perhaps six feet one inch--but he weighed about 225 pounds without an ounce of fat.

All his muscles were etched on him, from his wide shoulders to his heavy calves. He had a narrow waist, but rather wide hips--not at all effeminate, but essential for power. His neck would have been grotesque in a less developed man: a stout column of gristle and sinew that made his head look small. He had high cheekbones, bronzed by the sun; a prominent cleft chin; and a large nose that had been broken and reset more than once. There were a number of old scars on his face and body--and several fresh ones, including one hell of a love-bite on the junction of his neck and shoulder. And one side of his head was bandaged.

Striker jumped clumsily out of his trousers, almost taking a tumble, and staggered toward Ilunga. He limped slightly, unconsciously favoring his right knee, which had probably been often injured. Without effort she put the flat of her foot in his belly,

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overcoming the temptation to hit him in the crotch, and shoved him back. She needed his help; she couldn't let emotion get in the way.

"Ilunga!" he cried foolishly.

Then the white whore came up, shaking everything she had.

There was something intriguing about it despite the color. Again, Ilunga didn't want to get sidetracked; she had to talk to Striker and enlist his help in a hurry, and squabbling with his buxom playmate of the hour was a waste of time.

"Get your black ass out of here!" the floozy demanded.

"Who is this girl?" Ilunga asked Striker imperturbably.

"Thera Drummond, judo novice," he said, embarrassed.

But the girl wanted to quarrel, so Ilunga had to oblige her. It was the only way to eliminate the distraction so she could talk to Striker.

She kicked the bitch cleanly on the bouncy posterior. The girl actually tried to grab Ilunga's foot, attempting a clumsy throw.

Ilunga refrained from laughing; it was necessary to make allowance for the inexperience of the pretty child. No need to hurt her.

Let her try a few grips, then break the holds easily. Black cat playing with white mouse.

But Ilunga was not a play-combatant, and soon tired of the game. She landed a foot in the girl's stomach, calculated to do no damage, then got on top of her. With one hand Ilunga pinched a white nipple, with the other she put pressure on the most sensitive area of the genital. A double pain-hold when fully exerted.

However, this was not fully exerted, just a token. Shame to destroy a body like this. White it was, but well formed; there was a certain pleasure in handling it. Even the silky hair falling over Ilunga's arm had its qualities; cut short, it would never hold an Afro, yet the texture was pleasant.

The girl screamed. Ilunga let her go; the hold could not have been that harsh. Then she realized. It had not been pain that made the girl react, but pleasure. That body was made for one purpose, but this was not the time. Not in front of a man.

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The white girl got out, leaving Ilunga with little more than the memory of the feel of that lush body under her hands. God, there were times when she was tempted . . .

Actually, the girl had not been a bad fighter, and she had performed cleanly. What form would the encounter have taken if there hadn't been a man watching?

But now to business. Quickly she sketched her encounter with Danny and the Blakrev thugs. As she described Danny's condition she felt ridiculous tears coming to her eyes. What shame, to plead before this honky-but it had to be done.

"I can't help you," he said.

And there it was. She had broken up his liaison with the white tart, and sent the girl packing, and now he was getting back at her. Why hadn't she waited? The rate he had been going, another minute would have abated his lust and he would have been ready to talk.

Now it had to be the hard way.

"Once you were in need," she said, "and I helped you. This is all I'll ever ask of you. I never asked anything of a white man before." It galled her like hell, but she could still picture Danny,

bleeding.

"I want to help you," he said. "It's just that I'm backlogged on prior commitments. I'd have to have your brother in my apartment and stand guard over him for weeks-and I'm going to be out of the country in that time. I can't call my trip off. There's no explanation I could make that wouldn't arouse suspicion and betray your brother's whereabouts. Students are in and out all the time. It just wouldn't work."

He was protesting too much. What was the use? There was no help here. Honkies didn't help blacks.

"But I can tell you who could do just as good a job. He paused.

"No, I forgot, he's in Japan. Let's see. Ah, I know! A black man, and a martial artist. I can call him-"

Hope dawned. "Who?"

"Mustapha."

She looked up, surprised. "The Mustapha? You know him?"

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He nodded "I met him in a tournament. We aren't close, but I think we understand each other. I think he'd like you."

That again. He'd take one look at her ass, and want it. Striker himself was the only man who wasn't that way. He liked sex, but it was second or third among his priorities, instead of first. With a black woman, at any rate. That white siren . . ."Most men do like me. I don't like them."

"I know. But he has merit under his braggadocio, and a kind of heart. If any man is worth-"

"Don't tell me my business!" she snapped. "Make the call."

Now Striker was pimping for a black man. Where would it end?

There was a phone in the library. Striker called. There was some static with a secretary or someone else running interference, but he bulled through. "Jason Striker. S-T-R-I-K-E-R. Just give him the name. I'll hang on."

He hadn't been bluffing. In less than a minute Mustapha himself was evidently on the line. "Yes, it was some time, down in Nicaragua!" Striker said. "Remember that banquet? I know, I threw up too!"

At last he got down to business. "Look, I have a woman here. She saved my life, and now she needs help. I'm tied up. Well, it's her brother. He got shot by a black militant outfit. I know you're militant yourself. So is Ilunga-one of the best. I-L-U-N-G-A. But her brother couldn't take it. He tried to drop out, and they sent an extermination crew after him. Blakrev. Yes, but you know this sort of thing only damages your cause. We all want equality, but the white racists pounce on every episode, play it up big. All she wants is a safe place for him while he recovers. Thanks, Mustapha! I knew you'd understand. You'll like her; she's some woman. Karate. Equivalent to fourth dan, I'd say. And kung fu. Probably can beat the bejesus out of most of the self-styled sifus around. One thing, though; she's an addict. But it's not anything that gets in her way. Kill-13. Okay, I'll put her on."

He handed the phone to Ilunga. "Hello," she said shortly.

Mustapha's familiar voice came through loud and clear. "Lis-

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ten babe, I know you. I'm a fan of yours from way back. But you kicked one of my sparring partners once . . ."

"I don't kick black men unless they push their luck."

"Like walking in the park? He's a honky. 'S'okay, small loss.

But I don't want anything like that happening to me, see?"

"Understood." She knew what was coming next.

"It's going to be some trouble, if I help your brother."

"Understood," she repeated. There had never been any question but that it would come to this; she had no other coin. She did know how to make a man happy, when she had to. It was part of knowing how to make a man unhappy.

"Every day he's here." He had big ideas.

"Yes." All things considered, it was a fair bargain. No one would suspect a ranking boxer like Mustapha.

"I'll send a friend for him. Where is he?"

She told him. She had to chance it, at this point.

"You come straight to my place. Now," he said.

"Yes." She hung up, disgusted.

"I'm sorry," Striker said. "It would not have been this way with Hiroshi, my Japanese friend. He's an old man. If there had been any way do it myself-

"I know. That's why I came to you." She could have prostituted herself to Striker and justified it to herself on the grounds of

helping Danny. And Striker would have helped without demanding such payment. Now she'd really have to do it, with no personal satisfaction whatever. She shrugged. "So I pay. It's worth it, this one time. Thanks."

"I still owe you," he said. "Some other time."

Some other time . . . She left without further comment.

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Mustapha was like the doctor, only worse. He had bigger appetites and much more stamina. He wanted to talk at her in that mile a minute way he had, then make love, then talk some more.

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Evidently his knowledge that she was the castrator of men was highly stimulating to him, so long as he was assured she would not practice her art on him.

But Danny was brought safely, ensconced in Mustapha's large apartment, and treated well. That was what counted.

Mustapha was a big man, taller than Striker, well muscled and handsome. He had been a contender for the world heavyweight championship in boxing, but had been denied his actual shot at the title because of his militant beliefs. The denial had been illegal; he had gone to court and won his case. But by that time his best years were past; younger men had come up, and Mustapha's chance was gone. He had reason to be bitter.

Still, he seemed to live well, and he was still a fine black figure of a man. His facial injuries had had the attention of a plastic

surgeon. He dressed in flashy clothes and spent money freely, too freely. He was often reputed to be in debt.

Next morning, weary from a workout fully as rigorous as any karate program, she went in to see Danny-and he was gone. The bed was empty.

Mustapha entered behind her. "He's okay," he said. "He's being taken care of. But his future depends on you."

Ilunga stood motionless, realizing that she had been betrayed-again. While she submitted to this man's revels, her brother had been quietly taken away. But she could not act.

"I want you to know," Mustapha said, "that I don't like this part."

"I don't like your black ass either!" she snapped. "You try to touch me again-!"

He stepped back, guarding his crotch. "That's not what I meant. I'm with Blakrev, of course. But Striker was my friend, close as a honky can count, and I had to lie to him. When he said you could deliver your brother, I had to do it. Or I'd be dead tomorrow."

Not to mention the ass he would have passed up! But what

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could she do? They had Danny. But she grasped at one straw. "Striker didn't know?"

"He didn't know. Honkies are naive about these things. Keep him that way, and he won't get hurt."

White Striker had not betrayed her, but black Mustapha had.

After having his night with her. That was what she called a royal fuck! Striker was not the only one who had been naive! Now she was helpless. One act of vengeance against one Blakrev agent, and Danny was dead. "I thought all you wanted was to kill Danny," she said dully.

"That was all," he agreed. "To make a real fine example of him, right in the street. Until yesterday morning, when you wiped out five Blakrevs in as many minutes. Then we wanted you. Your brother's small-fry; we can use someone else for the example."

And she had put herself right into their hands. Incredible coincidence -or was it? Mustapha had been at pains to exonerate Striker, which could mean that Striker was the real betrayer after all. They didn't want his cover blown, so they had arranged for Mustapha to take the rap. Good white agents for a black revolution must be hard to come by.

Mustapha had said Striker was naive. But she remembered how Striker had taken on the Demon cult, fully as formidable as this Blakrev thing, and destroyed it in a few weeks. And they had had Striker's fiancée hostage. Naive? Like a mongoose among snakes. Blakrev had her. Why did they care what she knew about Striker? If they intended to kill her, they could readily do so now.

"You're working it out, aren't you," Mustapha said. "You have talents, talents we can use. You killed five of ours. You'll kill twice that many working for us."

Yes, of course. She would be a good asset to such a movement.

She would have to play along. Until she could rescue Danny. Meanwhile, she would learn all she could. If Striker was the one who had done this to her, there would be a reckoning.

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"Big Banana wants to rap with you," Mustapha said. "Come with me and watch your tongue, woman. We'll see who gives the orders around here."

The leader of Blakrev? It had not taken her long to obtain audience with the top. But that, too, was suspicious.

She was taken in a black (naturally!) limousine. She sat in a back compartment, all to herself, like a rich bitch with a sealed-off chauffeur. Black curtains prevented her from seeing out. She took a deep breath as the car took off, glad to be rid of Mustapha at last, and the overpowering temptation to smash his arrogant balls- and realized too late that there was gas in here. Before she could even attempt to break out, she lost consciousness.

When she woke, she could not tell how long it had been; but her body said many hours. She was hungry, and her bladder was full. She needed a refreshment stop. They were zooming along a superhighway, by the sound of it.

She tapped on the glass partition that separated her from the chauffeur. The man looked around and nodded-and it was not the same driver. She couldn't even be certain it was the same car. A long trip, indeed!

Soon it pulled into a filling station. The chauffeur got out, walked around, unlocked the door and let her "Five minutes," he said.

The air was hot, though it was night. Night! It had been noon when she started.

Make a break for it? No, no use. They still had Danny. Judging from the warmth; she was somewhere in a southern state. Where could she go, with no money? Into the cotton fields?

She finished with the restroom and returned to the limousine.

A box lunch awaited her on the seat. She ate slowly, listening to the whine of the tires: high-speed travel, seventy or eighty miles an hour. It was possible to go long way on an interstate in ten hours at that velocity.

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On and on. Finally she slept-then woke with a start as the car pulled to a halt. The chauffeur let her out again. "Just walk through this gate," he said, "and up to the door."

Ilunga unlatched the gate and walked down the path. Odd, that the driver hadn't taken her all the way in. The limousine drove off.

She could turn about and walk out; no one was guarding her now. But then Danny . . .

Resolutely, she went on.

The night was warm and sultry, and there was the smell of the

sea in the air. She glanced back, and noted that the wall surrounding the estate was ten feet tall and had broken glass embedded in the top and a strand of barbed wire above that. Electrified; she could tell by the insulators.

Inside, it was huge. The lights near the wall showed that there were small rolling hills covered with verdant grass, and there was the musical sound of a small stream meandering through. The trees were strange: she recognized a many-trunked banyan and a coconut palm, but others were hauntingly unfamiliar.

Something charged through the dark shrubbery. She strained to see, but the light was too dim away from the wall, and the view too obstructed. But it sounded like an animal of some sort, a large one. Perhaps a guard dog, a Great Dane. It had a slow, funny gait-she had never heard footfalls quite like that before-and a funnier smell.

Well, she had killed obnoxious dogs before.

The thing came closer then slowed to a walk, just out of clear sight. It was a dog, huge and spotted-she thought. "Come on, Bowser. I'm ready for you," she muttered. What better way to relieve her frustrations.

But it only watched, its eyes bright in the night. If only her night vision were better. Before she'd started on Kill-13 she'd had excellent sight.

"All right, I'm coming after you!" she snapped. She was not afraid; the dog did not live who could make her back off. Some-

times she had deballed curs in the park, in lieu of men. This was like a park. She moved toward it, her deadly hands and feet ready. She didn't really need good vision for this; her ears and reflexes sufficed. Though she could use a good sniff of Kill-13.

The creature gave a loud, cackling cry and retreated.

Startled, she stopped. That was no dog! That was a laughing hyena!

Hyena? Ridiculous! They were African creatures, and Asian.

This was America.

Then she realized this estate was like the African veldt at night.

That one great, odd shape, like an upside-down beer-bellied tree-an African baobab? The kind of terrain for lions, rhinos-and hyenas.

Home of the black man. Home of Blakrev.

"All right, hyena. We'll go see your master," she said.

That man, she would learn in due course, had started as heir to a million dollars, but lost it in the stock market by gambling on cocoa futures. He had excellent connections, both business and political-but broke, he was nothing. So he combined his martial-arts talents with his connections in the Internal Revenue Service, using tax audits to ascertain the worth of vulnerable businessmen, then extorting ten per cent. He also knew key Cuban exiles, and Latin American drug contacts. Now he ran Blackrev, using those drugs. And because of his anonymity and his intimacy with highly placed politicians, he seemed to be immune to investigation or prosecution.

No black man himself, but an unscrupulous white renegade
and accomplished martial artist.

The Hyena.

Chapter 5

BRAINWASH

I did not feel easy about Ilunga. She had accepted my referral
to Mustapha, and I knew she had followed up on it. But when I
called a few days later, Mustapha told me she had taken her brother
Danny and gone, he knew not where.

I had the feeling he was lying to me, but I didn't know why.

His tone was different than when I had first called him. Was he
hiding something?

Perhaps he had had a fight with Ilunga and kicked her out.

There was a lot I didn't understand about black relations. I checked
her ghetto apartment, but it was empty. Where had she gone?

I was busy; the judo team training was taking more and more
of my time, as we entered the final weeks. I had the team at my
own dojo, but it still pre-empted my regular schedule. I had to let
substitutes teach my private morning and afternoon classes. Ideally
the U.S. team should work out together anywhere from one to
three months before the big event. In Russia, Europe and Japan
they do. But in America they are lucky to get more than a week.

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Only strenuous effort on my part had gotten most of them together
for two to three weeks in advance. But it did consume my

time!

I also had to worry about the Hyena. The last thing I needed was to get involved in black politics and drug addiction. But Ilunga's plea just wouldn't let go of me. If she was no longer with Mustapha, I might have failed her. Something was wrong; she should have gotten in touch with me again. I owed her something, and after this judo meet I would be able to follow it up.

But somehow I had the feeling it could not wait that long.

Her brother Danny was a dabbler in drugs, she had told me; that was what had gotten him in trouble, for Blakrev evidently used drugs to control its converts. A bad situation-but it meant that if Danny and other youngsters could be freed of their drug dependencies, Blakrev would lose its power over them.

I had worked with a few youths with drug histories. Some had gone straight, preferring judo or karate to the drugs. They had really been searching for purpose and acceptance by their peers, and my martial-arts classes gave that to them. But some were not amenable, and had to be denied further training in my classes. I could not tolerate overt drug addiction in a trained judoka or karateka.

"Say, Andy," I said to my half-blind karate student/instructor.

No, it was unkind to call him that, or even to think it. He had been raked across the eyes by Ilunga, back when she was a Demon; that was one of the problems about her. Now he had partial vision in one eye, and in a few months he would have another operation

to restore his sight to normal. "Do you know anything about drugs?

I mean how to get off them?"

"You don't have a drug problem, sensei!" he laughed. "All you ever take is aspirin, and I don't believe you're addicted."

"A friend asked me for help with her brother. He'd been shot, but it was drugs that led up to it. I wondered-"

"Oh, you mean one of those peer-pressure groups," Andy said, getting serious. "They catch a kid before he's really addicted and

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run him through the mill. I think we have a judo student here who-"

"Maybe so," I agreed. "I don't know if I can find this kid now, and I don't know whether he'd go. But next time someone like that needs help, I want to know where to send him." Actually, it was more than that; it was an attempt to expiate my failure to proffer real help to Ilunga in her hour of need. Not that she was ever likely to know. The human conscience works like that; at times-too little, too late-but still the motions have to be honored. And in the back of my mind was the half-formed notion that maybe Ilunga had taken her brother to such a place, and that I might locate her that way. Small chance, but as I said, conscience isn't always reasonable. Mine isn't, anyway.

"Try Strate," Andy suggested.

"Straight? Straight where?"

"S-T-R-A-T-E," he spelled. "Sort of a pun on strait, as in being

in a bind, like hooked on drugs, and straight as in arrow. Idea is you start out strait and wind up straight. In between, you're 'strate'-part of the stratum. One of the good crowd."

"Oh," I said. "Do they do anything besides make puns?"

"See for yourself," he said. "I sat in on one of their meetings, and I'll admit I was impressed. But it's no good telling you, any more than you could train a black belt in karate just by telling him. You have to see."

"Okay. Thanks."

After the training session I drove down to the Strate headquarters.

I was hailed at the entrance by two young men. My muscles tightened but I reminded myself that this had nothing to do with either the judo meet or the Hyena-in fact I had no business here at all, really-and relaxed. I explained that I wanted to talk with their front desk. "Okay!" they said cheerfully. "Love you!"

Love me? Startled, I drove on in without acknowledging. I parked, noticing that a printed placard in a neighboring car said "STRATE LOVES YOU."

I began to catch on. So love was their motif.

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Their office was in a huge garage: obviously not a high-budget operation. Several people were waiting for attention, so I sat down for my turn. The others seemed to be white teenagers and their parents. A small puppy frolicked on the floor. There was no sense of tension; it was more like a bus station.

After twenty minutes nothing had happened. Had I missed my bus? Evidently Strate had more time spare than I did. I finally approached the desk and inquired how one applied for admittance to their meetings.

An older woman looked at me suspiciously. "You wish to admit your child?"

"I have no child," I said. "I just want to attend a meeting."

"Why?"

The question caught me by surprise. Surely they knew why people wanted to attend. But if she wanted me to spell it out, all right. "I was told you have a good drug rehabilitation program here. I want to see it in action."

"You're a professional?"

"If you mean in the drug field, no. I'm just a concerned citizen.

I think it's too bad so many kids are getting hooked on drugs today, and I want to know what's being done about it. So I came here, to learn." Actually I had had experience with the worst drug of them all, Kill-13, usually addictive with one sniff. I had had a sniff myself, and only the grace of God had spared me from permanent addiction. But the average kid would not be exposed to Kill-13. Not any more.

The woman scribbled something on a bit of paper and walked away. Shortly, three young people came out, a boy and two girls.

"I'm the director," the smallest of them said, a little girl with reddish hair, not well kept. She was not well dressed, either, and looked about fifteen.

Were they fooling me? They seemed serious. "I'm Jason Striker."

The girl looked at the paper the woman had given her. "You came to give a lecture?"

Some foul-up! Their bureaucracy was as inefficient as any other.

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"As I told the other woman, I came here to learn. I want to attend one of your meetings, talk with your people, to see how your program works."

"Are you bringing in your son or daughter?"

"I have no children." I was getting tired of this. Were they stupid, or merely double-checking? "I just want to see how you operate, in case I have occasion to refer anyone here."

"We don't allow anyone to attend unless he's on drugs or the parent of a person on drugs," she said firmly.

Oh? That wasn't what Andy had said. He had attended, and he was not on drugs. It appeared these people didn't trust me, and that was funny, because I had come with complete candor. All I wanted was information. Why should they be suspicious of strangers?

"How do you expect anyone to learn about your program in time to help him-or his children-if you won't let him see until he's actually hooked on drugs?" I asked.

The little girl shrugged inelegantly, oddly sober for her age. It was as though she had been through this many times before. She was not pretty, and I wondered whether she had found a home

here at Strate, being accepted as a staffer instead of taking her chances in the outside world. "We can't change our rules."

How often had I heard that, as the refuge of the indefensible in mindless bureaucracy! If the world were likely to end tomorrow, this type of person would not change a rule to save it.

Somewhat disturbed by being balked by this youngster half my age I was about to leave. I had wasted my time, and this did not improve my temper.

"We love you!" the three youngsters chorused as I turned my back.

I lacked the grace to respond in kind. Love without trust? My love was more discriminating. I could not love Strate without knowing it better.

"Hey, Mr. Striker!" someone called. I looked around. It was Mario, one of my judo students. He was tall and thin, with a small
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beard and long hair. Not one of my best, and his tonsure was in technical violation of judo guidelines, but a hardworking, decent sort.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm on staff," he said with pride. "I've been with Strate three years."

"You were an addict?" I asked, surprised.

"Pot, hash, speed, downs, opium, peyote-the whole route," he said. "I tried them all. It's all on my record. Don't you read those forms you have us fill out for judo?"

"Not well enough," I muttered. "I could have asked you about Strate and saved myself the trouble of coming here."

"That's no good," he said. "You have to attend a meeting, at least, to really appreciate it."

I had been that route. "They won't let me in. I just tried."

He looked at me in disbelief. "Something's fishy."

"I'm not the parent of a drug addict," I said.

"Come on, we'll see about this."

He led me back to the desk. "Georgia, set it up tonight for this man. The works."

The girl stared at me coldly, showing no trace of the love she had expressed a moment ago when she thought she was rid of me.

"Mario, you know we don't let strangers watch."

"Strangers!" he cried indignantly. "This is Jason Striker! My judo sensei. He's done more good for more kids-" He continued with a deluge of praise that had my ears burning. I often wish my students could talk about me without exaggerating. Well, without too much exaggeration, maybe. The upshot was that I found myself invited to their evening meeting. I had, it seemed, a connection after all.

I came, of course. After the scrambling I had had to do to gain admission, I viewed Strate with a certain cynicism, but I still wanted to learn. Maybe they had reason to distrust strangers; maybe drugusing gangs tried to infiltrate their meetings and break them up.

So I tried to keep an open mind.

It was impressive. There may have been a thousand people cramming that warehouse, inmates, parents, and selected members of the community, such as myself. If every one of these visitors had worked as hard as I had to get here, they were a determined lot.

We all sat in a mighty circle on the floor, for there were not enough chairs by a factor of a hundred or so, and we sang songs. They sang, anyway; I tried to follow, but music is not my forte, and I didn't know the tune or words. Even so, I could appreciate the skill with which the Strates sang. They did multi-part harmonies, and the beat was exact. When they started, they started precisely together; when they stopped, it was on a dime, with no sour note. There must have been a lot of practice and a lot of discipline to get them that sharp.

Then there was an expectant silence. After a moment a young boy stood up and spoke. "I'm Bill. I'm twelve years old. I've been on pot, hash, peyote, speed, and acid since I was nine. I saw the older kids doing it. I wanted to get in with the crowd. I felt awful guilty, but I didn't really care about myself. My folks didn't know I was skipping school. I stole money to support my habit. When they caught me, I wanted to die. The juvenile court sent me to Strate, and I was really scared. I didn't want to come here. Now I know I was wrong. I hurt my folks. I wouldn't let them help me. I don't want to touch drugs again, ever. Not even a trunk. I just

want to go home and make it up to my folks. Get a job, make something of myself. Thank you for helping me. I love you."

"I love you!" the Strates in the crowd cried as he sat down.

I was amazed. This boy, by his own admission, had been on half a dozen drugs, in and out of juvenile court, and now was confessed and reformed-and he was only twelve! Apparently Strate had saved him from a lifetime of addiction and crime, and had set him firmly on the road to good citizenship. What more could anyone ask?

Another person rose-a girl in her late teens, I judged. "I'm Jill. I was hooked on pot, acid, cocaine, hash, alcohol, speed. I

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wanted to be grown-up. I thought I was smart, that I had things together. But I was really very lonely. I ran away from home when I was fourteen. I tried everything to feel good. Nothing worked. I lost my motivation. Anything that happened, I just said people didn't like me, that was my excuse for everything. I had no purpose in life, no meaning. My friends were just people around. I was easily hurt, but I never showed it. They thought I was strong, but I was weak. I never stood up for what I thought was right.

Now I love living, I love my parents. I love you!"

Tears were streaming down her face as she sat down. "I love you!" the others chorused again, comfortingly.

So Strate had the secret of curing addicts! Why hadn't I been aware of this before? The world should know!

Almost immediately another girl stood up. "I'm Millie. I'm seventeen. I was on pot, hash, acid, speed, downs, and horse . . ."

She continued her recitation, but my attention swerved. These confessions-they were too similar to one another. Each person had tried half a dozen addictive drugs at an early age, and gotten in trouble for it, and come here, and now each was overflowing with remorse and love for the group that had cured him or her. It was like a memorized spiel, a litany, and the script was becoming familiar. Effective the first time, but losing authenticity with every repetition.

Perhaps these kids really believed what they were saying but I didn't. Reform is excellent, and so are good intentions and positive attitude. So is love. But not at the price of rote conformity. What was Strate's program? What was happening to these kids behind the scene, to make them speak out in public apology like this?

I remembered something a friend had told me in confidence about a mental hospital where he worked as an aide. "Most of the patients are okay," he said. "They don't want trouble. They have their hang-ups, that's why they're here, but we know about these. Some are incontinent-real mess to clean up that shit! Some have amnesia, some do screwy things like masturbating in the open every hour. But they aren't ornery. A few are real troublemakers,

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though. Nobody can handle 'em. So we send 'em down to Wing IV. I don't know what happens to 'em there, but when they come

back in a few days, they're like lambs. No trouble at all, any more.

Not for a long time. 'Course, some never make it back . . ."

This public display of contrition-it had the aspect of Wing

IV. Maybe I was being paranoid, but it was damn well worth checking out. No sense leaving Strate with the wrong impression.

After the meeting, Mario arranged for another talk with the child-director. I was no longer surprised at her youth; it was obvious that Strates could be any age from ten on up. A fifteen year old could be a three-year veteran, and this one was.

"I'm not clear exactly how this works," I said carefully. "I heard the Strates talking, but none of them said how they were cured. What do you do the rest of the day, when you're not at the big meeting?"

"Nothing," she told me. "To succeed here, you have to change. You have to realize what a jerk you are, being hooked on drugs." I shook my head dubiously. "A lot of kids I know would never voluntarily admit they were jerks." Would Ilunga's brother Danny admit it, or would he laugh derisively at the very notion? No need to ask.

"It works," she insisted. "All you have to do is walk through that door." She gestured toward the far aperture of the warehouse, where a Strate staffer stood guard. I realized that no one could pass through that door, either way, without being challenged.

"This is something I understand," I said, thinking again of Wing IV. What was behind that door? "If I were an addict, and I

walked through that door; would I be cured?"

"We don't handle adults," she said. "You would have to go to another program."

"What other programs are there? For adults?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

This was a director? Curious. "What is your program? What happens to a person-behind that door?"

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Her reply was another shrug. But then she said, "I just told you. He comes to realize what a jerk-"

I sighed. I had heard of revelation, religious and otherwise, in which a person came to realize the error of his ways and resolved to change. Some really did change. But that was not my question. There had to be some inducement, some lead-up, experience to make that person alter the habits of a lifetime. This child would not, or could not, tell me what that was. And I suspected I knew why.

Strate, in whatever wholesome guise, was practicing brainwashing.

With a guarded controlled environment and strenuous group pressure, it was able to tame all but the most adamant subject.

Teenaged youngsters were still suggestible. They could be molded in a fashion hardened adults could not.

But brainwashing was an extremely dangerous tool. It did not turn out free-thinking individuals, it turned out conformist automatons, all parroting the prescribed line. That line could be "I love you" or "I hate you"-they would say it and believe it. Perhaps

that was the only real cure for incipient drug addiction. But in my mind, the cure might well be worse than the ailment.

No, I would not send a boy like Danny here, had I the option.

My student Mario might swear by Strate, but I knew him to be a narrow, limited personality. He would never make a really good judoka; he lacked the initiative and imagination, and most of all he lacked the sheer fight. He had a positive attitude, certainly, but I saw now, more clearly than ever before, that this was not enough.

Later, I followed up with a little private research into the statistics. They were not optimistic. Of those who graduated from programs like Strate and returned to the open world, approximately ninety per cent were back on drugs within six months. The only sure way to stay straight was to stay with the program—either as an inmate or as staff, as Mario was.

I had not learned what I expected or wanted, and I had not found Danny or Ilunga, but I had learned. In future, I would stick to my martial arts.

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Danny slumped in the dark cell. He had no idea whether it was night or day, or how long he had been there. He was naked and thirsty. They fed him irregularly so that he could not keep track of the time. There was no place to urinate or defecate except where he was and his hands were tied behind him. The cell stank

of his own refuse. He was also in the throes of a mild withdrawal from his minor drug habit.

Only his mind remained bright, his passions, his memories.

He was a coward, and knew it, but somehow, when Blakrev had actually tried to kill him, he had gained courage. Now there was no doubt of their nature, no doubt at all. If he believed in anything, anything at all, it was the sanctity of human life. His sister had fought them and taken him to a doctor, and then somehow she had gone and he was here, and one thing he knew was that she would never have betrayed him. She must be dead, and now there was no one to protect him, no one to lean on. No one to uphold her honor except him.

They had told him he was in Blakrev. He had lifted himself off the bed despite the agony of his wound. "I'm not with you, you motherfuckers!" And then he was here. His wound still hurt, but now it was a badge of honor, a vital evidence that they had done their worst.

Light bathed him blindingly. Someone untied his hands, cleaned him up gently. It was a woman, dark-skinned like him, attractive. He was embarrassed as she washed off his privates, the refuse on his legs, but he suffered it without protest.

She guided him to a pleasant room with a picture window opening out onto a tropical landscape: palms, shrubbery, sand.

He relaxed in a comfortable chair.

A man entered-brown, handsome, casually well dressed.

"Sorry about the misunderstanding," the man said. "Those fools

thought you were an impostor. When we checked out your refer-

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ences, we knew you were of good black stock. Your sister may have deceived you."

"Never!" Danny exclaimed.

The man took no notice. "Smoke?" he inquired, proffering a cigarette. It had the look and smell of a reefer, and Danny wanted it badly, but he shook his head no. "Drink?" the man asked next, bringing out a bottle. But Danny distrusted this too. The moment he accepted any drug from Blakrev, he was done.

The man shrugged. "She's been telling you lies about Blakrev, trying to turn you against our interests. But of course you know there can be no peace with the honkies. They have to be put down."

Danny carried no brief for the white man, but that didn't make Blakrev his friend. "Go suck your ass," he said. He knew about the Tarzan-Jane approach; he had seen the police use it.

One interrogator would be harsh, tough; the other gentle, friendly.

This one was Jane, and not be trusted.

"I don't think I understand you," Jane said. "There are very good things waiting for friends of Blakrev, and very bad things in store for Blakrev's enemies. I would hate to see you hurt."

"Then let me out of here!" Danny cried.

Jane sighed. "It really would be easier if you supported us."

Danny didn't answer. He knew what was coming, and he was terrified, but something in him would not let go.

A second man entered the room: short, muscular, and with the head of an animal. His skin was white. Tarzan. Jane faded out. "Stand!" the beast-man snapped.

Danny, though his body was shaking and sweating, ignored him. Naturally Tarzan was white!

Crack! A fist like iron crashed down on his shoulder, hurling him to the floor.

After that it was vague. When Danny found himself back in his cell, he knew he'd had the worst beating of his life. Every part of him hurt.

Now it was glaringly bright. He sat on the bare metal cot, shuddering, unable to alleviate the pain. What a monster that

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white beast-man was! Wouldn't it have been better to go along with nice black Jane?

Logically, yes. But still Danny couldn't let go. His sister would never have given in, and now he couldn't betray her. If she were dead, she had died fighting Blakrev.

He lay down, shielding his eyes against the awful light. That must be a thousand-watt bulb! At last he began to relax, to fall asleep despite his pains.

A terrible shock ran through him. Danny cried out in new agony and threw himself off the cot. They had electrified it!

That was the beginning of his next ordeal. He could not sleep.

Every time he nodded off, something violent happened. An electric

shock, a deafening clang, or a swift blow through the bars.

Whatever it took to keep him alert and hurting.

He understood, now, what they were doing. They were brainwashing him. If he began to go along with Blakrev, these harassments would ease. If not, they would continue until he cracked- or died.

Contrary to all his own expectations, he held out. Because it was what Ilunga would have done.

Somewhere in that maze of waking fatigue he was taken back to the room with the picture window. He was put in the chair and made to face the window. The lights went out, so that there was nothing to see except the pleasant view outside.

A man stumbled onto the scene, a black man who looked vaguely familiar. Maybe it was just the type; he looked like one of the Blakrev drug pushers.

"This man tried to cheat Blakrev by holding back part of his sales," the man behind Danny said. "Watch." Danny watched, because he didn't want to be hit again. The pusher was running from something, but what? He kept looking nervously over his shoulder.

Suddenly a hulking animal shape appeared, some kind of huge dog or cat. "The hyena," the voice behind said. The hyena leaped and grabbed the fugitive's leg with his teeth. The man screamed.

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Danny heard nothing; the glass was soundproof. But the vision

was enough. The pusher fell, but the animal did not let go. It crunched hard on the leg until the bone snapped.

The man was still conscious. He tried to crawl away on two hands and one leg. But the hyena caught an arm, and again crushed the bone with a single vicelike closing of its terrible jaws.

Then it went to work on the helpless man's torso. Using claws and teeth, it ripped at the abdomen, tearing away skin and muscle. Finally it dragged out the living intestine and began to feed. For a moment it looked up, as if seeing Danny, a bloody string of entrails dangling from its smiling mouth.

"Delicious!" the man behind him remarked, and smacked his lips.

Danny threw himself off the chair and hurtled into the man headfirst. His forehead struck the man's crotch as the lights came on. Now there was an audible scream! As the man fell, Danny punched him on the nose. Then he lifted his foot for a stomp.

Never before had he fought like this!

They dragged him away and hung him up by his feet, naked, his head immersed in a tub of water, almost drowning him. Only by bending his body could he clear his mouth to breathe . . . and then a standing ring of men beat him in the face and body with leather straps. Tarzan, Jane, and the others--they were all there, even the woman. They swung him around by the rope, each laying the leather into his buttocks, until his rear was a raw mass of bleeding meat. He thought he was going to die, and now he wanted to, but they knew what they were doing, and kept him alive and

in constant pain.

At last they took him back to the picture window, still without food, water, or sleep. Now there was salt in the chair, stinging cruelly, but he had to sit. And watch.

Was it to be another kill for the hyena? He didn't care. Nothing further could dismay him. He had won a victory of sorts: he had unmasked Jane, shown the black man up as the torturer he was.

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The beast-headed Tarzan came into view. He stopped, turned, and beckoned.

Then Ilunga stepped out.

"Sis!" Danny cried. But it was useless; she could not hear him through the soundproof glass.

Ilunga came up to the man. Tarzan put his hand on her arm and guided her around to face the window directly. Now she could see Danny.

Tarzan said something. Ilunga looked at Danny-and spat at him.

Danny was too shocked to move or speak. Ilunga was alive and well, and she had gone over to Blakrev!

They took him back to his cell. Food and water were there, and there was now a mattress and blanket on his cot. They even let him sleep.

But what use was any of this, now?

Chapter 6

CUBA

We traveled to Cuba via Mexico; no direct flights went to Havana from America. Mexico City, from the air, was a giant bowl surrounded by mountains. It was dusk, and the lights were coming on; myriads of twinkling glows, and the eerie illumination of the oil refineries.

Mexico City is one of the great cities of the world, with a population of about eight and a half million; it is second only to New York in the Americas, and second to none in age and beauty. Long before the Europeans came, this mile-and-a-half high metropolis flourished amid Aztec sacrifices.

Next day we flew to Cuba. As we neared the island, the plane's intercom came to life, spouting Spanish. One of my bilingual judokas translated for me and the others. "We are now flying over the infamous Bay of Pigs."

The Bay of Pigs! Where American-backed Cuban exiles had launched their abortive invasion of Castro's regime, only to be wiped out. I remembered the long effort to redeem the prisoners, trading

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them for 500 monster tractors. It gave me a chill. Had things really changed that much in the past decade or so? Now we Americans were invading again, and our fighters had little better chance of success.

More Spanish, and the translation: "You all know what happened here. A great victory for Democracy over Imperialism . . ."

I tuned it out of my mind. I was no expert on politics, being basically apolitical, and I had never decided on the rights and wrongs of the Bay of Pigs fiasco; but if Castro's Cuba was a democracy, my understanding was backwards. I looked down, watching the landscape change to flat country, first swamps, then plains covered with farms. Finally we landed at Havana International Airport, announced as Jose Marti Airport, and called Rancho Boyeros Airport by the natives because that was the town it was actually in. A bus took us into Havana, through rolling countryside with small vegetable patches: lettuce, cabbage, beans, carrots, gourds, and so on. Gardens seemed to grow the same under communism as under capitalism. We were given a small tour of the city, via the windows of the bus and spot announcements.

The road took us past the big round Sports Complex where the judo meet was to be held. Several roads met in front of it, at a large fountain lit by colored lights. We moved right alongside the Civic Center, with its monument to Jose Marti, a major figure in Cuban history, atop his star-shaped pedestal. Then the Palace of Justice; did they really have justice here, I wondered? And the University complex and the beautiful Church of the Sacred Heart, which looked like a European Cathedral. I'm no connoisseur of architecture, but I enjoyed the whole tour as a simple ignorant tourist.

I saw many Spanish-language posters on buildings and poles, no doubt excoriating the vices of capitalism. We rode along the Malecon, or seaside highway, past the Capitol or capitol building. I was surprised to see that it was an exact replica of the one in Washington. Then on by the Presidential Palace, and through the

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Havana Tunnel. When we emerged I saw the of the grim Cabanas fortress, the prison filled with political dissenters.

After that it was the Via Blanca, or White Road to Varadero, eighty miles from Havana, where we would stay for our final training. This trip took an hour and a half. Added to the tour, it made a total of three hours from airport to hotel.

Havana was a huge place, almost two million people. In fact, it accounted for about a fifth of the total population of Cuba, a remarkable concentration. But the whole road, through Havana and beyond, bordered the sea, and there were beautiful beaches all along the way.

The International Hotel, where we were staying, was on a narrow spit of land, a lovely peninsula, with beaches on both sides. I could see that it would be a lot of fun here, and I hoped my team did not suffer from the distraction. We had to fit in a lot of lastminute training if we were to make a decent showing.

We trained, and trained hard; but as the sweltering days passed, we had to take some breaks. There is, after all, more to life than judo, traitorous as it may seem to say it.

The last afternoon, before our move to the Havana Libre in

Havana for the meet, I walked alone out on the beach to clear my head after a grueling session. The sand was clean and warm, so fine it was like powder, and I was tempted to plunge into the water for a swim. As a part of our training, we ran over this loose sand every morning, much harder than normal running. I had on my bathing suit, like everyone else.

I didn't try to strike up any conversations. The ideal Cuban, I had discovered, is an orator. Despite my ignorance of the language I could appreciate the rhetorical rhythms of the incessant, loud, fast talk, accompanied by expressive gestures. We Americans lack that zest in our dialogue.

The sea here was shallow and clear, with a great variety of beautiful seashells. I could make out sea horses and schools of little cuttlefish. Give it time, I thought; one day soon Cuba would enter

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the twentieth century and pollute its waters in civilized fashion, and all this beauty would pass.

A Rubenesque girl accosted me. "Que hora es?" she inquired.

She had long brown hair, wore glasses even on the beach-nearsighted,

I judged-and had extremely generous breasts that would

surely sag before her youth passed.

"No hablo Espanol," I replied regretfully, using one of the

phrases I had learned for such occasions. "I can't speak Spanish.

Sorry." In this case I really was sorry, for she had a really voluptuous

figure barely contained by her bathing suit.

"Ah, you are Canadian," she said in my language.

"American," I said. "Sorry again."

She looked disappointed, but put a positive face on it. "The Americans are not all bad. Just their government. I am sure the people want our friendship."

"I certainly do!" I agreed; "We're not bad. We're just bad judokas," Less than stunning repartee.

"Oh, so you are with the judo team!"

I confessed I was.

"You will lose," she said confidently. "Our teams will win the championship."

I shrugged. I didn't want to fight with her. "What makes you think that?" Actually I could think of worse ways to relax than talking with a buxom girl, communist though she might be. It was not her politics that showed up so amply in the sun, after all.

One deep breath and she would burst out. Voyeur that I am, I wanted to be on hand for the event.

"Cuba was a pioneer in Central America," she said warmly.

"Kolychkine brought it here from Belgium. We were host to the first Pan American Games, and also the second, and we organized the Pan American Judo Union. Cuban senseis organized and introduced judo to Guatamala, Puerto Rico, and Costa Rica. With our new government, run by the people, it is even more popular. We have courses in judo at the University, with graduates and tenured judo teachers."

"Say, you must be a real judo fan!" I exclaimed. "Who are you?"

She was, it turned out, a University student, studying pedagogia-that is, to become a teacher. (Her students, I thought, had better be below the age of ten, or they would never be able to concentrate on the subject. Such jiggles!) She was making a study of judo her graduate thesis. She was not terrifically proficient in it herself, being a green belt, but she knew a great deal about the subject.

I realized that she had been on the prowl for foreign judo team members. An American could hardly have been her first or second choice.

"I'd like to see that University," I said wistfully.

"I will show it to you," she said. "When do you go to Havana?"

"Tomorrow," I said.

"I will pick you up tomorrow," she said.

I nodded gratefully. So she was willing to settle for the lowly American after all. She left me then, and walked on down the beach. Her buttocks jiggled from side to side.

*

Dulce was as good her word. The Havana Libre was only two blocks from the University, so we walked over. She wore an ample ruffled skirt reaching down to her knees; no more covert glances at her remarkable legs and thighs. Her dark brown hair hung in waves

to her shoulders, and her breasts seemed incredibly large, her waist miraculously small, and her hips amazingly broad. Everything was accentuated today. I'd always thought of Cubans as dark-skinned, but her skin was creamy white.

We moved uphill to the foot of a broad staircase leading up to the University. The buildings were all in Greek style, with granite Doric columns topped by relief carvings. There was a park in the middle. We dallied there briefly, then passed the library and the

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huge stadium and finally made it to the monstrous indoor dojo where the Cuban judo team was training. A man came up as we entered the judo hall. He was forty-five or fifty, a big man about six feet tall, beefy but strong, with wide bones, black curly hair, a small scar on his cheek, and a slightly cauliflower ear. He did not look too bright, but I knew this was an illusion. "¿Buenas, los puedo ayudar en algo?" he inquired, big white teeth flashing in a friendly smile. His voice was deep.

"This is a visitor from the American team," Dulce said.

"The American team! We shall plow you under! Welcome! I am Rolando Rubio, coach of the Cuban team."

"Jason Striker-American coach," I said. We shook hands, and I felt the extreme musculature of his body. This was a powerful, trained man.

There were a number of judokas training in the hall. I could not help sneaking a peek, for these were what my boys would have

to compete against. I saw one man on his back, running the line.

Student after student attacked him, only to be overturned and held down, or strangled efficiently. What a demonstration of skill!

"Jason Striker? I know of you! How glad I am to meet you! I saw you beat the karateka last year, on television."

"Actually it was a draw," I demurred. It was amazing how news of that martial-arts tournament had spread. I kept running into people who remembered it.

"Luis!" Rolando shouted, his voice booming in the hall. The man on the mat disengaged from practice and approached.

"This is Jason Striker, American fifth dan." He turned to me.

"Sensei Luis Guardia, fifth dan, who works with me on the mat."

Luis was about fifty, with curly brown, hair and blue eyes odd in a Cuban. I noticed that he limped somewhat; his knees had been badly injured in the past, so that he could no longer walk easily. He stood only about five feet five inches tall-but there was no doubt he was a devil on the tatami.

"I was just admiring your style," I told him.

"And I have admired yours!" he said, with an infectious smile.

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He had a scar on his forehead, as though he had not been quite quick enough against a swordsman. "Come, friend. Let's work out on the mat."

I hesitated; I really hadn't come for this. But these people inspired me with an instant feeling of camaraderie; they were real

judokas, my type of company. Where was the harm in a friendly match? "Okay," I said.

I changed into one of their judogis, donned my black belt, and joined Luis. A number of the students stopped to watch. No matter.

Luis lay on his back. "Attack me," he invited.

I was puzzled. He was not even defending himself. What did he think I was—a novice, a white-belt? I approached. He changed position slightly rolling on his side I slipped up and caught him in a kesa gatame, a scarf hold. I sat at his side, one arm around his neck, the other catching his arm against my armpit.

Correction: I intended to apply that hold, and thought for a moment I had. But at the last moment Luis moved aside, as slippery as an eel. His hand pushed against my arm, his head was out of the noose, and I was face down on the mat. He was at my back, both hands choking my neck in an okuri-eri jime or lapel strangle, using the lapels of my kimono to choke me.

I tried to resist, but his hands were in deep and the cloth was cutting my neck. His arms were strong as a bull, deceptive for so small a person. In a real fight I might have tried to hit him in a vital spot, before falling unconscious, but this was sport judo.

I tapped with my leg, since I couldn't speak, surrendering.

Luis released me, smiling. "Want to try again?"

Yes, I wanted to try again. I didn't like being so readily defeated.

I knew I was not the best judoka in the world, and I was out of shape; having spent most of my time training others. But

still, I was no patsy, and his rank was the same as mine, and he was older and smaller.

I grabbed his knees and pushed them to one side. I was to the rear of him now, holding him down *kami shiho gatame*, my body

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in a line with his, my head pressing down in his chest, my hips over his head, and both arms pressing his arms tightly against his side, with my hands holding his belt. Let's see him get out of this!

I thought. This was the toughest of all holddowns to break.

But again I was surprised by his speed and flexibility. He really was a master of mat work. His body arched back, back, back in a backbend, while I held his upper torso. His legs bent back and hooked under my belt. Both his feet started pushing. It was impossible to hold him down, because the legs are so much stronger than the arms. Slowly he pushed himself back. But I was not going to let him get off so easily. I kept turning on the mat with him, till suddenly I was on his back, one forearm pressing against his throat and the other pushing down the back of his head: a modified *hadaka jime*, or bare strangle. My legs crossed over his abdomen to impede his escape. I also started a little bit of illegal pressing down with both legs to scissor his stomach, to help put force on his powerful neck. I squeezed with both arms and legs for all I was worth.

Suddenly his body arched back, one leg over mine; the other

caught his own leg, trapping mine in a leg lock. The pain was unbearable and I had to shout "Maitta!" surrender.

Luis laughed as he released me. "I know this is illegal-but so was your tightening on the leg scissor. I set you up for this hold."

No wonder I had gotten my hold so easily. He had let me have it, so as to break it. I could not match him in mat work, his chosen specialty. He had suckered me.

"Kolychkine taught us such tricks," Luis said. "I like to surprise judokas with them."

I could not stay mad at him. He had taught me a valuable lesson in tactics. "Good match," I said.

Luis turned to Dulce, who had been watching avidly. "This Yankee you picked up," he remarked, "this beach derelict-he is a true judoka. He loses to an illegal hold, but he makes no excuses, though he has beaten the best in the world when the rules were suspended. That is the mark of a champion."

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Rolando was soon called away to attend to his coaching duties, but Luis remained with us. He introduced us to his beautiful, willowy Cuban Chinese wife. Seeing her gave me a pang, for I had once sought to marry a Chinese girl. But another Chinese, Kan-Sen, head Kill-13 Demon, had slit her throat. Might he burn forever in the hell to which I had dispatched him!

The four of us-Luis, his black-haired wife, Dulce, and I-at in the stadium, refreshed by the breeze, and talked all afternoon about judo the world over. The time passed like a shot. Then we

went over to the bar on the top, of the Havana Libre, tallest building in Cuba. All Havana lay like a jewel beneath us in the evening.

The women departed briefly for the ladies' room. Luis leaned over to me confidentially. "Señor, I do not suggest anything. But there have been certain rumors-I do not credit them for a moment!- that you might have trouble."

"Oh, we'll have trouble, all right!" I agreed. "I saw how sharp your judokas were. And we have little hope of matching the teams of the other nations."

He made a little gesture of negation. "That too, perhaps. But you-if you are ever in need-I cannot speak freely . . ."

I looked at him, realizing that this was not idle conversation.

"I am not familiar with this country."

"La Esperanza in Pinar del Rio," he said. "Find it on a map. Go there, ask for Tomas the fisherman. Tomas Cepero."

Then the girls returned, and he was suddenly full of jovial inconsequentialities again. We finished a pleasant evening. In fact, I enjoyed myself about as much as I ever had, for a competent judo sensei and good-looking girls make excellent company.

But why did Luis suppose I might get into such trouble that I would need an underground escape route? What could he know of my affairs that I did not? After all, I had never met him before.

Next day I went out with Dulce again. This time she took me to Copelin, the Castro Ice Cream Palace, on the corner opposite to the Havana Libre. It was a huge structure, filling a quarter of the block, with a surrounding park. It was an ice cream parlor.

"Cubans are crazy about ice cream." Dulce confided. "They sell fifty flavors here, made of real milk and eggs."

"Ice cream!" I have my own peculiarities, and chief among them is this: I love ice cream. I know it is mostly sugar, and is no fit training diet for a martial artist. But I was the coach, not a player, and I was sweating hot, and the very thought of cold, highquality ice cream made me salivate like one of Pavlov's dogs. Fifty flavors? My willpower crumbled like hammered plaster. More appropriately, it melted.

We ate ice cream, cone after cone. I felt compelled to try all the exotic flavors: maranon (sour and astringent), mango, pina, purple caimito, anon, guanabana, papaya, fruitabamba, melon, guava, zapote-God, what a capitalist pig I made of myself! But it sure was fun. I especially liked the coco glace, a half a coconut filled with delicious coconut ice cream.

Afterwards, we went swimming at Rio Crystal, the Crystal River with an artificial waterfall near the Havana waterworks. I was embarrassed, because my gut was bulging with all that ice cream; I must have looked like a potbellied retiree. In the evening we went to the Tropicana nightclub. The government allowed no gambling, but it had a fabulous show. I could not keep my eyes off the remarkable array of chorus cuties. Dulce was quite piqued. We

dined under the stars, the wonderful crystal roof moving back so we could enjoy the scenery. Chicken and rice-arroz con pollo- with deboned chicken cut into small pieces, fried ripe plantains, Cuban bread, a salad of lettuce and tomatoes, and dulce de leche, or milk dessert.

All in all, I did not suffer unduly in my off hours. I think

Dulce might have dropped me after the first day, having satisfied

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her curiosity, but when she saw how the University personnel welcomed me, she decided to stick around. I'm only conjecturing, of course; no man really knows what a girl sees in him. But Dulce was an intellectual, which I am not, and she could hardly have found my mind or knowledge stimulating.

At any rate, we necked a little bit, and she was amazingly passionate. But she was an old-fashioned girl, still a virgin, and she retained that status during our acquaintance. I think she really liked me, but my memory of my dead fiancée kept us apart.

Dulce was also in the Cuban FAR, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias, some kind of a paramilitary organization. I got the shock of my life when I first saw her in her working clothes, instead of bathing suit or evening dress. She wore a dark green military uniform with a pistol on her side, and I was sure she knew how to use it. Black boots, plus a jaunty black beret on top of her hair. Her job had something to do with military talks, indoctrination, morale, and Marxist-Leninist Theory.

But we had a judo meet to compete in, and as it approached all else was blotted from my attention. I wanted to overlook nothing that could give our team a chance; no technique, no discipline, no frame of mind. We were entering as underdogs; no one expected us to do well. I didn't either, but I sure as hell was going to try my best to surprise them.

In sport judo the object is to win without hurting your opponent. A full point is called an ippon, and that immediately terminates the match. Normally an ippon is scored by throwing your opponent cleanly on his back. In a real life situation, that would shake him up considerably, probably putting him out of commission, for few untrained people know how to take a fall.

There are other ways: holddowns, locks, strangles, or simply a superior performance within the time limit of six to ten minutes.

But an ippon is like a knockout in boxing: fast and sure, no matter what has gone before.

The meet itself seemed anticlimactic. I watched the great sports palace fill up, a huge crowd, unlike the usually deserted stands

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common to American judo meets. This was what I thought of as a football turnout. There were even reserved seats-empty in this crowded hall, but still guarded by militiamen-for Fidel Castro and his entourage. In this communist paradise of equality, some were more equal than others. There were constant exhibitions between the matches, breaking the presumed monotony. I understood

that Mustapha the American boxer would participate in one of these. Maybe I'd get a chance to talk to him.

The Japanese did well, of course; they always do. They demonstrated their superiority, by cornering most of the first-place

medals. The Russians followed through with many of the silver medals. I was surprised to learn that the Soviets had fewer than a

hundred black-belt judokas in all their realm, compared to some nineteen thousand for France and similarly large numbers for other European nations. But Russia, going for quality rather than quantity,

was first in European judo. Oh, the Europeans took some medals, too, and one Cuban lightweight surprised everybody by defeating the Japanese champion with a kesa gatame holddown.

The hope of our team was Tony, a young college student shodan, a collegiate champion in the 205-and-under division. He

was Italian-Greek extraction, swarthy, with black hair. He wore glasses-but woe betide the bully who took him for Mister Milquetoast.

His favorite throws were the uchi-mata and morote seio nage.

Tony's first match was against Mihaly Szabo of Hungary. Szabo came in with a full tight o-soto-gari and Tony shifted his weight

backward and countered with a left o-soto, winning half a point, waza ari. Half a point was not enough to win, but it was a good

start in fifteen seconds. Szabo came in again with the o-soto-gari;

Tony blocked him and threw him with his own o-soto, making his second half point.

That brought him victory. I refrained with difficulty from doing

an unsportsmanlike whoop of sheer joy; our entry was proving himself.

All of our other entries were eliminated in the first round, however.

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Next, Tony went against Norberto Vasquez of Cuba. I saw Rolando and Luis watching, and I did not meet their gaze. One of our boys would have to win, and the other had to lose, and I knew exactly how the Cubans felt. They had said their team would annihilate ours. How sweet it would be to prove them wrong-but how sad, too, for I liked these people.

Norberto was a mat man-not surprising, with Luis as a trainer.

But Tony could handle himself on the mat too, and I had warned him what to expect. In fact I had drilled him until we both were dizzy. He could win-he could!-but my hands were sweating as they lined up. I remembered what Luis had done to me on the mat, and knew he had drilled Norberto too.

Tony tried a morote seoi nage, lifting Norberto and spilling him on his side. It could have gone for a half a point, but there was no call from the judge. Then Norberto tried a left uki-waza sutemi and it was Tony's turn to sprawl on his face. I winced, but no call from the judges here, either. Norberto was on top of him, trying for a hold Tony managed to reverse him and grab him in a yokoshiho gatame side hold down. I held my breath, counting seconds; half a minute would mean the win.

Noberto struggled, but Tony hung on, as I had taught him to.

Fifteen seconds, twenty, twenty-five, thirty! Victory!

Now Luis caught my eye. He smiled, a gracious loser, and I felt both warm and cold inside. Would I have been so generous?

Then Tony came up against the Russian, Novokov. If he won this one, he would make it to the finals and be assured of at least a third-place medal. I was only a spectator at this point, but my heart was pounding like that of a first-time contestant. Russia was big-league judo; did Tony have a chance?

I watched Tony do a beautiful uchi-mata, throwing the Russian, and in that instant I knew he had won. My feet really did leave the floor! The Japanese referee raised his hand to signal IPPON, and it was the most beautiful sign I ever saw.

But the two judges—one Argentinian, the other Polish—stood up to disagree.

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What? I was on my feet and over there, protesting. I had been in competition a dozen years, and I damn well knew an ippon when I saw one. The anti-American bias of certain regions is well known, but it should not extend to the judging of a judo match.

Well, what did I expect? Americans are not the best-liked people around the world, and I guess I'd feel the same if I were from a have-not nation, watching the conspicuous consumption of precious resources that the U.S.A. practices. And the Japanese suffered from similar discrimination in judo contests, but their superiority

kept them winning in spite of it. The Americans lacked that level of skill, so the bias really hurt. Sometimes at decision time it looked as though there were a Japanese-American alliance against the rest of the world.

My protest was disallowed. Tony was granted only half a point, a waza ari. Not enough to win. So the match continued.

Something went out of Tony after that. Oh, he stood up and put on a good show, but I could see that his shock at the miscall had destroyed his concentration. I couldn't blame him; he had just learned the hard-way that America's fifth-rate judo status was not due entirely to the inability of its players. So many people of the world wanted so much to see the Yankee humiliated, and here was their chance.

There was nothing we could do about it.

Novokov faked a tome-nage sutemi, and changed to an arm-bar, a standing juji-gatame. Tony should have been able to avoid it, ordinarily, but he had lost his edge. That was the end; I knew it.

All you can do in the face of such a hold is capitulate.

But Tony tried to resist it.

"No! No!" I cried from the sidelines in sudden alarm. "Don't fight it! Surrender!" That may sound like cowardly advice, but anyone who has experienced a standing arm-bar knows otherwise.

Tony did not hear or heed. He tried a forward somersault, a foolish maneuver against an expert. The Russian did not let go; he twisted instead and pulled back harder; I heard the snap as Tony's

arm broke at the elbow, like a sudden pistol shot. He gave a cry of pain, and there went the American hope for a medal.

The judo meet continued, but it was over for us. I was abruptly more interested in our return to the States than in the tournament proceedings. We had arrived by plane, but would be going home by boat, via Canada. Such circuitous routings were necessitated because there was no direct communication between Cuba and the U.S.A., and we did not have enough money left to take a plane home. Money might have materialized had we made a decent showing in the meet; but we were dead, now, as far as any news interest went. So we would limp home in our shame and isolation. Well; variety, spice of life, etc. Maybe the sea air would wash out the taste of ashes.

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Dulce drove me to the harbor in a Volkswagen sedan. She was in uniform, gun and all; I suppose this counted as shore patrol or something for her. Quite possibly she had been assigned to keep an eye on me, but I wasn't worried, as I had nothing to hide except my chagrin about the meet results. I was sure our initial meeting had been coincidental, but after that she had been forced to mix business with pleasure, and I wasn't sure in which category I fit. Our romance, if you could call it that, never got beyond the polite stage. I knew she didn't mean me any harm, anyway.

There were, it turned out, advantages. I got convenient chauffeuring service, and I hadn't realized that it required a special permit

to visit the ship. Dulce had obtained it for me on her own.

And she was nice company.

We parked and walked down toward the docks. This was the Old Havana section, with small twisted streets and crowded houses, then the usual wharves and warehouses and ships. It was evening, and the harbor lights illuminated the water. A big moon was reflected on the sea, and I saw the glow of the refineries across the bay, their excess gas fires burning brightly. The sweep of the light-

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house beam passed us, adding romance. But then a mischievous sea breeze brought the smell of dead fish and the pungent effluvium of some chemical cargo. Over all hung the odor of the natural sea, with its clean, salty ambiance.

We showed the permit and boarded the ship via a small gangplank.

It was a Canadian cargo vessel, the Maple Leaf Forever, a small, well-kept ship with about five cabins for passengers and a large cargo hold. There were a couple of crewmen aboard who greeted us with friendly Canadian accents and gladly showed us around when they learned I was to be their passenger. They were polite even when they learned that bouncy Dulce was not coming along. I comprehended their disappointment.

They explained that the ship had brought American spare parts to Cuba, the American companies evading the embargo by this device; patriotism took a back seat to profit, as always. The Maple Leaf usually returned with a cargo of Havana cigars that would

probably infiltrate the U.S.A. illegally. Also sugar, refrigerated beef, and big lobsters. But she was empty at the moment, with most of her crew on shore leave.

It would not be luxurious for my returning team, but it would do. And the people were nice.

"Well, I guess that's it," I remarked we returned to the dock. I felt out of sorts. Everything in Cuba had lost interest for me since that disaster with Tony. Even Dulce. "I'll probably get seasick."

Then it happened. Several black figures charged out of the night. I was walking around the front of the little car to the other door, having helped Dulce into the driver's seat, a male courtesy that she didn't need and may not have appreciated.

Luis Guardia's comment about possible trouble for me sprang to my mind. Was this it? Ridiculous; these were wharf rats, stevedores, out to mug the stranger. Still . . .

They were three large black men. One hefted what looked like a machete; I saw the big curved blade glint. The machete is the cane cutter's all-purpose tool. It was capable of lopping off a Spaniard's head when wielded by a mambi-the Cuban indepen-

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dence soldier, but was normally used for the island's main cash crop, sugar cane.

He was the first to reach me, that weapon chopping down. I went in under the blade, blocked the descending arm at the wrist with my left hand, and went in low with my other arm against his

legs. I threw him with a kata guruma hard against the car. He bounced off and fell in a heap. He tried to get up; he was tough. But my first kick sent the machete flying from his fractured wrist, and the second caught him in the side of the jaw, breaking it. The second attacker made the mistake of going after Dulce, trying to haul her out of her seat in the car. Her gun fired, once, and he went down. I had been right: a Cuban army woman was no easy mark.

But the third man was on me already. He caught me on the head with a lead pipe. I fell with the blow, so that it only grazed me, doing much less damage than otherwise, but still it hurt, and I had to fight to retain my equilibrium. From the ground I kicked his knee with one foot while hooking his ankle with my other. He fell down with a dislocated knee. But he still held the pipe in his hand. I hunched near him on the pavement. Again my foot went out in straight stomp to his groin, putting him out of commission. No more attackers came. "You don't seem to have done much about crime in the street," I said to Dulce.

My remark was half in jest, and I expected a short diatribe on how bad crime on American streets was in comparison. But she took me seriously. "We have very little crime," she said as she bent to search the body of the man she had shot, right through the heart if I was any judge. "There is something funny about this." "Is there?" I had the nasty suspicion, now, that there was more to this than met the eye, and that she was somehow involved. She was taking this too calmly. Had it been a setup to get rid of me, as

perhaps Luis had warned? But why? Whatever threat I represented to Cuba had been dissipated when Tony lost his judo match.

"He has no identification, no papers," Dulce said. "That means

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he's an outlaw. Come-we must report this to the G-2."

"The G-2?" I asked blankly.

"The political police. Like your CIA or FBI. Their three main functions are patrolling, intelligence, and legal. They arrest individuals they consider suspicious, like these." She nudged the corpse with her foot, and continued with a neat capsule description of the G-2. I didn't like her comparison to our FBI, but I also wondered about her ready knowledge. From her own description of G-2 activities, I realized that she herself could be a member, a secret agent. Was she trying to warn me without betraying her assignment? No, she would not have shot one of her own. This could not have been a put-up job. She had acted to protect herself, and me. If she had wanted me dead, she could simply have shot me, and said the thugs had done it. Still, I didn't like the sound of the G-2; I had heard stories of the way secret police operated around the world. Maybe it was a different sort of trap: I would be accused of murder and detained. But again, why? Luis's warning, and now this. Coincidence?

"I'd like to take a look around," I said. "Maybe I can spot something."

"The G-2 will check," she assured me. She wanted the G-2 here, all right.

"How long will it take them to get here? We need to check now, in case there are others." I really wanted to see whether she'd balk at letting me search, and possibly leave the area.

"Very well. You check. I will drive to the nearest phone and report. They will be here in a few minutes."

What about that. She was letting me do it. No sign of connivance here. "Good. I'll duck down out of sight, so no one knows I'm still here. They'll think we both left in the car, if there are more than just these three."

She nodded. Then she leaned over in the dark and kissed me.

I was caught by surprise, doubly: first, because she had never before initiated such action, and second because of its extreme pas-

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sion. Abruptly-too late--I realized the truth: Dulce did not merely like me, she had a full-fledged crush on me. Some intellectual women really go for the physical type of male; I should have read the signs. But her natural restraint and modesty had made it seem like less. I had an ugly premonition I would not see her soon again, if ever, and knew she had it too. Hence her ardent kiss.

Then she started up the motor, turned on the headlights, and maneuvered around the bodies. I ducked into the shadow of a building and awaited developments. I was glad that whatever was afoot, Dulce wasn't involved.

"So it was you, honky!" a low voice said behind me.

I whirled, startled. I had heard nothing before that. I was further confused because I recognized that voice, and it made no sense at all. What was she doing here, in Cuba?

I saw a tall black woman with her hair in a flaring Afro, her lips full, her nose broken and never properly set, ruining an otherwise pretty face. Large firm breasts, small waist, muscular arms and legs for a female, taut belly. A woman who could move with blurring speed and strike with uncanny accuracy, yet possessed, too, of a dynamic beauty.

It was Ilunga, the Black Karate Mistress.

Chapter 7

TAO VS. KILL-13

"So you are mine," the Hyena said.

Ilunga looked at him a moment. He was shorter than she, but massively constructed. He wore a grotesque animal-head mask, but it could not conceal the fact that his skin was white, not black.

This was the leader of Blakrev? A renegade white?

It was obviously a fraud, as she had expected all along. Blacks wanted freedom, equality, vengeance, so the white exploiters ined in to capitalize on that drive. Even in revolution, blacks were not equal.

She could overcome him, torture him to make him talk, use him as a hostage. Get Danny back, break up this fake revolution, or better yet, take over the apparatus and convert it to a real revolution.

Right now she could strike . . .

"Try it, black mama," he said.

He was a fighter, and a deadly one-she could see that in his bearing. He was confident; he was challenging her. Which meant he thought he had the situation in hand. He must have studied

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her, analyzed her techniques. His house could be set up with every conceivable device. She could be shot down the moment she made her move.

Better to bide her time, galling as that was. Find out what this man wanted of her. Play along, until she could deal with him effectively, without the risk of treachery.

"You're smart," he said. "No wonder you did well in the Demon cult. You will do better with me. Now I'll take those tonki-- the ones you hide in your hair."

Slowly she removed the little blades and handed them over.

She saw that his fingernails were longer than hers, and pointed like needles. When she fought him, her first move would be to break off those nails.

"Now the drug," he said.

"What?"

"Your supply of Kill-13, the red-eye medicine. I will take charge of it."

How had he known about that? She had to bluff. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He made a gesture, a mere flick of his thumb, as though flipping

out a marble. A tiny dart jumped from his hand and lodged in her arm.

She yanked it out, but already something was wrong. Before she could do more, she fell forward.

"Curare, my own special blend," the Hyena said, as he caught her neatly in his strong arms. "Used by the Amazon headhunters.

Nerve poison. Completely disconnects the voluntary muscles, renders the subject absolutely immobile. But it has one intriguing attribute."

He carried her into another room and set her on a laboratory table. The surface was hard and cold, and she felt both qualities readily. But she was unable to shift her weight, or to make any voluntary motion at all.

"It does not impair sensation," he said. "As you are now aware."

He made a bark of laughter, sounding like an animal. "It was once

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tried as an anesthetic for surgery, and seemed to work. But when the patients recovered, they claimed they had felt every cut of the scalpel." He put his hands to her head, his fingers removing her silk neckerchief and going through her Afro to the scalp. "Finally a doctor-took curare himself, and found it was true. He never lost consciousness, and he retained full sensation-but while under the influence, he had been unable to react in any way, not even to make his discomfort known."

His nails combed through her hair, searching methodically.

He found and withdrew the little bags of Kill-13 pellets hidden there. He was right; she felt every tug of his fingers, but could make no protest. If he chose to torture her, she would be unable even to scream.

"Since you are currently doped on your own drug, your awareness is heightened," he said. "No doubt you feel even more clearly than normal. But your drug dampens pain. An interesting combination; you cannot express the pain you cannot feel."

Interesting, indeed, but she felt neither intrigue nor mirth.

What was he going to do to her? Rape her? She had been raped before; it was no novelty, and no longer any torture.

"There will be more of the drug elsewhere," he said. He poked one long nail into her ear, and for a moment she thought he was going to puncture her eardrum, or even her brain. But he moved carefully, showing precise control, and did not.

His hands moved to her clothing, undressing her. Despite his long nails, his fingers were adept. He moved her arms, legs and torso about, getting all her clothing off, including the tight vest she wore beneath her blouse, and her black lace panties. So what use are undergarments? she thought. They are no protection. They only came off . . .

He turned her over, and she flopped limply at the urging of his strong hands, still powerless to offer even token resistance. She would have killed him if she could. Not because she was sensitive to nudity, but because of his arrogant presumption.

He palpitated her bare breasts with his knuckles, but found

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nothing beyond the knife sheathed between them. He squeezed her nipples, watching them react normally: no hardware there. He spread her legs, removed the little dagger strapped to one thigh, and ran one nail deep into her vagina, fishing for other packets.

But probe as he might, there were none.

It was a specialized, impersonal sort of rape, without even the excuse of lust. She wondered whether he was capable of such an urge. Perhaps he was a eunuch, invulnerable to betrayal via the wiles of women. Whatever she had, he would take, indifferently.

She had castrated men for far less than this. But she made a note:

Do not rely on the castration kick with this man.

Then he turned her over, parted her buttocks, and thrust the nail into her rectum. There he found it: her last reserve of the vital drug, sealed in a small aluminum cylinder. He hooked it out.

"Your body has excellent tonus," he remarked. "Well, sleep it off, now." He put a cloth over her face, and she felt herself fading.

Any other man would have been driven to some, expression of carnal passion, for Ilunga knew she had remarkable anatomy. The Hyena had insulted her on more than one level. But perhaps she had already learned his vital secret.

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She woke with nausea, a splitting headache, and an odd, unpleasant taste in her mouth. Her body felt numb, with pin-prickling

all over, as though all of it had gone to sleep.

The Hyena was there, still in his animal visage. "Now you are conscious," he said. "Now you have volition. Stand."

She ignored him.

He brought out a single pellet of Kill-13, and suddenly she was aware of her need for it. She had been out for some time; her Demon-high had worn off. Soon the first withdrawal pangs would start. They would intensify until fatal, if she didn't take another sniff.

The Hyena walked to the toilet, dropped the pellet in, flushed.

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Nothing could have shocked Ilunga more than that loud rush of water, carrying the pellet away forever. She had so few doses left!

To see one deliberately wasted . . .

The Hyena returned. "That one is gone. There will be no more today. I do not like to be balked. Stand."

This time Ilunga stood. She was shaking.

The Hyena had her. She could not live without Kill-13, literally; there was no way off the drug but death. When he had robbed her of her entire supply, he had captured her life force.

She had to perform, or die. However much her mind sought to resist, her body could not. She had to obey.

"You will go far in Blakrev," he told her. "You have had experience in forming terrorist bands. The blacks trust you. And you can fight. You will be my lieutenant-but first you must be trained.

We have little time, so you will work hard."

She stared at him stonily. If there were only some way to kill him! But he had the Kill-13 locked in a safe, surely, and he would be canny about the combination. She had had experience; she knew how these things worked. If he died, there would be no way to open the safe, and she would die too. And so would Danny; there would be standing orders.

"This nation is running short of fuel," he said. "Blakrev is going to start blowing up petroleum refineries, to make that energy pinch worse. It will cause more disruption than a thousand raids on military or industrial targets. You will be in charge of Operation Fuel Crunch."

"I'm no arsonist!" she protested. "The minorities would be hurt worst of all. The honky fat-cats will get their gas first, and the black man last. When the industries close for lack of fuel, the blacks will be fired first-and lynched first."

"Not if the revolution is successful," he said. "Then the blacks will be first, and the whites will wait. But we have to destroy the bases of white power, and energy is crucial to it."

She looked at him. This was a white talking. It was phony.

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The Hyena made a motion as of dropping a pellet into the toilet. The warning was plain. "I'll study arson," she said.

The Hyena considered. "I think you have not yet learned," he said. "One does not argue cases with the Hyena; one obeys without

question." His thumb flicked, and though she tried to dodge, the curare-derivative barb caught her on the hand.

She whipped that hand to her face, biting into the skin to draw blood, trying to suck out the poison before it penetrated.

But it was no use; she fell, as she had before.

She was in for it now. Before, the Hyena had merely searched her. This time he would torture her. He intended to drive out any vestige of self-will. Why had she resisted? She should have cooperated eagerly, giving no hint of her true feelings. Until her chance came.

Even her capitulation had not been enough for him. It had not been instant. But this experience had already shown her one thing: there was no simple way out of this. She had to get off Kill-13, and develop a defense against the curare darts.

The Hyena picked up her body, still naked, and carried her to a back room that was like a medieval dark-cell. He fastened her wrists and ankles to manacles set in the wall, letting her half-stand, half-hang there. Then he left her.

Was this all? Hung in isolation? He'd have to take her down soon, if he wanted her services. She could not last long, with the Demon-hunger growing in her. He knew that. He would free her before long, if he was sensible.

Sensible? There was the catch. The Hyena was a maniac. He was half insane. She had talked back to him; he just might let her rot here.

Hours passed. The curare wore off, but her pain grew. She

could not rest; if she did not maintain her weight on her feet, her wrists took up the slack, and that was worse. She was hungry, thirsty, and the Demon monkey was on her back, the worst torture of all.

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What was she to do? Call the Hyena? She knew that was what he wanted, and that he would torture her further by refusing to answer until he was quite ready. He wanted her to suffer, to lose all semblance of individual character. To accept his orders without question, no matter what they were. He would have her crying, crawling, mewling.

She could not. No man could do that to her. Better to die.

But how would she react when the withdrawal agony became unbearable?

Was there an alternative? She had thought there was, when the Demon cult fell. She had tried the most positive approach she knew.

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Sifu Teng Yu-Feng was short and fat and about fifty-five years old. His teeth were gold. The small fingers of each hand were bent or broken. Not impressive. But her contacts said he was the top man in the field, locally, and that he had been known to train promising students in kung fu without charge. And that he had command of many secret mysteries-mysteries that just might

aid her in her quest for freedom from Kill-13.

"Ah, the Black Karate Mistress," the sifu said, recognizing her.

"I have admired your barbarian handiwork."

"Sifu, I don't understand."

"You have been violent, yet you have punished many who required it, and you saved one who was worthy."

How had he known? She had a reputation as castrator of men.

But she had told no one of her connection with Jason Striker, whom she had hauled from the burning remains of the Demon headquarters.

The sifu puffed on a tremendously long ivory pipe, possibly formed from the tusk of an elephant-one entire tusk. The end of its stem was shaped into little carved hands holding the bowl.

"And now you come to me for help."

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"I want to get off Kill-13.," she blurted. She did not like asking anything of any man, not even a sifu.

"That has never been done before," he murmured, blowing out fragrant smoke. Suddenly she recognized the odor: opium.

How could an opium addict help her break her own addiction?

"Except, perhaps, by one," he continued. "And he was not really on it. Your friend the judoka."

"Striker came to you?" This was amazing!

"He had no need to. He has had good instruction." The sifu's eyes gazed on her serenely. "But you are thoroughly addicted. For you, it would not be easy."

She didn't care about ease! "You can cure me?"

"No."

Disappointment was like a kakato-geri, a heel-kick, to her face.

"Why?"

Another fragrant puff of smoke. "I do not take barbarian girls as students."

Rage came, like the shock of hurricane-force winds after the dead eye of the center of the storm. She was high on the Demon drug; she always dosed herself before undertaking any challenging project, even this quest to get off that drug. She had strength beyond what most men could imagine in a woman. She spread her legs and bent her arms in the contour known as the Horse Stance of kung fu and stood firmly in the sifu's doorway.

He puffed slowly on his ornate pipe, watching her. Nothing needed to be said. The Horse Stance was a model of difficulty for the novice; only with long practice could a person maintain it for more than a few minutes. Serious students learned to hold it for an hour or more. The sifu finished his pipeful, then got up and wandered back inside his kwoon, or practice hall, the kung fu dojo.

She stayed where she was, drawing on her Demon strength to hold the position. Half an hour had passed; had the drug let her feel pain, she would have been suffering. She had assumed a much deeper and lower Horse Stance than normal, one only for masters, much more difficult to hold.

Bye and bye the sifu wandered back. Two students followed him. They inspected Ilunga as if she were a statue, remarking on the form of her stance. "I'd give her another fifteen minutes," one said.

The other shook his head judiciously. "Ten, at the most. No woman can hold her legs apart longer than that." They laughed, male-fashion. But she did not move or speak.

Fifteen minutes later her stance had not changed. The two students shook their heads. "She must be dead," one remarked. "Fossilized." They departed.

As she passed an hour, a larger group appeared. Several of these assumed the Horse Stance opposite her. Five minutes passed; ten. The first student collapsed, unable to maintain it longer. One by one the others dropped; they were young, and simply not up to the grueling continuation. Sifu Teng settled down again and commenced another pipeful of sweet opium.

At an hour and a half the Kill-13 drug began to wear thin.

Normally a sniff lasted longer than this, but the drug was used up faster by strenuous exertion. This was quite a test.

Her head became light, and waves of pain came-pain the drug had suppressed before. Sweat poured down her body in rivulets, making her itch, but she could not scratch. The itch became almost as bad as the pain. But she could not stop now; there was a considerable crowd of people, inside and outside the kwoon. An hour and forty-five minutes; she could see the big clock mounted

inside the exercise hall. Her legs were numb, yet they hurt terribly.

The prickling sensation that had started low now encompassed her whole body. She was racked by terrible cramps, especially in her buttocks.

Now the kwoon was packed with men, sitting on the floor, facing her, watching her, waiting for her to fall. No word was spoken.

One hour fifty minutes. She clung to consciousness, but it was as though she rode a saddle of fire. Her head seemed to bobble just above that flame, rolling about, ready to fall in. Yet she suf-

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fered from water, too. She wanted very badly to empty her bladder, and the position was absolutely no help.

One hour fifty-five minutes. The burning reached up her neck, into her jaw, her palate, climbing, climbing. Her brain was cooking in agony; she was suffering Kill-13 withdrawal. But she would not stop.

Two hours! The face of the clock loomed huge in her vision.

Then she fell, crashing down like the statue some had said she was, and lost consciousness.

Hands hauled her up, firmly, gently, and set her in a chair.

She had been out only a few seconds, but her lower half remained numb. Someone brought her fragrant herb tea, odd and bittersweet.

She felt her strength returning.

Sifu Teng approached. "This is not a barbarian girl," he remarked.

"This is a woman."

By no more than that did he signify the reversal of his prior decision. But the students broke discipline and applauded. Ilunga had set a kwoon record for the Horse Stance.

"Still, I cannot cure you." He paused. but she was too far gone to react. "I can only point out the way. You must cure yourself." Relief was like a successful counterblow. "I have no money, only the will to be free."

He waved his hand negligently. "No more is required." And so Ilunga became the student of Sifu. The first thing she learned was that he frowned on the term "kung fu."

"Kung fu?" he asked as though mystified. "I do not know this word."

Perplexed, she tried to explain. "Kung fu-the Chinese boxing. Tiger's claw, crane's beak, dragon's tail-"

"Perhaps you refer to hsing-i or pa-kua. Hsing-i has twelve styles: dragon, tiger, monkey, horse, iguana, cock, hawk, snake, eagle, bear, swallow, and ostrich. Some schools include the mythical T'ai bird, the falcon, and the camel, omitting the ostrich and-"

"No, I mean kung fu, like karate," she said, amazed that he should profess such ignorance.

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"There is a generic term for exercise," he said. "Perhaps that is what you refer to, kung fu. But this is no more definitive than saying 'businessman' for an American. What kind of exercise? It is not clear."

"The martial arts," she said. "To fight, to overcome-"

"The martial arts," he repeated. "That would be wu-shu. And still we do not know which martial art."

Ilunga realized that this was a lesson. The Demons had spoken of themselves as the kung fu temple, but this was no more accurate than the Black Muslim connection to the true Moslem religion. Borrowing a name meant nothing.

"Perhaps hsing-i, then," she agreed.

"Perhaps ch'in-na," he countered.

She was unfamiliar with this term, too. But now she had some notion how to proceed. "Please, sifu-I know nothing: Teach me."

He smiled, nodding. This was the attitude he wanted. "Meditation in repose is excellent, but meditation in activity is a thousand times superior. The mind must be in a state where the meditation is steady and continuous." He paused to take another puff of his opium.

Ilunga's heart sank. What could meditation do against the irresistible compulsion of Kill-13? The sifu could lecture all week, but if this was all he had to offer . . .

"Or tai-chi," he said, observing her doubt. "Permit me to make a demonstration. You are an agile woman, skilled in striking and evading, are you not?"

"Yes, sifu." At this point she was wondering how to excuse herself from this discussion without offending him. Sifu Teng might be a talkative old fraud, but he was treated with a respect bordering

on worship by his students, and she didn't want more trouble than she already had.

He set aside his pipe and fetched several bricks from a pile in the corner of the courtyard and set them on the floor, two feet apart, in a circle. "Do you suppose you could escape the grasp of a man by jumping from brick to brick?" he inquired.

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"That depends on the man, and the grasp," she said cautiously.

The sifu placed his right hand on her back, unclenched, touching lightly. "This grasp." he murmured.

She was alert for the catch. "No more than that? No attack?"

"None," he assured her.

"That is no grasp at all," she protested. "I could escape it without effort."

"Then do so."

Mystified she jumped from one brick to the next. And stood surprised, for the gentle weight of that pudgy hand with its warped little finger was still upon her, just as though neither person had moved.

She jumped again, more quickly, but Teng jumped with her, his hand never moving, never varying its pressure.

Now she realized the nature of the demonstration. She launched herself around the circle of bricks, now ducking low, now leaping high, now weaving this way and that. But that soft touch remained.

Amazed, she halted without warning, whirled about-and the sifu was gone.

"Well!" she said breathlessly. "So it was a trick!"

She put her hand over her shoulder to feel the place where his palm seemed to rest. There would be an empty glove there, perhaps.

But her fingers touched warm flesh.

She spun again-and there was Sifu Teng. His hand had never left her.

"With such power to hold," he remarked, "could you also not let go?"

With such power, this power of tai-chi, was it possible? Could the reverse of such a thing break the hold of Kill-13? Perhaps so.

And so she learned. She practiced the soft exercises of tai-chi, heightening her awareness and concentration. The movements were slow, smooth, flowing without strain, and it was as though she were floating in air. There was never any strain. It resembled the hard blows of karate-but these were gentle, dancelike.

Touch the South Wind. Her body turned to the south, hands

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moving around the rim of a great circle, left hand at the top. On they went, left hand dropping, right rising, and the right foot also rising. Then forward, and on into Touch the East Wind.

The River Crests and Ebbs . . . The White Crane Pecks . . . The Mantis Springs . . . The Dragon's Tail Strikes . . . The Dark Lady Spins Flax . . . The King of Heaven Rides the Tiger . . . The Soft Endless Sea . . . The Eight Drunken Fairies . . . She learned them all. And

her mental control strengthened.

But somehow it wasn't enough. She felt the growing control, but it still fell short of the strength of Kill-13.

Sifu Teng saw it too. "For you, tai-chi is not enough. Perhaps ch'in-na would work-but I am the wrong man to teach you that."

"Who is the right man?" she asked, relieved.

"Sifu Tuh Hsinn-wu. But he lives in Cuba."

Cuba! It might as well have been hell. There was no way she could go there except by hijacking a plane, and that sort of thing had become much less feasible than in prior years. The airlines had stringent protective measures, and the Cubans only dumped the hijackers in jail upon arrival. And jail would be the end of her, with her addiction. In Cuba, as in many foreign countries, the authorities dealt harshly with addicts.

So she and the sifu parted company amicably. Despite the failure, the experience had been worthwhile. She had not known before that there could be softness in martial art. This new approach did not improve her fighting ability significantly, but it did make her aware of the gentler side of her own nature, a side long suppressed. Now she could understand that a person who did not choose to fight was not necessarily a coward or weakling. She had, however, picked up a few hints about the martial art of ch'in-na. Sifu Teng was master of it; he had declined to teach it to her because he felt he could not relate to her properly. But she had seen some of what he imparted to other students. He followed the mystic religion and philosophy of Taoism, a simple, frugal way

of life-but he pointed out that the very word tao meant "sword" in Chinese. Hence there was a certain ambivalence, and she now

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understood just enough of this to know that he was not being capricious in referring her to an unreachable authority for further training.

Ch'in-na was neither boxing nor wrestling, neither karate nor judo, yet it was integral to both. It was called the muscle-splitting skill, the twisting skill, or simply "The Devil's Hand." It stabilized the opponent's body for a strike or throw, making maximum effect for minimum force. The student first studied anatomy, so as to know when and how to press, twist, or grasp. He learned to counter strikes and locks. He learned to attack swiftly but with relaxation, avoiding unnecessary force.

Some of the techniques were fantastic. Students practiced the "Well Fist," gesturing with a fist at water in a well, trying to make the water murmur. Theoretically this could lead, in ten years or so, to a "Distance Death" blow against some hapless enemy. Or "One Finger," in which a man struck an iron bell with one finger, making it ring. Then he withdrew so that his finger did not quite touch it, trying to make it move without contact. Or to extinguish a candle by making his motion several feet away. This was another potential Distance Death blow.

Yet Sifu Teng was a man of peace. "Show me a man of violence who came to a good end," he said, and I will take him for my

teacher." She had smiled, thinking it a joke, but he had been serious in his fashion.

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Now, hanging from chains in the Hyena's dungeon, Ilunga found renewed meaning in Sifu Teng's teachings. The violent way was denied her now, but the gentle way remained. She could not attack the Hyena, but she could work on herself. As the pain mounted in her wrists and body, much as the pain of her Horse Stance had risen before, she concentrated on her inner system and made it fade. As her thirst intensified, she visualized a sea of water

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and imagined she was floating, and her thirst abated. The seemingly futile exercises of tai-chi became the key to relief.

But her need for the drug Kill-13 could not be assuaged so readily. Tai-chi had failed her before, and it would fail her now.

Nothing sated the compulsive craving except the drug.

Unless-

The revelation was stunning. Tai-chi could not overcome the craving in direct confrontation, but it could change her attitude toward it. Suppose she took another addictive drug, and persuaded herself it was Kill-13? Heroin, perhaps. If she could make that conversion with the aid of the Chinese discipline, then she would be addicted to a drug she could obtain. She would still be an addict, but one of the Hyena's two great holds on her would be broken.

And he would not know it.

Later, she could go the methadone route, taking the cure for heroin addiction. There were many methadone clinics around the country, and such treatment was legal.

Or cocaine, better yet! For heroin it was necessary to have a needle, which was awkward. But cocaine was sniffed, like Kill-13; in fact, she understood that cocaine was one of the thirteen secret ingredients of the Demon drug. Not only could she make that shift unobtrusively, it would be easier to convince herself that it was Kill-13. In fact, she could mix the two drugs, gradually shifting the ratio from one to the other, until it was all cocaine.

But then she saw the one great flaw, assuming the process would work. The Hyena watched her all the time when he did not have her confined. She could not get any cocaine, or any other drug. Unless—wait! There were telltale signs. The Hyena's nose was chronically runny under his mask, and he sniffed a lot. She had thought it was irritation from the confining mask, for it had to be hideously close inside that animal head. But it could be cocaine addiction. His animal odor—possibly another signal of the habit. He had lost his sense of smell . . .

Doctors claimed that cocaine was not physically addictive. Haha.

But psychologically, it was irresistible. Such emotional com-

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pulsion—it could account for some of the Hyena's peculiarities.

Potent, expensive, dangerous stuff.

Still, it was her best chance. Striker had gotten off Kill-13.

True, he had had only one sniff, immediately worked out of his system by savage physical action and the emotional shock of the death of his Chinese fiancée. And he had friends with extremely specialized knowledge. But he must have done something similar, sliding from one drug to another. The secret was to do it in stages; one-step cessation was fatal, like a hammerfist blow to the brain. Several steps could cushion it, until the addiction was gone.

If Striker could do it, so could she. She had to believe that.

First, she had to practice the discipline of conversion. Perhaps she would not be able to apply it soon, but if she cooperated with the Hyena, he would give her more freedom, and then she might have access to some other drug. Possibly she would be able to steal some of his own supply of cocaine.

A strange sensation suffused her. It took her some time to identify it, masked as it was by her pain. It had been long since she had experienced anything like it.

It was unholy joy.

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Hours later, when the Hyena returned, Ilunga was fully amenable to any orders he might give. Satisfied, he gave her one pellet of Kill-13, and she used it. But it was the beginning of the end of her addiction; she knew it.

The Hyena had made the mistake of forcing her to think.

Actually, the Hyena, like Sifu Teng, had much to show her.

Some of it was simple: the huge handsome house and grounds, with pretty trees and stream. One side of the house had a monstrous

picture window, dark from the outside: one way glass.

The Hyena stopped her there. "An enemy of Blakrev looks out of that room," he said. "What do you do?"

He was testing her new cooperation. All right; she would play

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the game. She hawked up a mouthful and spat directly at the glass.

The Hyena seemed to smile under his mask. He sniffed. "Now, now-we are more subtle. We either convert or kill our enemies. We do not waste effort in futile gestures." But he was pleased, and they went on.

She wondered idly whether there really had been anyone looking out. But it wasn't important.

There was a huge cellar under the house with a shooting range. He taught her how to handle guns; to shoot fast and accurately with a .45 pistol, an M3 silent machine gun, a Springfield 30-06 sniper rifle with telescopic sights, and a sawed-off shotgun. "Do not aim," he said. "Just point the gun as an extension of your arm and fire. The one who fires first lives to fire second. But take the gun up to shoulder level; shooting from the hip is just a waste of time."

She turned out to be a natural shooter, especially when high on Kill-13, and he was pleased. But she observed that he never used a gun himself, and that was odd. Why would he study guns,

collect them, and be expert in their use, and not use them?

He brought out an olive-drab cardboard box containing a block of cheeselike yellow substance. The block had a cross section of two inches and was eleven inches long. "This is C-3," he said.

"Plastic explosive, very powerful. One pound is equivalent to three pounds of commercial dynamite. This is two and a quarter pounds.

Here, catch!" He tossed the mass-not to her, but beside her.

Ilunga dived for it, catching the sticky, putty-textured stuff before it hit the floor. What would seven pounds of dynamite do in this confined space?

The Hyena laughed his animal laugh. "It will not go off without the detonator cap. That is dangerous, however."

He was toying with her, making her react. Naturally he would not have blown himself up along with her. But she dared not show any ire.

He showed her how to use the primer, making a hole in the

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plastic and inserting the detonator. To prime it, she had to cut off a piece of blasting fuse, then crimp the cap around the fuse and insert the other end into the plastic. There was also detonating cord for simultaneous explosions, blasting caps for priming other explosives; pencil detonators that provided a time delay from three minutes to twenty-three days, depending on model and temperature.

He also showed her how to set off incendiary grenades, how to make Molotov cocktails, how to derail a train, and similar modes of sabotage. Blakrev certainly meant business.

Still, she had no chance to get any cocaine, even though she was now certain the Hyena himself used it. He was too canny, too careful.

Under the suspicious eye of the animal hyena, she molded the C-3 about dummy objects in the yard, setting up for practice explosions. The stuff was slick and oily, smelling like fresh shoe polish. This plastic explosive was fantastic stuff. She had worked a little with dynamite before, as a member of the Demon cult, and was frankly afraid of it. Dynamite was deadly dangerous, especially when old; it couldn't be jarred, or frozen, or heated, or left in the sun, or it might go off prematurely, taking its handler with it. When it sweated, the juice was not water but nitroglycerin. If it was stored too long, the nitro tended to concentrate in the bottom of the cartridge. The very notion gave her the shakes.

Plastic, in contrast, was a delight. It could be frozen, heated, or even burned, and it would not go off. She could make a ball of it and throw it against the wall, with no danger. It was completely inert, until properly primed. It was even possible to eat it and suffer no harm other than an upset stomach, if it wasn't overdone. And suddenly inspiration. She had heard of army junkies eating C-3 in Vietnam, getting a high like that of a drug, a kind of psychedelic. Like glue-sniffing, in the long run it was poisonous and could damage the brain, but in the short run, before the tolerance built up, it was comparatively safe. Safer than Kill-13, certainly. She tore off a small segment and brought it to her face. The

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shoe-polish odor was penetrating but not unpleasant. In a way it reminded her of Kill-13.

And there was her salvation. Why quest vainly for cocaine when the Hyena had put another drug right into her hands? He had made his second critical mistake. Here was her tool!

She put the chunk into her mouth and chewed. It tasted as it smelled: like oily shoe polish. But that was of no importance. If this worked . . .

She concentrated on the mood. Now was the occasion to remember the beautiful messages of the Tao Te Ching. "Dow Duh

Jing," she murmured, pronouncing it the way Sifu Teng did.

"There are ways, but the Way is uncharted . . ." This was the way, uncharted, but if she held to it firmly enough . . .

"The softest stuff in the world penetrates quickly the hardest." Her mind was soft, her chains were hard.

In due course she became violently sick. Her stomach hurt terribly, and her mental control gave way. She retched from the bottom of her gut. But the plastic high was upon her, and the pang of Kill-13 withdrawal was less intense. Plastic was canceling out Kill-13, at least partially.

Now was the time for tai-chi. The high was the same. The High Was the Same. THE HIGH WAS THE SAME. Or at least so close as made no difference. She didn't need the Demon-drug. She didn't believe that, quite. But it was close, close.

Damn Striker! Damn his treachery for getting her into this.

No-this was not the occasion for hate. Kill-13 thrived on hate. Forget the betrayer, concentrate on herself. "It is wisdom to know others. It is enlightenment to know oneself."

She was on her way.

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But the Hyena had a surprise for her that completely changed the situation. "Are you ready to take out that oil refinery?" he asked.

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"Yes." She had resigned herself to that crime. Until she was able to break completely with the Hyena, she must make no attempt to balk him. She had been thoroughly trained for this mission, and knew how to use every necessary weapon. "Weapons at best are tools of bad omen, loathed and avoided by those of the Way."

But she had not yet mastered the Way.

"Forget it. You are going to Cuba."

"Cuba!"

"I'm expecting an arms shipment. Guns, ammunition, plastic -all the things you have been trained to use. I can't go there myself to pick it up. You will handle it instead. If there is trouble, you know what to do."

She knew. Use the guns to wipe out the opposition, and C-3 to destroy the evidence. But perhaps she could get through with minimum damage. "A skillful soldier is not violent . . ."

The Hyena gave her back just enough of her Demon capsules to tide her through the period he had scheduled for the mission.

He didn't know she was now able to extend them.

She knew she would not return. He still had Danny, hidden somewhere, but she would simply have to gamble on locating and freeing her brother before the Hyena realized how weak his hold on her had become.

"The arms will be smuggled aboard the ship that carries the American judo team back from the judo meet in Havana. A man named Jason Striker coaches that team. The Hyena looked grim, even through his mask. "He will recognize you, so stay away from him. If the weapons are found aboard the ship he will be blamed.

It is your job to get them loaded without his knowledge."

Interesting. Did he want her away from Striker because Striker would suspect something, or because she might reveal Striker's true complicity? No one in the Hyena's organization had ever implicated Striker, yet Striker was turning up just where the Hyena needed him. Coincidence? Or the secret backup man, present to take care of any last minute foul-up or attempted betrayal? She had to know.

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She traveled with Mustapha, as his wife. Mustapha had been invited to give an exhibition boxing match during the world judo championships, another neat detail in the Hyena's scheme. The truth, she was sure, was that the Hyena trusted no one. So he sent

several agents in, to check on each other.

But there was one great advantage to her in this mission. The Cuban sifu who might help her was here. That was the Hyena's third great mistake: he had sent her to the one man who might release her from the drug Kill-13.

Still, Jason Striker . . . He had sent her and Danny into this.

Maybe he knew where Danny was hidden. The Hyena had ordered her to stay clear of Striker, but she had no intention of doing so. If he were guilty of this betrayal, she would kill him. But because her mind was in doubt, and because she needed to learn where Danny was, she would talk with him first. It might take a lot of pain to make him divulge the secret, and she would enjoy every minute of it.

Yet there was a hard core of misery in her. Why did it have to be Striker? She had thought him an honest man.

If she bided her time and played her hand correctly, she could accomplish everything at one stroke. Freedom from her addiction, the rescue of her brother, and the deaths of all those who had betrayed her. Then let the black revolution proceed; a lot of other honkies might die before it ran its course.

But one mistake, and she would be finished.

Chapter 8

KI

"I come on my own mission-as you know," Ilunga said.

There was a loading on her words. I tried to study her, but her

face was now shadowed, and her short skirt showed her fine legs, not her thoughts. "All I know is that I sent you to Mustapha for help." I paused: "Mustapha-he's doing an exhibition match at the judo meet. You came with him?"

She nodded slowly in the dark.

"Then it worked out! I'm glad. How's your brother?"

Her red eyes, black in the deep shadow, were like angry holes in her face. "You do not know?"

I sensed something wrong. "Ilunga, I never found out. I called Mustapha a couple of days later, but he said you had taken Danny and gone, he didn't know where." I paused again. "But why would he say that, if you were still with him?"

"Why, indeed," she murmured.

"I looked for you. I thought Danny might be in one of those peer-pressure drug rehabilitation groups."

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She laughed, unprettily, derisively.

"And why are you out here near our return ship?" I continued, nettled. "Are you coming back with us?"

"Maybe."

"Well, three thugs just tried to mug me." Once again I paused.

"But you were watching! And you didn't help." I jumped away from her, on guard now. "Were they with you?"

"Yes."

Something was fishy. "Why should you attack me? After I

helped you?"

"Helped me!" she cried sardonically. "You betrayed me to Blakrev!"

"I what?"

"You sent me to Mustapha, right-hand man to the Hyena.

They've got Danny-and they've got me. That's why I'm here. So we're on the same side now. But that won't stop me from killing you." Something appeared in her hand: a gun.

I stood still. Blakrev-Mustapha-the Hyena? It was incredible!

I had never suspected such a triple connection. This was what Luis had tried to warn me about; he must have had access to government information. But I knew Ilunga well enough to know that she wasn't fooling. "If you're with the Hyena, you're not on my side! The man's an extortionist, a killer. I fought him once, but he got away. Next time I'll finish him."

"You fought the Hyena?" She sounded amazed.

"Don't you remember? Just before you came to me at Drummond's house. He was out to kill Drummond for balking on the payment. I balked him. We're enemies now." This was my first hint what the Hyena was using all that extorted money for.

Revolution!

"Why should I believe you?"

I shook my head. "Why should you doubt me? I never lied to you before, and I'm not starting now. You saved my life. I thought I was helping you. But you don't have to take my word for anything.

Just tell me where to find the Hyena, and you'll see whether

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we're friends." The truth was, I was bitter about the American judo team's humiliation, and the manner of it, and would have welcomed a no-holds-barred brawl. What better opponent than the Hyena?

"Uh-uh, honky! You'll report I contacted you, instead of staying away from you, and he'll kill me. I've got only one way to go: forward. You tell me now: where's my brother?"

Her brother-hostage to her cooperation. She was really on my side, against the Hyena. But she didn't believe it. "Did the Hyena tell you I was with him? Part of his organization?"

"No. I worked that out for myself."

"He didn't tell you, and I deny it, but you think we're both lying?"

"I-don't know," she admitted.

"We're together, Ilunga," I said. "We're both against the Hyena. Trust me, or shoot me." I was sure she would not shoot me until she had resolved her doubt. "Call Mustapha. Ask him which side I'm on."

"Another liar!" she snorted. "You don't know about the arms shipment?"

"Arms shipment!"

She made a quick decision. "I'll show you."

At that moment two cars shot silently down the street toward us. "That's Dulce bringing the G-2," I said.

"Move!" Ilunga snapped. "No noise." She gestured with the gun.

Bewildered, I moved. I didn't fully comprehend her motive, but I was sure she would shoot me if I balked. If she really believed I had betrayed her to Blakrev . . .

We ran down an alley until we came to her Mercedes Benz, another impressive evidence of the Hyena's connections, for there were no cars available on a rental basis in Cuba. We got in and took off, driving without lights. Her driving in the night was horrendous, because of her lack of experience and her poor night vision; we wandered back and forth across the road, ran stoplights,

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and bucked a wheel over the curb a couple of times. I became very nervous, especially since she was using one hand to hold the gun on me.

"You could cover me better if I drove," I offered.

She ignored me and increased her speed. I didn't like this at all, but that gun remained pointed unwaveringly at my head, and I knew that it was more dangerous to my health than either the Cuban secret police or an auto wreck. Ordinarily this would have seemed to be a good time to attempt to disarm her, but I knew that one reason she drove so badly was that she was paying close attention to my every movement. Her eyes were not good, but her other senses were far sharper than mine.

"Here," Ilunga said, and pulled to a stop before an old nondescript house in a Vedado suburb. It was in front of a block-sized park, across from a big fountain with a statue of the god Neptune surrounded by date palms. Hardly a suspicious residence.

I saw then that this was on C Street, and house was 104. It was an old home, with a garden in front and an ancient fence of wrought iron. The entrance doors were big and tall, wide enough for a horse and coach to pass through, with a massive bronze knocker.

"Knock," she said.

I knocked. After a long wait; the door opened and a man answered.

"Si?"

"Ilunga. I want to inspect the shipment," she said.

"Mustapha said no one could enter," the man replied in English.

"And who's this?"

"Jason Striker. I want him to see it."

"Striker! The boss gave orders that he was to be kept away at all costs!" And suddenly the muzzle of another gun was swinging toward me.

I danced aside, hoping Ilunga would not shoot me in the back.

But she concentrated on the other man. Her foot shot out, knocking the gun from his hand. "I'll be responsible for Striker," she said.

But in that moment of her preoccupation, I struck. I caught

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her pistol, with one hand, pushed its slide back with the other hand so that it could not fire, and twisted the weapon out of her

hand.

Then I returned it to her. "Call Mustapha," I said. "Get him over here. If he's high up in Blakrev, he'll know whether I'm part of the organization. It will be hard for him to lie, with me right here; he can't let me go, after I've seen your cache-unless I am your betrayer." I was playing a dangerous game, for if Ilunga didn't kill me, Mustapha would. But I trusted her motive more, and with her on my side . . .

She took the gun. "I'll do that. Get on inside."

But the man tried to intervene, grabbing me from behind. I struck backward with my elbow, scoring on his solar plexus. Cowed, he made no further protest.

We entered. The interior was not well kept; it was a vast barnlike place, with big wooden beams supporting the roof and flaking yellow paint on the walls. There were boxes with books all about. One of the rooms we passed was lined from floor to ceiling on all walls with books, and I could see sparrows nesting in the rafters. There was also an interior patio. Evidently this house was used as a temporary warehouse for literary supplies.

Hidden behind stacked boxes were some unmarked crates.

Ilunga put away her gun and handed me a crowbar. "Take a look."

I wedged in the point and began to pry. The lid of the first crate squeaked up. I pried again, gaining leverage.

"What the hell is this?" a voice snapped behind me.

I froze. I knew that voice. Mustapha! How soon he had come!

He must have been only a few blocks away.

"All I want to know," Ilunga said evenly, "is whether this honky is in this with us. So I'm showing him the cargo for his boat. We can't conceal it without his cooperation."

"He's involved now," Mustapha muttered, covering me with his gun.

"Not before?"

He faced her angrily. "Woman, why did you do it? He was my

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friend, once. It was bad enough lying to him so as to trap you and your brother; it'll be worse having to kill him!" He shook his head grimly. His hand tightened on the gun. "I'm sorry, Jason. I really am. I'm going to have nightmares about this. But there's no way out-not with the Hyena."

He meant it. I braced for action, wondering which side Ilunga was on now. If I had miscalculated-

"Let's take a look at that cargo first," Ilunga said. Her right hand was on her head, her left on her hip. A large jangly metal bracelet was on her left, that I hadn't noticed before. It was not her way to wear ostentatious jewelry.

"I can shoot him before you move," Mustapha said. He was suffering from no illusions about her propensities, either. "Then I'd have to shoot you-if you move."

"You'll only get off one shot," she said. I knew that was true, too; she'd have her knife out of her hair and into his body while he

was firing at me.

But Mustapha didn't seem fazed. "You may not recognize my weapon," he said. I turned, slowly, to face him. He held a peculiar revolver with a bulbous barrel. "It is a cyanide pellet gun. The pellets penetrate the skin and cause instant death, no matter where they hit. The Russian secret police use these, and they are extremely effective."

"I recognize it," she said. "But you still won't have time to aim twice."

Mustapha nodded. "I don't need to aim at all well. Chances are fifty-fifty I could squeeze off the second after your knife hit me, and touch you somewhere. But I see no purpose in having three deaths. So it's an impasse. I'll compromise. We'll look at the cargo. But it won't change a thing."

I went back to work on the crate, feeling an itch on that spot on my back the cyanide pellet would strike. What would this accomplish? I had been exonerated, but there was still a gun trained on me—a more deadly one than before.

I unloaded the crate, then another. What a cache of weapons!

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All captured American equipment. Naturally, I thought; Sovietmade weapons would be immediately suspicious, betraying the true origin of the "revolution." The first crate contained blocks of C-3 plastic explosive. The second had detonator caps, rolls of fuse, and similar apparatus. I handled these with extreme care, knowing

how dangerous they were. The third had fragmentation hand grenades and incendiary devices. The fourth had M3 machine guns with silencer barrels, .45 pistols, and similar weapons. There was plenty of ammunition in the last crate.

I had a bright idea. I picked up a detonator cap in one hand, and a box of C-3 explosive in the other. "Guess what will happen," I said, "if anything happens to me."

"He's right," Ilunga said, and I knew that this was what she had had in mind. "Those caps are very touchy, and there's enough plastic to blow apart this whole city block."

Actually, it was a bluff. I didn't know much about plastic explosive, but suspected that the caps had to be properly prepared and inserted in the plastic before they would set it off. Ilunga surely knew this. But Mustapha didn't.

Mustapha nodded. "I can kill him, you can kill me, and he can kill us all. It doesn't really change anything."

"So we'll chat bit," Ilunga said evenly. "Maybe we can come to some sort of agreement that isn't quite as fatal." She glanced at me.

"What do you think of it?"

"If these are destined for the States, it's illegal," I said. "And I'll bet they're not for the benefit of Blakrev or any other black group. These guns would be for American communists. Why should Fidel Castro arm the blacks, when communism's real aim is to take over all the world-including the blacks?"

"What would you do with these, then?" she asked.

"I'd destroy them!" I said. "And if you knew where your real

interest lies, you'd help me."

"Would you destroy them, if we let you? By your own hand?"

"Yes!" I said. "I'd set fire to this house."

"Would you?"

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What was she driving at? I shook my head. "No. I can't destroy property wantonly. But I could carry the weapons out to the sea and dump them."

"Listen, man, I can jostle that cargo as well as you can,"

Mustapha said. "So can she. My gun, her knife don't make any difference." He holstered his cyanide pistol and approached the cache. "But this looks like real cool iron."

I relaxed. He was right. Any action could destroy us all, now that the crates were open and spread out. We could not afford to fight; we all could lose. It wasn't just the plastic; the grenades didn't need primers to explode.

Ilunga's hand dropped from her head. "Yes," she agreed.

Mustapha picked up a rifle and broke it open so as to fit a clip into it. Oil dripped, from it. "Hey!" he exclaimed.

"They ship them oiled, stupid," Ilunga said. "They're still usable."

"I know that! But there's something inside it." He fished out a packet and twisted it open. White powder spilled out, falling to the floor.

I stared. "That just might be-"

"Horse!" Ilunga said.

"Smack!" Mustapha echoed, shocked.

"Heroin!" I said. "So that's what your boss is really shipping."

Ilunga put one finger in the powder and touched it to her tongue. She nodded affirmatively. "Pure shit."

Mustapha drew out a clip of ammunition, then several more.

"Look here!" he exclaimed.

We looked. The crate had only a thin layer of ammo on top; the main part of it consisted of plastic bags of powder.

"Twenty million dollars street value!" Mustapha breathed. Of course there was no immediate way to verify this estimate, but I had a hunch it was close enough.

"The Hyena," I said, working it out as I spoke. "He's using Blakrev as a cover for the really lucrative trade. Heroin. He doesn't give a damn about black revolution. Hell, he's white himself. He

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just wants the blacks to take the rap if the scheme is exposed. He doesn't even touch the guns himself."

Ilunga's head lifted. "What's that?" She ran to the cobwebbed window. "The G-2!" she cried.

"They traced us here!" I said. "We've got to run!" I knew a fight would be futile; the G-2 would quickly have a small army of reinforcements.

"There's no percentage in this," Mustapha said. "Let's us call it quits. You two get lost; I'll talk to the G-2."

I didn't know which side he was on, now. He was no drug

pusher, but he might still be loyal to the Hyena. In the circumstance, it seemed best not to argue.

Ilunga and I ran out the back way. But the Cuban G-2 was marvelously efficient. A spotlight blinded us. "ALTO!" a voice cried. I halted, knowing better than to attempt to break in such straits. But Ilunga staggered and fell to the ground. She rolled back, her legs coming up, her thighs spreading. She was wearing a short skirt so that her legs were exposed directly to the glare of the spotlight, right up to the panties.

"Coño!" the voice exclaimed. The light wavered.

No wonder. She had no panties on. She was giving the G-2 an eyeful seldom offered outside of a harem.

Then her arm moved. Something glinted in the beam, and there was a hideous scream. The light slewed off into the sky.

She had hurled one of her little shuriken at the voice. Now I realized that her heavy bracelet was not a hanging geegaw; the decoration was a deadly throwing knife, ready to pull and heave. I, like Mustapha, had thought her hair was the only place she kept such weapons, a potentially fatal misjudgment.

We ran again. I let Ilunga lead the way, as she obviously knew this area far better than I did. She jumped a low iron fence into the porch of a neighboring house, forced open the old wooden door, and ran up some rickety iron stairs. We leaped across the roof until we reached the side of a modern apartment building. There was a fire escape, and we climbed it. Then a short run, a death-defying

leap to a nearby building, and we were in another city block and out of reach of the G-2, for we were among the maze-like warrens of the azotas, upper roofs. We made another short run and jumped across a narrow street, to fall on a smaller building in front. We were, I discovered in mid-air, some eight stories high; there was an auto moving far below, its headlights spearing forward through the dark canyon of the street. I was frankly terrified.

Ilunga came to a small washing shed in the azotea. The door was ajar and we crawled inside. The space was constricted, and we were practically on top of each other. The roof was actually open to the sky, but were wires strung across, full of hanging laundry that provided some concealment from the view of plane or helicopter.

"We'll be safe here," she said. "For several hours, at least. Dogs can't trace us. I know a better place, when it's safe to move."

"Good enough," I said. "Actually, I should be able to talk to the Cuba authorities. I know one of their militia women-army women, I mean."

"I saw her. You mean she's your friend?"

I made myself comfortable beside her, sharing the limited cover of the laundry. Ironically, a pair of feminine panties hung right above my face. "Don't act shocked. I know lots of women, and some are quite attractive."

"She came as your friend? Not to snoop around the boat?"

"So that was it!" I said. "You saw her uniform, and thought

the Cuban authorities were after the arms!"

She nodded in the dark. "I didn't know it was you until I saw you fight."

"But if this shipment was a communist plot, why should the G-2 bother it?"

"That's one of the questions," she said. "Betrayals happen.

Maybe the G-2 was coming to make sure the shipment went through. I stayed to watch, just in case."

If so, we would get little comfort from the Cuban authorities.

We had tried to destroy that shipment, and certainly we would expose the presence of the heroin. But it could be; I had not been

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in trouble until I got near that arms cache, and then trouble had come looking for me, as though the G-2 had known all along where the cache was. "So you were trying to get the arms shipment through on schedule."

"Uh-uh, honky. I was going through the motions, so the Hyena wouldn't kill my brother."

"Then why did you bother to talk with me? The worst I could have done was expose the shipment, and you didn't care about that."

She was silent for a time. "Do you know how he died?"

There was a slight accent on "he," and somehow it telegraphed her meaning. "Kobi Chija, my fiancée's father? He was ambushed by the Demons in a taxi." It was a bitter memory, seemingly irrelevant,

but I knew that Ilunga had a purpose in bringing it up.

"I learned the details later," she said. "I thought you would want to know, but we never had a chance to talk."

True enough. Ilunga had been a Demon then, and she and I had been enemies in our fashion. We hadn't talked much when we met. And I had been set to marry Chiyako, beautiful daughter of the Chinese Northern Shaolin kung fu instructor, Kobi Chija.

"The Demons wanted to recruit you," Ilunga said. "They thought that if they captured your fiancée, you would have to join them. So the order went out to bring them both in, father and daughter. Alive, because they knew you would never be swayed by more killing. With the girl hostage-

I began to see the relevance. Ilunga's brother had been kidnapped and held hostage to her cooperation, and I had seemed to be implicated. Before, it had been my fiancée Chiyako kidnapped, to put pressure on me, and I had thought Ilunga had been party to that. I had been ready to kill her. Yes I could understand her feelings, this time around.

"So they set an ambush for Kobi and Chiyako," she continued.

And I listened intently, for this dreadful knowledge was vital to me. I had had enormous respect for the old kung fu sifu, and I had loved his daughter. As Ilunga spoke, in the gloom of that

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lonely rooftop refuge, I visualized the nightmare as it had happened.

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Chiyako, dark-eyed, fair-skinned, lovely despite her bandaged breast, sat in the taxi beside her father. A treacherous broken-bottle attack had almost torn off her left breast and put her in the hospital, but now she was coming home.

The taxi stopped for a light. Suddenly another car pulled up beside it, and a gun poked out from its right window into the face of the cabbie. "Stay where you are!" a harsh voice said.

Kobi looked, and saw the blazing orange eyeballs of a Demon high on Kill-13. For an instant the Shaolin sifu tensed for action. But he knew he could not act in time to prevent that gun from going off. The cabbie would die, and so, probably, would Chiyako. No victory would be worth such a price.

So Kobi surrendered. He and his daughter got out of the cab, which drove off with alacrity the moment the Demons gave the word. Now it would be possible to fight, for there were no more than six Demons. But again he refrained, for Chiyako, though versed in martial art and possessed of discipline and courage, was not well. She could still die in the fracas, and it was not worth that risk. Also, he hesitated to initiate violence; he was a man of peace, and perhaps these Demons intended no harm. That chance was slight, after the threats they had made against him, but so long as it was a possibility . . .

"Into the car," the Demon-leader ordered. "Her, not you, chink!" He shoved Kobi back roughly.

Kobi almost acted then. He saw his daughter pause, on the

verge of crippling the Demon with a swift blow. They could put away two of the men before the others reacted, then take out two more in the next few seconds. But the odds were still adverse.

Only a fool attacked a man with a gun. He did not want to be

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separated from his daughter. But until he was sure of their intent, or had opportunity act without risk to Chiyako . . .

So he desisted, and she, acknowledging his decision, got into the first car. Kobi was taken to the second. He sat in the back seat between two Demons, with two more in front. The first car sped away.

The Demon to his right drew a knife 'Now, old man . . .' the addict said. Suddenly Kobi was sure they intended to kill him and use his daughter to nullify Jason Striker. There was no mercy in them. First the capture, then the separation, then murder.

They had taken the old man's acquiescence for cowardice. Had any of them fought him before, they would have known better.

But none of them had, for the simple reason that no Demons had survived their previous encounter with him. Now, at least he could act without imperiling Chiyako; the Demons in her car would not know what transpired here until too late. The addicts, in separating father and daughter, had made a tactical mistake.

The knife was hovering near his face. The Demon was grinning; he was going to entertain himself with a little innocent torture before finishing the job. Demons felt very little pain themselves, but their heightened perceptions could appreciate it in others.

No doubt they liked to see blood flow, to hear the music of a victim's screams of agony as the mutilation proceeded. Demons had little sexual appetite; their drives were sublimated in sadism. Kobi had, over the past few weeks, searched for some redeeming feature of Kill-13 addiction, but apart from the immediate physical lift, he had found none. The humane qualities of the addict seemed to be suppressed, the bad ones exaggerated, in a kind of Jekyll/Hyde metamorphosis. Even common sense and proper caution were blunted by the drug, as now.

Kobi suddenly drove sideways with his elbow. It was a Chinese atemi blow. Its force, crushing muscle and nerve against bone with deadly precision, permanently incapacitated the Demon. Even without pain, the man could not withstand the destruction of his

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nervous system, and his body reacted automatically, falling forward. Simultaneously, Kobi swung his hand past the knife of the other and connected to his temple. In that hand the old man held a tiny weapon, overlooked by the Demons: a yawara stick, like a hardwood dumbbell grooved to fit the fingers. Though only a few inches long it provided a hard surface-and under the force of that blow, the Demon's temple crumpled like an eggshell. The knife dropped from abruptly flaccid fingers.

Then Kobi struck with his yawara to the neck of the driver, the wood jamming where the neck joined the head. The blow

caused a massive hemorrhage of the cerebellum. The driver died instantly.

The car swerved and crashed against the curb, but the fourth Demon, with his drug-induced reflexes, had time to fire his gun. Even as the sound of the shot blasted in the confines of the car, Kobi was going down, his forehead smashing into the crotch of the Demon on his left.

The car bucked over the curb and sideswiped a building on the right. Glass shattered; the side stove in. The Demon with the gun was caught in that crush as the car slowed to a stop.

From the wreckage only Kobi emerged, for only he had been trained to survive such violence. His right arm was broken, and there was a slash down his back where the bullet had grazed him. Only in storybooks and bad novels do heroes tackle superior odds and emerge unscathed, particularly where guns are involved. In life there are wounds for the just as well as the unjust.

But there was a third Demon car, behind. It screeched to a stop. Kobi ran for it-not away, for there could be no escape from their bullets-but toward the car. Two Demons scrambled out and started shooting at him, but there was no time to aim properly, and this time he actually did beat the odds and reached them without sustaining another injury. He bowled one over with his shoulder, then with his good hand grasped the throat of the other.

Kobi was an expert in Northern Shaolin kung fu, the most

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deadly of the complex of Chinese martial arts. Though he always

sought peace, he could, literally, kill a man with the strike of one finger. When he got his hand on the Demon, that Demon was doomed.

But the addicts of Kill-13 were not ordinary-thugs. Their strength and reflexes were far better than those of any normal person, and the drug gave them a berserker courage. And this Demon still had his gun.

He put that gun to the side of Kobi's face, quickly, like the motion of a rat-trap springing shut, and pulled the trigger. Kobi's deadly nails tore his larynx out, but the bullet smashed upward through the soft part of the jaw and on through the brain and out the top of Kobi's head.

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"And that was it," Ilunga finished "He took six Demons with him, that old man, but he died, his brains splattered across the sidewalk. The others took the bodies away and covered the traces, so there was no police report. And of course they had the girl."

I nodded in the dark. "I appreciate your telling me," I said, smarting from the knowledge, for that old wound was deep. But now I had confirmation of what I had believed, that Kobi Chija, my prospective father-in-law, had acquitted himself with honor. His life could never be recovered, but the pride of his memory was essential.

"You know why I told you," she said.

"Yes."

"I suspected you, as you suspected me, then. But I never betrayed you, though we were enemies."

"And I never betrayed you," I said. "And we are not enemies, now."

"I guess I knew that all along, but I didn't know I knew. You're a honky, and-"

"And you hate all honkies," I finished for her.

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"I did hate honkies. But since I studied Tao, I can't get the old edge on it any more. 'God's Way is gain that works no harm.' That's from the Lao Tzu. I wish-"

"Kobi was wrong in one thing," I said. "Kill-13 addiction does not convert a good man into an evil one. It only accentuates traits within that man, and stifles his inhibitions. You retained your good qualities, and the Demon leaders had intelligence and integrity.

When I learned of the abduction of my fiancée, you comforted me instead of taking advantage of my shock. There was that in you that responded to my need. I never forgot that favor."

She spat viciously to the side. "Shit, Striker! You don't know a thing! I never did anything for you."

But I understood her. I had complimented her and thanked her for the aid she had rendered during the Demon adventure, and she was constitutionally unable to accept such appreciation gracefully. That Tao training obviously had affected her profoundly, but the negative passions of a lifetime could not be reversed overnight

Her emotion was ambivalent, but powerful.

Racism was deeply ingrained in her; it was part of her nature.

She had been mob-raped as a child by white men, and ridiculed by white policemen when she sought justice, simply because she was black. Her whole life thereafter had been dedicated to revenge against the white man. Now she had been used again, by the Hyena.

How could she profess any respect for any white man?

Yet she had taken the trouble to tell me of the abduction of my fiancée and the murder of Kobi. On one level it could be interpreted as a desire to hurt me, for the news was undeniably painful.

But on the deeper level, this was Ilunga's way of apologizing for believing I had betrayed her. And an excellent way it was.

"I studied Tao to try to get off Kill-13," she said. "But I didn't make it."

"I thought Kill-13 addiction was incurable," I said.

"You got off it."

"I wasn't really on it," I said, realizing I had been tactless. I

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had had one sniff forced on me, and had suffered a hell of a high, but in my case, one sniff did not an addict make.

"You would have been an addict, if you hadn't had some way to stop it," she insisted. "What did you do?"

I saw she meant it. She thought I had some secret remedy, and she really wanted to know what it was, so that she could use it herself. "It isn't what I did, it's what I am," I said carefully. "Drug

addiction comes to the disadvantaged, the emotionally insecure, the ones with seemingly overwhelming problems. They need an escape, and drugs are the easiest way, short term. I've had a better life. I was raised in a happy home, and I did well enough in school. I like my profession, instructing judo and karate. I have no reason to escape my life. I'm not bored or hungry or dissatisfied. So for me the drug euphoria is no temptation. But you-well, if I'd had your background, I'd be an addict too. Don't get me wrong. But you never had the chances I had because you're a woman and your skin is black."

"And when you lost your fiancée?" she asked softly.

Just like that, she punctured my glowing balloon, turned the knife in my gut. Expertly, with no warning. Now there was no way out but the truth. "I wanted to die. I would have died, if you hadn't dragged me out, you bitch."

"That was when you had your sniff of Kill-13," she reminded me. "There was your escape from grief. Why didn't you take it?"

"I hated Kill-13 and its Demon cult," I said. "I destroyed it, and I'd do it again ten times over, and still not be satisfied. They killed my love."

"I hate Kill-13 too," she said. "And my brother may die because of it. How did you get off it?"

She was forcing me into admissions I had never made before. I had been a setup for addiction, in that circumstance, by my own definition. Without my fiancée, Chiyako, my life was meaningless; color, sex, and job satisfaction were irrelevant. Yet I had escaped

the power of the drug. "I think it was the ki," I said at last.

The ki-that mysterious inner force, indefinable yet potent,

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so hard to master. Hiroshi the aikido sensei had it, but few others could do more than talk about it.

"You believe in the ki?" she asked.

"I was a skeptic once, but one day a man showed me its power. He was a sixty-year-old little philosopher, but as formidable a martial artist as I have ever known. Hiroshi--he was the one I intended to refer you to for help with Danny, had he not been too far away, in Japan. The normal laws of the universe seem to apply to him only imperfectly. With ki, a man can do things . . . I can't explain it, really."

"This ki stopped the drug," she said.

"Yes. I can't describe it better than that."

"Teach me the ki."

"I can't. Don't you see, I don't have perfect command of it myself. It comes with need-sometimes-but it's involuntary."

"Feel my face," she said.

Perplexed, I ran my hand over her black hair in the dark and found her black face. It was slick with moisture.

I froze, my hand across her closed eyes, those red Demon eyes.

It seemed impossible, but there was only one explanation. This tough, emotionless woman-she was crying.

And she had let me know. That was as incredible as the act.
Ilunga could kill without scruple; she had done so many times. If
ever she should cry, it would never be before a honky. Unless she
were moved by something more fundamental than I had yet appreciated.
Her captive brother, her Tao training, her determination to
break the unbreakable addiction of the Demon drug-she was not
the vicious woman I had known; she was at the breaking point.
She had humbled herself to ask me for help, again.
It humbled me. I knew what this display had to have cost her.
And I had to respond. This was an emergency as real as that of any
combat. I felt it right through to the core of my being.
And from that core came the ki. It rose in me like a living tide,
spreading from my hara, the seat of my soul in my body, growing
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until it became a pulsing sphere of raging forces. Up, up through
my viscera, my muscles, my arms, suffusing me with its unique
power. It pulsed out through my hand that rested across her bloodshot
eyes, and it entered her body. It was as though my hand
glowed, and her head glowed under it, receiving that subtle charge.
Ki-the invincible, all-permeating force, animating the ultimate
resources of mind and body. It engulfed us both, that secret essence
of miracles.
But it left us calm in the center of its sphere, like the eerie
stillness at the eye of a hurricane. It has been said that with ki you
may move for a few seconds outside the normal time continuum,
projecting your mind to infinity. This may be true; I really could

not tell, for the power was not anything I controlled. I was only its vehicle.

Then it passed. The erratic force left me, and I shivered in the night, feeling a nakedness that no clothing could abate. Had it shown her, had it somehow helped her? I could not know.

For perhaps twenty minutes she lay there in silence. Then, abruptly, she sat up. "Got a match?" she asked.

A match-to heat a pellet of Kill-13 into vapor for inhalation?

"Don't do it, Ilunga!" I cried, the weight of failure abruptly heavy on my soul.

"It is wisdom to know others," she said, and I knew she was quoting from Lao Tzu. "It is enlightenment to know one's self."

She paused. "Strike a match, hold it to my face, tell me what you see."

I found a match and lighted it. I don't smoke, and have few occasions to start a fire, but there are assorted oddities in my pockets like matches and paper clips, don't ask me why. I brought the light to her head, seeing the white of her eyeballs reflected in the black of her face. She seemed serene; even her broken nose seemed straighter, healed. She looked back at me, unblinking, silent. But her seeming peace was the effect of the shadow; what was it that she wanted me to observe?

The match burned low, scorching my fingers, and I dropped

it. We were in darkness again.

Then it came to me. "Your eyes!" I exclaimed. "I saw the whites of your eyes!"

The telltale mark of Demon addiction was gone.

She leaned toward me, her hand catching my shoulder, pulling me about. "I love you," she said. "You have made me whole."

I opened my mouth to demur, but she closed it with a deep kiss. Then I knew that the ki had animated her, providing that last impetus she required to break the addiction. She had no other way to respond to it, in this first flash of its ambiance. She loved me—because she loved the world. That nucleus of hate that had fashioned her into a cold killer, that had made her hate herself, made her prey to the drug—that thing was gone, melted by the ki. I had not been the cause, only the instrument. The power obeyed its own imperative.

With this understanding came acceptance. Ki had saved me before, more than once. Now, perhaps, it had saved her. There was no experience like it; we both were children under its beneficence.

And so we made love, there on the roof, with the stars shining through the laundry above us, while the Cuban G-2 quested in vain. We made love, not as white to black, not even as man to woman, but as a merging of equals, united by the amazing quality of the ki. Not since I lost my fiancée had I experienced anything like it.

Chapter 9

FIDEL

When we were assured that the chase had subsided, we descended and made our way across Havana by foot. By this time, we knew, the G-2 had ascertained our identities and comprehended that we had tried to destroy the weapons shipment. Mustapha might have saved himself by blaming us-and quite possibly he had not had to lie to do it. We could not return to our former roles; they would arrest us on sight, and hold us on one pretext or another until the arms and heroin were delivered. And then- they might execute us.

Oh, there would be a stink, about me, at least. But totalitarian governments were accustomed to getting away with such things. If they could get rid of me secretly, they could deny any knowledge of my whereabouts, and who could prove otherwise? It wasn't as though Cuba had any great concern for the opinion of gringo America. After all, more than twenty American citizens had met the dreaded paredon, the execution wall, at Cabanas prison alone. Many Yankees languished in Cuban jails, disillusioned about the

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protective aura of American citizenship. "You can't do this to me! I'm an American . . ."

I was destined to share some such fate. All because I had stumbled across that illicit arms and drug shipment. Yet there was merit in it, for it had united me with Ilunga.

She guided me to the kwoon of the sifu she had been seeing in

Cuba. We walked for a long time, till we hit Havana's Chinatown.

We were right in the center of the street, Zanja, with old ramshackle buildings crowded together, Chinese laundries, fruit stalls and vegetable stands. Even at this late hour there were faces peering at us from the windows, old male faces.

We entered an old building. On the ground floor there was an authentic Chinese restaurant, the Pacifico, with several more old men lounging around the entrance despite the predawn hour.

Above was the small kwoon and room of the sifu. It could be reached by an old open-cage elevator with wire around the upper portion, or by a staircase. We used the stair. There had not been time for the sifu to help her fight her addiction, and now there was no need; but she believed he would hide us. At least until I could contact the Swiss Embassy and arrange to get out of the country. It was now early morning, but we had no choice; we couldn't wait for an afternoon appointment.

But Sifu Tuh Hsin-wu was there, and seemed to be expecting us. He was in his late seventies, very small and thin, standing about five feet two inches tall. His skin was like yellow parchment, taut across his cheekbones yet hanging flaccid on his arms. He was completely hairless; and his teeth were rotten stumps. He was smoking an opium pipe whose sweet odor permeated the room.

This habit of Chinese martial artists appalled me, yet many of them did it. He had the dreamy look of the lifetime addict.

"I see you do not approve," he said to me.

Was I to insult the man who might help me? "Your ways are

not mine. Perhaps with greater understanding I would see it otherwise."

"You Americans put undue stress on appearances."

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"No doubt," I agreed.

"Sifu Tuh is dying of cancer," Ilunga murmured to me. "The opium gives him relief from the pain. He has smoked it for fifty years."

More than pain relief was involved, then, I thought. Fifty years! I have lived a long satisfying life," Sifu Tuh said equitably "My one remaining desire is to die in honest combat, not from the debilitations of disease." He shrugged. "'The Wise Man's mind is free.'"

I recognized another quotation, probably from the Lao Tzu.'

Ilunga had really been exposed to this Taoist philosophy, and it had benefited her in more than the relief from addiction.

A child appeared, evidently some kind of servant. "Master, it is time to cook the rice," he said.

Sifu Tuh nodded. He went to a closet and brought out a twentyfive-pound sack. He held it above the kettle with his left hand, and drove the extended fingers of his right hand at it, once, twice, three times.

It was, as though his fingers were knives. At every stroke his hand plunged into the sack, making a neat incision. Rice poured out.

This was a true sifu, all right. I could not have done that trick;

my fingers would have snapped off.

He gave the pot to the boy, who hauled it away. It was for the restaurant below, I surmised; the sifu could hardly consume so large an amount in one meal.

I sensed that this display was not idle; he hardly needed to open the bag in this fashion in my presence. Probably he felt he had lost face because of my disapproval of his opium habit. He had not had cancer fifty years ago, so had needed no pain-killer then. So now he wanted to gain my respect with this exhibition.

"Lift me," he said. I put my hands to his elbows, knowing he could not weigh more than a hundred pounds. I heaved upward- and he did not budge. It was as though he weighed five hundred

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pounds. It was another demonstration, and I had to go along, for we needed his help. But I was impressed.

I desisted, shaking my head. "I will show you how it is done," Tuh said. He led the way to the roof, and held some rice in the palm of his hand. A sparrow flew down to eat. When the rice was gone, the bird tried to fly away, but evidently could not. Yet it did not seem to be injured. "When it seeks to fly, I hear its energy and yield, so that it has no base from which to launch itself," he explained.

"Even so the proper yielding can prevent a man from being lifted."

He let the bird go. Yes, I was impressed.

Then Tuh put his arm out straight to the side. "Bend it down,"

he suggested.

At this point I knew the resistance I would meet. I went ahead and tried. I put pressure on the arm, to force it down, and of course it would not go.

Then I felt the ki again, unbidden, flowing into my own arms.

Slowly I forced the arm down.

"Ah," he murmured, undismayed. "I feel that! You have some ch'i yourself! I thought I perceived it in her, and I wondered at its source." He gestured to Ilunga, who smiled. That was another thing: now she smiled, whereas in the past she had only bared her teeth.

"It has no source," I said. "It infuses whatever it will."

"True, true!" he agreed. "But give it time. If the will is concentrated, the vital energy will follow it. Will is of the highest importance, vitality stands second. Do not seek in your vitality for what you do not find in your heart. What you have is untrained, but it is very strong. It has made a woman of her."

"It wasn't just the ki the ch'i," Ilunga said. "He-"

"It was to cure the addiction," I said quickly. This hardly seemed the occasion to rehash our rooftop liaison. "She needed that extra push."

Tuh nodded, not pursuing the matter. He had recovered his face, and did not choose to make me lose mine. We had a leisurely

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breakfast of Chinese herb tea, fragrant and tasting of mint, boiled

rice with fish heads and chunks of lobster, and lotus seed cookies.

Evidently the restaurant below took good care of the sifu's dietary needs. Tuh told us how he had been sixteen at the fall of the Manchu Empire in China in 1912, and quite involved in the secret societies of the time, as well as in the Chinese underground. Later, when China fell to the communists, he migrated to Cuba, only to have it, too, fall.

"But here they tolerate me and my habit," he said, taking another puff of his opium. "So long as I do not publicize my way of life or my beliefs. And I am old, and soon to die. I take no joy in quarrels."

The boy dashed in. "Master!" the lad cried breathlessly. "The G-2 are coming!"

Ilunga and I jumped, alarmed. "They traced us here already!" I said. "God, they're efficient!"

Tuh walked to the wall and took down a red silk kimono with mystical signs embroidered on it in gold, "I have been expecting them. I will delay them while you depart."

"Sifu!" I protested. "This is not your concern. You said you take no joy in quarrels."

Tuh, garbed; now took down two kung fu swords: one a long chien, the other a broad tao. I marveled privately that the same name applied to both a sword and a philosophy of peace. "True. But this quarrel is necessary, and it is to be my last. 'A brave man who dares to, will kill; a brave man who dares not, spares life; and from them both come good and ill.' If they will desist, there will

be no bloodshed, and that is good. Otherwise, it is a fitting way for an old warrior to end."

A brave man who dares not, spares life. An interesting thought.

Sometimes it did take more courage not to kill.

Yet it was preposterous, this ancient, ill bag of bones standing up to the brutal, armed thugs of the G-2! I had seen the sifu's demonstration of skills, and felt the power of his ch'i, but still . . .

"Yes, the ch'i," he said. "Yours must be preserved, for it has not

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flowered yet." Startled, I looked at him. Could he read my mind?

There was a loud banging on the wooden door, Ilunga and I drew back into shadowed recesses, unable to get away unseen, and uncertain whether it was honorable to flee. This was our fight.

Tuh opened the door and stepped to one side. Four men charged in, carrying drawn metralletas, Czech 9mm submachine guns, faster but less accurate than the M-3. One carried a 9mm pistol. One man fired at a shadow; the bullet thudded into the wall near my head. Trigger-happy!

Tuh's long sword danced in the air, coming at the last of the four as he crashed in. The man's head flew off, but the decapitated body remained upright, grotesquely spouting blood.

The others turned as their comrade toppled, bringing their weapons to bear. The barrel of a submachine gun swung toward Tuh's torso. But it was toward this man that the awful corpse fell,

and he pumped a dozen bullets into that body before realizing that it was not the enemy. Then Tuh's broadsword slashed across, sending sparks from the barrel as it struck, cutting into the man's raised forearm, and finally embedding itself in the man's side. His spinal column was severed; he too fell.

Tuh was already hurdling the collapsing bodies, his free sword leading. The third man got the point directly in his solar plexus. The fourth was firing now, but he was already too late. Tuh's foot lashed out, tripping him. Tuh's razor-nailed fingers ripped into his crotch, emasculating him. No rice, this time . . .

It had all taken perhaps twenty seconds. Four men were dead or incapacitated, by this tiny ill bag of bones! But that was pa-kua, the Taoist-derived boxing.

Tuh looked back, spying us. "Now it is safe to go. There will be no pursuit."

But coming down the hall from the staircase were two more men with guns drawn. Tuh took a pronged spear from the wall, the ko mo, with a second blade placed at right angles to the iron head. He hurled it with such force that it impaled both men.

Through the open door behind him I saw the elevator rising

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with another load of troops. The gate opened, and the new men spied the carnage. Guns lifted, but the men were still jammed in the elevator, unable to take proper aim because of their own jostling.

There were five of them.

Tuh turned, ran to the door, and stooped momentarily over

the bleeding bodies. His hand flashed-and a red spray of blood fanned out to strike the crowded men. The effect must have been more psychological than physical, for the spray was too thin to blind them. It was as if some unseen force had momentarily pushed them back. Could this be the fabulous "sand palm?" Hands toughened by immersion in sand . . .

Tuh launched himself through the air in a prodigious leap. It was as though he were a great bright bird taking off, or a red kite, for his kung fu tunic fluttered. And in that instant I wondered: he had been able to make himself too heavy to lift by the power of his ch'i; could he also reverse that force, to make himself light enough to fly? The notion was fantastic, yet I could not entirely discount it.

He hit the open cage of the elevator, not giving the men a chance to spread out. Yet the air was filled with bullets, forcing Ilunga and me to upend the table and hide behind it. I put my arm around her automatically, as though she were a frail girl, and she did not protest. Tuh must have been hit twenty times, but he never stopped. All the men went down, and he was in their midst, rolling on the floor. He was screaming, and they were screaming, but his was the scream of the predator, theirs the prey. Those deadly hands were doing their work, those rice-bag slicers. Like knives they flashed, going in and out of living flesh, cutting their way through. It was as if instead of muscle and bone they were meeting paper dolls. It was the terrible dragon's-claw effect, the result of

decades of harsh training, of throwing empty jars up into the air and catching them with the fingers, and gradually filling the jars with more and more sand, increasing their weight. In the course of time, the hands became incredibly strong. And it was also his mastery of ch'in-na, the Chinese atemis, that enabled this wounded

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little man to inflict death so readily. Each of his opponents had been hit with at least two death-dealing blows; his fingers had terrible strength and were capable of snapping bones as if they were twigs. That, too, was the result of specialized exercise: twisting bamboo and similar finger drills. Each finger was as rigid as a little spear as it stabbed at vital spots. The long sharp nails passed right through eyeballs and into the brain.

And it was over. Tuh expired as he completed his effort, and lay amid the corpses of his opponents.

He had died as he wanted to die, in honorable combat. He had given his life to preserve ours. There was nothing we could do but accept.

"I have an address," I said, remembering what Luis had said that evening at the restaurant. How could he have anticipated this? "La Esperanza in Pinar del Rio. Tomas the Fisherman."

"Pinar del Rio!" she exclaimed. "That's a hundred miles from Havana, over the mountains!"

Geography was never my strong subject; I had somehow thought it was closer. "It's all I have," I said. "Havana's no good for

us now, anyway."

"Cuba's no good for us!" she agreed. "Well, we can walk. But if I run out of the drug, we're in trouble."

I stared at her. "Kill-13?"

She shook her head violently. "What am I thinking of! I'm off the Demon! I don't need the drug anymore."

The habits of years were not simply forgotten. She might be off the drug, but she wasn't cured, yet. She had told me how she had eaten plastic explosive to fight off the addiction, and studied Tao. My ki had helped her, but drug addiction is no patsy. Only a long, consistent abstinence can truly break it. There are no miracle cures, no easy ways. The addict has to suffer the long, hard route to freedom.

But I would knock her out and tie her up before I allowed her to take another sniff of Kill-13. If she could only resist the urge for it now, that urge would decrease with time, until the longings

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became phantoms and finally departed entirely. If I could get her to destroy her remaining supplies of the drug, it would be impossible for her ever to become re-addicted.

We walked. We didn't dare solicit any rides, for we knew the efficiency of the G-2. We were both in good condition; even traveling cross-country and foraging for food, we figured we could do at least twenty miles a day, and make it to Pinar del Rio in five days.

But we got a ride anyway. A friendly farmer stopped, and we were unable to decline without giving away our language handicap and betraying our origins. So we piled on the back of the truck with nods grunts of thanks, and piled off again two hours later when he slowed for a steep hill. It did give us a healthy start on our journey.

The country was beautiful. We trekked through the Valle de Pinales, a big valley with small mountains covered by pine forest, called mogotes, full of caves. But daytime travel was no good; this was settled country, and the risk of discovery was too great. We hid in clumps of sugar cane or crawled under the ubiquitous spiny maribu bush.

We slept together and fought off her sieges of withdrawal; when the pangs became intolerable I wrestled her down and made love to her instead, and, odd as it may seem, this therapy helped. Her need for the drug was partly based on her need for love, and sexual expression is a form of love.

During the second day we crossed a chill river, and she suffered another pang of withdrawal. Her hand went to her hair. I leaped on her and shoved her head under the water while I clawed at her hair with the fingers of my other hand. A package of something was dislodged, and it floated away in the current.

Ilunga fought her way to the surface and gave a single despairing cry, as though she had been stabbed. But I hung on to her, preventing her from going after the package. She could have crippled me with a blow but she did not; not one of her motions was directed

at me personally. She knew what I was doing, and deep

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inside she really wanted me to prevail. And when she saw that there could be no recovery of the drug, she turned to me, and kissed me, and we made love there in the water, only our heads above it. The river was so cold my hands and feet were numb, but where we touched each other our skins were burning hot, and our kisses were desperately passionate. In the delirium of the climactic ecstasy, it seemed as if the water must boil away!

That slow trek through the Valle de Pinales was as uplifting an experience as I can remember. But alas, it was not to endure. Next day we heard the baying of dogs, and knew the G-2 was on our trail again. It was the dread peinazo, a massive pursuit by hundreds of men, cutting off all escape, combing through every square yard of the terrain.

"Maybe we can hide," I said without real hope "If we can fool the dogs . . ." I cast about. "It's the sweat-impregnated leather of our shoes they smell."

We tried. We re-entered the river and swam downstream as far as we dared, then ditched our footgear and fashioned massive bandages of leaves and vine. With luck, the scent would be muted enough to lose the dogs, and the men would assume we had gone further down the river.

We limped to a mogoto and entered a cave. There we hid,

huddled in the deepest recess, listening to the milling of the throng.

They had lost our trail!

Once again we made love. It was as though we had a lot of catching up to do. The fading drug-hunger was no longer an excuse; proximity was enough. I had lost count of the times we had done it.

Then, probably by accident, a dog sniffed at the entrance to our cave. Our sweaty odor had become intense in that confined space. I saw the hound's ears perking up; then he opened his mouth to give cry.

One of Ilunga's stilettos shot into that open mouth and the dog fell over backward, its palate and brain pierced. But now we

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had to move, for we would be rats in a trap. "I'd rather die fighting!" Ilunga muttered, and I agreed.

We emerged, quickly scooped a grave with our hands, and buried the dog so as to hide the evidence. We climbed the hill. We could not risk that cave any more. What one dog could sniff, others would too.

A man rose up out of the brush. I caught him with a fast whipping inverted uraken or back-fist to the pit of the stomach.

He crumpled unconscious and we went on.

At the top we looked out, and saw a veritable army surrounding us. There were at least five thousand men spread out below.

The first in a row of five big mortars fired, and an incendiary shell, white phosphorus, exploded a hundred yards from us. It

showered the surrounding area with its deadly beautiful spray, like falling stars-but stars that burned to the bone with a fire no water could quench.

"God, I hate those!" I muttered. "I've seen what phosphorus can do to a man, burning the flesh right off his bone, and nothing in the world can stop it."

Then a voice blared out, from a power megaphone. "Surrender, gringos!"

"Gringos!" Ilunga snorted derisively. Perhaps this was the first time she had been seriously lumped with American whites.

"We have your range," the voice cried. "Surrender, or we will blast you!"

"They've got us," I said. "They could drop a round on our heads."

"I always knew they would," Ilunga said. "But I wanted this time with you. It's been real nice, honky."

I knew that she had never said that to a white man before, not without heavy sarcasm. "Yes, nice," I agreed. It had been more than nice. I felt a lump in my throat.

And so we surrendered.

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We were taken by car to one of the suburbs of Havana. I expected interrogation and possibly execution, but we were not

roughly treated. We were given a chance to clean up, then were taken to another house.

There were men all over, armed and alert. This was a real center of activity, all right. We were brought to a large room ringed with guards, and I knew that it would be impossible to fight our way clear of this though we were not tied or drugged. What were they going to do with us?

A large man sat in a Cuban sillón, a big rocking chair with a foam cushion, before a massive mahogany table. He was bearded, sweaty, and tired-looking, about forty-five years old. He had a big Havana cigar in his mouth, and beside him was a bottle of Spanish cognac. His unkempt appearance was in contrast to the military neatness of the guards. Some lesser interrogation officer, I judged; one day he would get himself canned for his failure to uphold military dignity of dress. But at the moment we were in his power.

"Welcome, Jason Striker!" he exclaimed in passable English, putting forth one big hand. I considered rejecting it, but realized that the gesture would be futile. Little men had big egos, and we were in enough trouble already. So I played the game and took it.

"And you, Black Mistress."

Ilunga shrugged, not deigning to reply.

The man laughed good-naturedly. "I see by your faces you do not know me. Ah, you gringos, for you the rest of the world does not exist!" He shook his head as in dismay. "Well, I know you! I watched you on TV, in that Nicaraguan tournament. I said to myself, 'Now there is one gringo I'd like to meet-but not in the

arena! And now, we meet."

I nodded, noncommittally.

"I am a great fan of the martial arts," he continued. "You cannot know what joy it has been to me to host the judo competition right here in Cuba. And your team did all right, eh? Since I took

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over, judo has prospered here like never before, and I am proud of it."

Since he took over? What was this?

"In fact, all Cuba has prospered!" he continued exuberantly.

"We produce more sugar, more tobacco, meat, milk, oranges, cobalt, manganese, oil, cement, tungsten, nickel, copper. More and better housing, better education-everyone can read now!"

He signaled, and an orderly brought a tray of food. I looked at the Cuban "hero" sandwich, with butter, ham, pierna sliced pork, cold cuts, cheese, pickles, and guava pastries, and suddenly I was aware that I had not eaten more than scraps for two days. To pitch into that repast . . .

He took up a huge Cuban roll, bit off a jagged hunk, chewed, and belched. My own hunger intensified. But now I had no doubt.

This was no underling; this was Fidel Castro himself, the ruler of Cuba! Why had he chosen to interrogate us personally?

But there was no chance to ask. Fidel was talking. Despite his mouthful, he spoke well, with compelling interest, and we listened, fascinated. But we had to wait on his convenience. How I

longed for a bite of that bread!

"But you Americans don't believe that, how well we have done," he continued, drinking from a bottle of beer. Now I was thirsty, too. But I had heard he spiked his drinks with Benzedrine. Addiction of one kind or another was almost universal.

"Your politicians lie to you, your newspapers prevaricate. Your free press is much less free than you believe, amigos! Half your foreign correspondents are in the pay of the CIA. Just think, but for the carelessness of one unbribed night watchman in one hotel, you would never have known of the complete corruption of your government! Watergate-there will never be a Watergate in Cuba!"

Naturally not, I thought. There was no two-party system in Cuba, and all the spying was authorized by the government. Fidel gestured expansively under my nose with a chorizo, a Spanish sausage, before cramming it into his mouth. I could al-

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most have taken a bite of it in passing. I swallowed the excess saliva in my mouth and paid attention to his words.

"Once Cuba was like that, too, in the time of the Sergeant, that embezzler Batista. But we routed out those murderers and put in honest men. We eliminated crime. There is no drug addiction in all the country, except for a few opium smokers too old to cure. I can't abide addiction!" He took another swig of spiked beer, then puffed on his cigar. Some ash fell on his food, unnoticed. Probably true, I realized. To Fidel, Benzedrine, alcohol, and

nicotine were not addictions-not in himself, at any rate. All hardcore addicts in Cuba were either dead or in prison. Totalitarian regimes could be very efficient with specific problems. But this did not preclude drugs for export, as we knew.

My expression must have given me away, for he addressed himself directly to me now. "You think I am a hypocrite, Jason Striker! You found that heroin. Admit it-you suspect us of smuggling the drug into your country!"

I nodded, for he did not pause long enough to permit a verbal reply. What a talker he was! "I know they call me the Horse-but I do not smuggle horse!" He laughed, but I noticed that not one of the guards cracked a smile. "No, that shipment was not of my doing." He blew a cloud of cigar smoke at us.

I thought he was going to elaborate, but abruptly he was off on another tangent of oratory "We have done well, but we have had help. The Soviet socialists have made many loans." He paused, then added musingly: "Soon we shall have to repay them, with interest, and how we shall do that I do not know! You see, I admit my mistakes. Even I can commit a mistake!" This was obviously humor; he was the perfect megalomaniac. "But it takes more than money! I told Allende that; 'Chico,' I said, 'you can not make a revolution with democracy and without controlling the army. Those fascist officers will turn on you, they will destroy you!' I told him, 'They will betray you the moment you interfere with their comfort or their real sources of power. Do not trust them. You must

take over the army yourself, or you are doomed!" But he would not

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listen." Fidel shook his head sadly, wisely. "The military mind is dangerous. It is paranoid. My friend Che discovered that in Bolivia.

A hard lesson!"

Che Guevara had died in Bolivia, fomenting revolution there.

They had executed him. A hard lesson indeed.

"No one pays attention to the problems of the world. There has been drought in Africa; the Sahara is being blown into the sky, and that dust is wafted across the great Atlantic, and it lands on Cuba, polluting our skies. But nobody cares, nobody acts!"

On and on it went, punctuated by that cigar after the food was gone: Fidel's view of the world, its politics and customs. We were a captive audience, yet it was not dull. Fidel really did have charisma; he compelled belief.

And then, suddenly, he was back on the subject. "That heroin-that is the work of a gringo, the one you call the Hyena." He chuckled, noting our reactions. "Oh yes, amigos-we know of the Hyena here! He was once in Cuba, professing loyalty to our principles. But he sought to betray us for his own advantage. He escaped -he is a cunning one!-but it is not safe for him here any more!" His eyes rolled toward the ceiling momentarily. "Alas, we do not practice torture in Cuba-but for him we might make an exception."

So Castro was the Hyena's enemy! Others might lie about such affiliations, but Fidel had no motive to lie to captives. I exchanged

glances with Ilunga. Did he mean it, or was he putting us on? I did not know what kind of sense of humor he had.

"Why should I lie to you?" Fidel inquired, correctly interpreting our concern. Now I suspected he was an expert in body language, for he comprehended thoughts before we could voice them.

A useful ability in a leader. "You have killed some of my best agents, and a good dog." He paused, and I had the impression the dog was of more importance to him than the men. "I could have you executed." He held up his hand. "But do not fear. I know your motive. You thought my men were protecting the cache of heroin. You wanted to destroy it, no?"

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Again there was only opportunity for a nod. This one-way dialogue was the darnedest thing.

"And I want it destroyed!" Fidel continued. "But you were with the black boxer, a known henchman of the Hyena, and he covered your exit. And you accompanied this Black Mistress, and much as I admire her form-" Here he looked at Ilunga with an intensity that would have caused any other woman to blush, though we could not be certain whether he referred to her physical form or her karate form. "She was working for that same criminal. I assumed you had joined her. Another mistake! When I reviewed your files, I discovered that you are mortal enemy to the Hyena, having balked one of his extortions. He has you marked for death,

as soon as he sees the heroin through to his contacts in the U.S.A.

But that extortion-what an intriguing way to finance a revolution!

I wish I had thought of it, when I was in the Sierra Maestra,

cold and hungry in the mountains! While you-" He turned again

to Ilunga. "You fought him from the outset, and killed half a dozen

of his men; but you were betrayed into his hands. He has your

brother." He shook his head. "I am sorry. I am a busy man. I get

behind, and files are so dull!" Dull, I thought with fascinated

amazement. His files were right up to date. What an intelligence

network he must have! "There are so many details of running socialist

republic . . ."

My brow furrowed, and once more he responded immediately.

"I shall explain, amigo! I do not want a confrontation with

your country. We are not on speaking terms, it is true, and your

government is inferior in many ways, and there have been unfortunate

episodes. But we are neighbors, and it is not good for neighbors

to quarrel. I return all your airplanes, you keep the gusanos,

the exile worms off my shores. We cooperate in our fashion. We

have a *détente*. It is best this way."

He took a breath, and paused, but before either of us could

say a word, he resumed. "But there are politics, always politics!

The Soviets are not the only communists in Cuba. There are radicals,

young Maoists from China. Cuba is not a large nation; we

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cannot afford to antagonize a large socialist state like China. You

have relations with Mao; can we afford less? I can not risk a confrontation

at this time! So those people have power. In fact it would be awkward to purge them at this time; one misstep could mean civil war here. So we tolerate a certain amount of mischief."

A critical admission. The Chinese communists must be powerful indeed, if this man was so wary of them. But what was the relevance to heroin?

"These radicals, they would like nothing better than war with America, with Cuba taking all the risk. The Soviets are more sensible, though they, too, have their moments. Those missiles . . ."

Here he paused longer, scowling. Yes-I was sure that would be a bitter memory! Not the fact of the missiles, but the manner in which Russia had removed them, on pressure from President Kennedy, without consulting Castro. They had shown him up for the mere pawn he was. "Anyway, the Maoists want to send weapons and trained men to America, to arm and train the Indians, the Chicanos, the blacks." He glanced at Ilunga again. "They hope to finance their efforts by the sale of heroin, more valuable than gold on the international market, yet cheap in China! But they are crazy! They will never conquer America with arms. The capitalists would like nothing better than a race war. They would make huge profits producing the weapons to exterminate the blacks and the Indians, all their nonwhite minorities. All those racists want is the excuse."

The thing was, he was making a certain kind of sense. An armed insurrection by any of America's minorities would be disastrous to those minorities.

"And to what purpose?" Fidel asked rhetorically. "You do not need to attack America to finish it; capitalism thrives on war! Just leave it alone, and it will fall of its own momentum. Already it is beginning. Look at your inflation, your corruption! And the drugs- they will not harm the dictators. Ninety per cent of that heroin will end up befuddling the brains of those same oppressed minorities, using up the money they need to live. No, I don't want that heroin delivered!"

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Then why didn't he destroy the shipment? I opened my mouth.

"But the Maoists are behind that shipment," Fidel continued.

"If I make a move, they will take offense, and the time is not right.

One day I shall deal with them." He smiled, and it was a singularly

vicious smile. I was abruptly glad I was not a Maoist. "But

not today. Politics. Everything in its time." He spread his hands.

"Do you understand?"

Yet again I tried to answer. I should have known better.

"I cannot act at the moment," Fidel said. "But neither can I

fail to act. I am caught between the Maoist faction and my American

détente, not daring to offend either party. So I must keep my

hands clean, scrupulously clean." He looked down at his hands,

which were assuredly not clean. Did he ever take a bath? "But I

would not interfere if someone else should act. Someone who had

no connection to me, like a capitalist gringo, or perhaps, his black

mistress." Was that an intentional pun? Ilunga was no man's mistress,

but the Karate Mistress.

It was coming clear at last. Like a chess player, Fidel was maneuvering his enemies to cancel each other out-leaving, as he put it, his hands clean.

"Naturally there could be no question of collusion," he continued affably. "People who kill my men are outlaws; I will have nothing to do with them!" He looked at me penetratingly. "Of course, you did not actually kill any of mine, Jason Striker. The three wharf thugs were the Hyena's, not mine. The eleven G-2 troops-who would have believed that one dying old man, hardly larger than a child, in pain from terminal cancer, could wreak such havoc! No one could believe it, no sensible man! No one but me! And we shall keep that secret, eh?"

Ilunga leaned forward, but Fidel shook his head. "What of the man with the spotlight, you inquire? He did not die. He will be blind, but he will live. We pulled your little blade out of his eye . . ."

Fidel reached into his pocket and brought it out, handing it to her. "He told a remarkable tale of the last sight he saw, or will ever see. No doubt he exaggerated, wanting something unique on record

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for that occasion. I do not believe him for a moment; all women wear undergarments." He shook his head, smiling. "Sometimes I yearn for the old days, when I was a young man in the Universidad. Such adventures we had, such sights we saw!" He glanced at Ilunga's skirt, but now her knees were close together.

He sighed windily, then belched, and drew on his cigar. "Power has its liabilities, you see. We are no longer treated to the simple pleasures. But we bear with it. La Patria me necesita, my country needs me!" Then he refocused on me. "But if you had killed any of mine, make no mistake. The penalty is death." And I saw with chilling certainty that he meant it. Our lives were of small account to him, affable as he might seem. He needed us, so he used us, but in other circumstances he would have thrown us away without a thought.

"And of course you do not care about the Maoist faction," he continued. "You are after the Hyena. Who resides, I happen to know, on the tip of the Florida peninsula, in the Everglades."

I jumped. Another giant step in locating the Hyena! Now we knew which section of the country.

"But the arms and drugs are not at his estate, and not going there; he is more careful than that! He is a most important man, in his human guise, though his true nature is best illustrated by the mask he wears! He is the confidant of someone extremely high up, but one horrified of scandal. Though expert in firearms, he never touches them himself, so as to keep any taint away. At his home he confines himself to training missions-and the brainwashing of someone's little brother."

This time Ilunga jumped, as well she might. Danny had been right there at Hyena's estate, all the time she was looking for him!

The beast-man certainly knew how to keep a secret, and Fidel knew how to push our buttons.

"The shipment you saw was only a small part of the total. We have watched many such loads, but have not interfered, for the reason I explained before. Their main cache is in the Marquesas Islands, deposited somewhere there by a Chinese tramp steamer.

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The materiel is awaiting suitable means for transport past the American shore patrol. Your judo boat was to have been one such means. Now wouldn't it be terrible if something happened to that main cache?"

This time we didn't even try to interrupt his dramatic pause.

He didn't need any response; he had it all worked out. Very cleverly, I had to admit; there was a brain behind that beard. "Now it happens there is a launch anchored not far from here, on the Almendares River. An excellent craft, fueled and provisioned, capable of doing almost fifty knots. I'm afraid the skipper has been very careless; he leaves it unguarded while he goes ashore for an illicit drink. Tonight the naval guard is away on maneuvers. Somebody might steal that boat, and I shall be most upset. My rage shall be heard all the way to China! But I suspect the skipper, afraid for his hide, will not report the theft for sev, h hours, so there will be no alert." He wiped away a mock tear. "Such a fine boat, too! What a shame! But we have so few criminals, we do get careless. A thief could take that boat all the way to the Marquesas, and I really do not understand why the Maoist faction should be

so upset about that, since it is no concern of theirs-that we know of."

He stood up. "It has been pleasant talking with you. We must get together again sometime, in better circumstances. Have a cigar!"

He shoved a fresh Havana into my hand. "I always like to exchange views with others, even Americans." And with a careless wave of his hand he dismissed us.

I looked at Ilunga, and she looked at me. I looked at the damned cigar. She opened her mouth to speak as we passed through the door with the guards.

"You'll want to check the sifu's kwoon for weapons and food,"

Fidel called. "There is water aboard the launch."

Chapter 10

EVERGLADES

It all fell out as Fidel had suggested. So long as we followed the charted course, his men took no notice of us. The moment we deviated, even to pick up extra food, they closed in. The message was plain enough. We had better perform.

We went to the sifu's kwoon, saddened that he had perished for nothing, and picked up an assortment of hand weapons for later use. Knives, daggers, a nunchaku, a kusarigama-the chained sickle-a sling, a manriki gusari, or chained ball, kamas, the Okinawan sickle, bows and arrows, and a powerful Chinese crossbow ornamented with silver and engraved with the figures of birds: an eagle fighting a phoenix. All in all, a deadly assortment of items, for we knew we were traveling into danger.

We also took some food: packages of dried shrimp ready to eat, salt fish, and even some leftover cooked rice. But it was sad, inheriting these spoils from Sifu Tuh. He had been quite a man, and I wished I had known him sooner.

The cache lay buried on a small island, but only the smug-

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glers knew the specific spot. Since they could dig anywhere in the sand and have the tide wash out all traces, or dig away the turf inland and replace the squares carefully, a quick search would be futile. We had to catch them in the act of picking it up. Only then could we discover and destroy the weapons and heroin. Too early or too late, and we would miss the Hyena's men, or alert them.

We anchored the craft in a secluded cove in a nearby island, then swam across to the cache-island. I was concerned about sharks, but we had shark repellent, and Ilunga assured me that they rarely attacked men in this area. We used rubberized swim suits, frogmen outfits we found in the launch. Ilunga was really stunning with the black rubber clinging to her body and nothing underneath.

We used snorkels and swim fins, and towed our weapons and reserve food in an inflated black rubber raft that could be deflated and hidden in the sand. The island was small-hardly a hundred yards across, jungle-covered. There would have been no place to conceal the launch, and it would have been a dead giveaway.

We were in plenty of time, as the Hyena's pickup party was

not due till well after nightfall. We arrived in the morning, wanting no premature encounter. They had to think the isle was deserted, and no doubt they would spy it out hours beforehand, before coming ashore to dig up the cache.

It was going to be tricky, because only from one of those men could I get the rest of the Hyena's address, and they were unlikely to be eager to talk. We would have to capture their party, then radio the U.S. Coast Guard to pick them up. I had the suspicion that Fidel had known the exact location of the Hyena's estate, but had withheld the information as an added inducement for us to make contact with the Hyena's party.

We made ourselves comfortable under the concealing fronds of a palmetto patch, rubbed on mosquito repellent, and settled down for what would probably be a wait of several hours. Naturally we made love again.

Afterward, as the sun set across the restless ocean, we talked.

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Ilunga told me in detail about her Taoist training with Sifu Teng, and I told her about the Shaolin training I received long ago in a Cambodian monastery, learning the meaning of weapons as training tools. "It seems almost sacrilegious to use them for violence, now," I said.

"Ha!" she snorted. "I wish I'd had a good weapon the first time I was raped!" But then she reconsidered. "Weapons at best are tools of bad omen," she quoted, as Sifu Tuh had done, "loathed and avoided by those of the Way."

I knew about her rape. She had been caught by four white men in a city park when she was only twelve years old, and brutally assaulted. Her nose had been smashed, and the white male police had taken a "boys will be boys" attitude. Thus her lifelong quest for vengeance against men, especially white men. Like me. Yet she had helped me try to save my fiancée, and she had saved my life. And now . . .

"Ilunga," I said carefully. "After this, are you going back to that life? Castrating men?" My groin gave a twinge; the first time she and I had met, she had damn near castrated me. One smashing kick . . . Yet I had been, if anything, more active sexually since that injury. Perhaps it was because it had given me reason to feel insecure about my masculinity.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I thought all whites were my enemies. But now I've been betrayed by a black man, Mustapha, and-" She gestured toward me. What could she say about me, after our passion of the afternoon?

I knew better than to speak of love. There had been too much between us, good and bad. "You have a lot to offer," I told her. "You could be a karate instructor, training women, black and white, to protect themselves. You could work with drug addicts, setting them straight. There is so much you could do, so positive-"

"Who would hire the Black Karate Mistress!" she snarled. She was still a creature of passion; she could veer either way, now.

"I would!" I snapped without thinking. But then, reconsidering,

I said it again. "I'm against rape and drug addiction. And I'm

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always in need of competent instructors in my dojo. I can't pay much, and some of my students can be difficult, like Thera Drummond, but . . ." I let it trail off. Would she listen-or laugh? Until this moment such a possibility had never occurred to me, yet it had its appeal.

"That white piece of ass," Ilunga muttered. Then she was silent a long time. What was going on in her mind? Maybe I shouldn't have reminded her of Thera, the heiress she had fought briefly, but that was the kind of problem she would have to face as an instructor. And men who would try to make her. She would have to learn to turn them down without kicking them in the crotch.

Did I really want her to accept? I could not place her in any good/bad category. Yet this could be her turning point. If she came in with me, she would become a productive citizen; if not, what was there but the ghetto and more violence?

"Yes," she said.

Suddenly I was glad. It was like a proposal of marriage, and its acceptance. In this moment we were commencing an association that might endure twenty years, or two hours, depending on the outcome of our mission on this beach. I knew the odds for our survival were not ideal.

I rolled over and brought her to me, kissing her on the lips.

Once more we made love, slowly, methodically, thoroughly. Love?

No, an insult to call it that. I'm no racist, but this particular affair was not made in heaven. Sex? Yes, of course-but if it was less than love, it was still more than sex. Perhaps it was détente.

And Ilunga would make a damn fine karate instructor.

Now it was amout, and suddenly I spotted it. One faint light, as of a small boat coming in with no more illumination than that necessary to find its way. We would not know which shore the cache was buried under, but on an island as small as this, it hardly mattered.

"Remember, wait until they actually start digging," I said.

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"Then you cover me with the crossbow while I talk to them. We don't want bloodshed if we can avoid it."

"Naive honkies," she muttered. "They never learn."

"All the same," I said. "I expect my instructors to be of good character. No unnecessary killing."

She stifled a snort of laughter. "How many people you going to hire-after you're dead?"

"As many as I need to keep the devils off my back."

"So you're going to hell!" She grimaced; I saw her teeth flash.

"See you there, in about an hour. Now don't get lost."

Slowly, slowly, the boat came in, about a quarter of the way around the island from us. Excellent location: if they came this way, Ilunga could cover me without moving at all.

The boat anchored about a hundred yards out. Five frogmen slipped into the water and swam to shore.

I stood carefully and stepped out on the beach, making no noise in the dark. I wanted to surprise them; if they surprised me, I surely would be dead.

I carried a sling with a supply of heavy, balanced lead pellets.

I had been exposed to this in the course of my Shaolin training, and was a fair shot with it. The thing about a sling is that it is easy to carry or to hide, deadly at short or long range, silent and readily provided with replacement ammunition. The Biblical David and Goliath encounter was a mismatch, all right; Goliath never had a chance. David would have had to get within a few feet for Goliath's sword to take effect; but David could strike from hundreds of feet. In fact, the sling was one of mankind's oldest and most effective weapons, an equalizer that made any naked shepherd boy the equal of a mounted knight in armor. Provided the boy was good enough with his weapon.

The frogmen splashed out of the water, removed their fins, and walked toward me along the beach. I froze in place near a palm tree, hoping they would not shine their light in my direction.

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Fortunately they stopped. "There's the rocks" one said. "It'll be ten feet south . . ."

Evidently one of them had a compass. In a moment they were digging, scooping the sand out with small shovels.

"Gentlemen, you're covered," I said. "Do not move." It might have worked, but it didn't. "Trap!" one of them bawled. They scattered explosively. Two of them charged me; the rest dived for the water. A gun fired.

I slung my sling. The lead caught the man nearest me in the chest, breaking at least one rib; in this light I was aiming for the broadest part of the body. He grunted and stumbled. I heaved my second pellet at the other, but this time I missed.

One of the three near the water screamed and splashed down.

Ilunga had put an arrow through his back. The other two wheeled at the water's edge and started firing, but the bullets went wild, because they didn't know where the shaft had come from. They were lucky they didn't hit their own men. Which was one of several reasons Ilunga and I had elected not to use firearms; they are about as likely to hurt friend as foe. Another reason, of course, was that Fidel had allowed us none; he didn't want this to smack too much of a G-2 operation. To raid an old sifu's kwoon and steal a launch-these were acts of outlaws, not government agents. Right; Mao?

I waded into the two nearest me. Alone in the darkness, I had an advantage they lacked: I couldn't strike my own people. I carried a kama, the Okinawan sickle. I saw a glint of gunmetal; with one hand I thrust it aside as if I were deflecting a knife, and then I sliced with the kama. I had hoped to disarm and subdue him, but the anatomy I struck felt too soft. I had cut his belly open.

The other was trying to train his gun on me, but he held his fire for the obvious reason. He could see me as well as I saw him, and once he was certain I had overcome his companion, he fired.

I leaped mightily, passing over the line of fire, and straight over his head. On the way I struck down with the bloody point of the kama. If I had tried to kill him under these conditions, I would

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surely have missed. As it was, the point of the sickle penetrated the man's skull, right through his brain.

I stood over the gory corpses. Ilunga appeared. "I took care of the wounded," she said. "They fight to the end, every one of them—that's the way the Hyena trains 'em. No surrender, no quarter."

"Damn!" I said. "It all means nothing, without the address."

Quite possibly Ilunga had saved my life again, taking out gunmen who might have gotten me from behind, but I felt little gratitude.

Surely she could have disabled one without killing him. Yet I had done no better.

"Got to be someone manning the boat," Ilunga said.

The Hyena's ship. I nodded affirmatively. We stripped the paraphernalia from two of the frogmen, not to use, but as camouflage.

There was no way to tell how many men might be aboard the ship, but even one would be more than enough, if he suspected us. We would be sitting ducks in the landing craft. But the water was no better; swimming would take longer, and alert the guard. The shots would have abolished secrecy, at any rate.

Their landing craft was a Boston Whaler fiberglass boat, with

a flat bottom and a silent motor. Very nice equipment.

Ilunga placed a charge in the cache, timing the plastic in the way she knew with a pencil detonator. It would blow in fifteen minutes. We'd better have things in hand at the ship by then.

We started the motor and headed out the way the craft had come. We hoped the ship would show us a light.

It did not. But we were able to make out its silhouette against the horizon, for it was not far off the shore. It was a pleasure yacht, about forty feet long. Who would suspect such a craft of gun running and drug smuggling!

We guided our boat toward it. As we pulled in close, a spotlight shone on us. "Halt!"

The voice sounded familiar-but there was surely a gun behind that light. We halted, cutting the motor. A routine challenge?

We had to bluff it.

"I heard gunfire" the voice said. "Three of you are missing."

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I had to answer. "We were ambushed," I said, changing my voice as well as I could. I have never been adept at this sort of thing.

"By whom?" No doubt about the suspicion. I was sweating.

"That Striker fellow."

"Striker! You kill him?"

I hesitated, not liking the lie "Yes," Ilunga said for me.

There was a burst of firing from a Browning automatic rifle mounted on the yacht. I plunged into the water on one side, and Ilunga on the other. It hadn't worked! Could we get away?

"Now listen, brother, before I hole you for fish bait," the voice cried. "Striker was my friend! After you I'm going to do the same to your honky boss!"

"Mustapha!" I cried.

There was a pause, while the spotlight searched. When it came across me, I chanced betrayal and waved. "Damn! It is!" Mustapha said. "The bleached judoka! I should have known."

So he had decided which side he was on at last. I was glad, and not just because it enhanced my own survival. In moments Ilunga and I were aboard.

It developed that Mustapha had learned the truth about Fidel's attitude when the G-2 took him in. But they had turned him loose and left the cache in the house so as to keep the knowledge of his changeover from the Hyena. He had become a double agent, giving his boxing exhibition and supervising the trans-shipment of the arms. "They're aboard this ship right now," he said. "We sneake gavem out right under the noses of the naval patrol." He grinned; we all knew how that could happen. "I was just waiting for the men to pick up the rest of the cache before making my move."

Fidel had taken no chances. He had sent Mustapha by one route, and us by another, all with the same objective. We could have killed each other-but the cache would have been destroyed

without Fidel's apparent involvement. In fact, if we all died, there would be no one at all to betray Fidel's interest. Slick and ruthless.

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We fished out the supplies we had saved from the boat. As we worked, an explosion rent the island. Ilunga's delayed charge had gone off; the cache was no more.

"Are there any charts or anything that might show where the Hyena's estate is!" I asked "We have to reach him in a hurry, before he gets word of this interception."

"I know where it is. You mean you don't? Why didn't you ask me before?"

I exchanged glances with Ilunga. "Never mind," I said. "Let's just get there, fast."

"Not so fast," he cautioned me. "This ship's supposed to take the arms to another port. We can't just dock at his Key Largo rendezvous and drive his truck to his Everglades estate. He'd blast the truck right off the road!"

"We can't wait, either," I said. "We have to hit him first, hard."

"Can't," he said. "That whole property's booby-trapped. No way to get in unless he lets us in."

"Unless we had an inside agent to sabotage the defenses," I said.

"Forget it. His troops are all dependent on him for their fixes.

They may not like him, but they're loyal."

"What about Danny?" I asked.

Ilunga's face lighted. "Danny!"

Mustapha looked grim. "Look, sister, he was taken there for indoctrination. Brainwashing, really, the same techniques they used in Korea in the fifties. The same they use to cure teen druggies, only worse. Much worse. They can make a man eat his own steaming shit and like it, after that program. He's been there over a month, now-all the time you were there, and more. He's either a loyal Hyena honcho, or he's dead."

As he spoke, Ilunga's hand went to her hair. But she froze with an effort, knowing he spoke the truth.

I was sorry I had brought it up. I wondered what Danny was doing now.

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The three stood on the lawn, knowing the end was coming, but determined to fight like cornered rats for their lives. Two were small, slinky pusher-types, but the third was big and brawny. The Hyena went after the big guy first. He moved deceptively fast, making a claw-hand swipe at the black man's face. The victim raised his hands to protect his eyes, and the Hyena delivered a snap kick to the groin. The man buckled, his head thrown back, his mouth wide open in a scream of agony. The Hyena hooked his claws in that exposed throat and tore it out, the jugular vein, larynx and carotid arteries coming loose in a bright red mass.

The two smaller men, realizing that they were next, didn't

wait their turns. With the mad courage of desperation they attacked.

One leaped on the Hyena's back and tried to strangle him.

The other pulled out a concealed small knife and went in low, aiming for the belly.

"HYAAAA!" The Hyena snapped his head back, crushing the first man's nose, breaking his hold and sloughing him off unconscious.

He then did a tai-sabaki to the side, so that the second man's knife-thrust missed. He grabbed the wrist and pulled the man forward by the arm. The razor claws of the Hyena's other hand raked across the man's face, leaving a raw pulpy mass where the eyes and nose had been.

In the space of a minute, this one white man had destroyed three black men who had tried to deceive him; and he had done it in fair combat. Tarzan he was, but he was also the Hyena, a powerful leader of men, a revolutionist. These three had plainly deserved what they had gotten.

The Hyena dispatched the unconscious man, the one with the smashed nose, by picking him up by the feet, whirling him around a couple of times, then smashing his skull against a tree.

He dropped the carcass and turned to Danny. "Throw this offal to my friend," he said. His friend was the animal hyena. "What he doesn't like for today, put in the freezer for tomorrow."

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Danny obeyed. He wondered whether, after this, he would be permitted to see his sister, but he knew better than to ask. The

Hyena expected absolute obedience from his minions. And what would Danny say to Ilunga, who had gone over to the enemy so readily?

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We anchored at a small dock in Isla Morada's beach, near Key Largo, then drove the waiting truck off. It was dawn. This was the very thing Mustapha had said we couldn't do, but we were gambling that it would be the last thing the Hyena expected. Fortunately there had been no provision for radio communication; the Hyena's fear of exposure of his part in the smuggling was greater than his fear of betrayal. A radio message could be overheard. We did not attempt to talk to the authorities. The Hyena, in his civilian identity without the mask, was highly influential, and we had no direct proof of his involvement in this smuggling scheme. None that would stand up in court, not against the kind of defense the Hyena's money could buy, that included murder of all adverse witnesses. And the mission we contemplated could hardly have been condoned by the officials. Naturally the Hyena would kill Danny the moment the news of Ilunga's and Mustapha's defection hit the press.

We had to destroy him first; then the real evidence would pour into the light of day like pus from massively infected wound just lanced. If we were stopped before we could accomplish this, the law would crucify us, not him.

Still, we had to sleep a few hours. All three of us had been going steadily for too long, and any mistake caused by our fatigue

could be fatal.

In due course we drove to Fort Lauderdale until we got to the Tamiami Trail, then entered a small dirt road with a NO TRESPASSING sign. "Forgive us our trespass," Mustapha murmured.

Now it was near dusk. We hid the car in a clump of vegetation

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and continued on foot. This was not the front entrance, of course; there was little sign that anyone had been this way before. The Hyena himself had a private airplane, Mustapha said.

It was a grueling trek, for the evening was hot, the footing was rough, and we had a lot to carry. But I told myself a daytime approach was best because we could not afford to wait until night, and the Hyena would least expect it. We hoped he had no secret runners to keep him informed. The lengthening shadows would help conceal our approach.

We were in the Everglades, which made for dull scenery. Saw grass, cattails, small clumps of trees, and where there was sufficient elevation, large numbers of birds. I had thought I would be excited, for I had heard of the Everglades many times, but there is only so much swamp one can endure without feeling the monotony, particularly when sweating under a load. I didn't even see an alligator. My intrigue departed like one of the flying herons.

Too bad I wasn't a bird-watcher.

At last we came to the outer wall surrounding the estate. It

was some ten feet tall with broken glass embedded in the top cement, and electrified wires above that, just as Ilunga had described it. A kind of dry moat was before it; in wet weather this would be brimming with water, I knew, and there would be hungry wildlife in it. But at the moment the Everglades were in drought. Fire was as great a hazard here as flooding.

This is as far as I know the route," Mustapha said. "I've never actually been inside."

"I have," Ilunga said. "I know the whole layout. And I know how to infiltrate and sabotage this sort of place, because the Man taught me. Taught me well."

I smiled. "He taught us all-different things." But I doubted the Hyena would have shown her all his tricks; he would have saved some, just in case.

We set up the portable trampoline we had hauled so laboriously.

It was essential that we scale the wall without touching a wire, and this was the way. We were all athletes, and we had practiced on this sort of thing before. We could get over, but the landing

could be tricky. Especially if anyone were keeping really effective watch, or if there were some electric eye beam above the wire.

Ilunga said there wasn't, but how could we sure?

"I'll go first," Mustapha said. He stood on the trampoline and bounced. In moments he was rising high-six feet, eight, ten.

"Look before you leap," I cautioned him, not intending it as a pun. "If anyone's in sight--"

He bounced in place several times, his head passing well above the top. "All clear!" he said "Ground level, visibility good, turf soft. I'm going over!"

Now he made two much stronger bounces and angled himself forward. He sailed above the wall, clearing it by a good yard, and dropped out of sight. We heard the thud of his landing.

This was the test. We were gambling that the Hyena was overconfident, and had added nothing to the wall's defenses. The man who depends on insufficient protection is more vulnerable than the one who depends on none.

"Sokay!" Mustapha called back, not too loudly. "That last step's a doozy!"

Ilunga went next. Her kung fu training gave her better control, and she cleared the wire neatly with only inches to spare, and landed almost silently. "Ready," she said.

I threw over our remaining supplies, lofting them high so that the two inside had time to catch them. We didn't want any of this stuff broken. Then I took my turn on the trampoline. As I bounced high I saw the spacious grounds, with a large neat two-story Spanish-style stucco mansion in the background. It had a sort of tower on one side, and red tiles on the roof. There was even a pleasantly winding stream. But I was doing too much sightseeing, and I miscalculated my hurdle. One foot snagged on the topmost wire.

There was no shock, for I was not grounded I maintained my balance and landed cleanly. But somewhere on the premises an

alarm bell sounded.

Overconfidence? I was the one who suffered from it! Now we

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were in trouble, for the trampoline was outside. We could not jump back out.

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"Up," the Hyena said.

Danny, logy from his daytime nap, did not react immediately.

That was his mistake.

"I expect instant response," the beastman said. "Tie him."

Two men entered and tied the bemused Danny by the arms and feet. They carried him outside.

Across the estate they went, and down to the edge of the marsh where the stream spread out into a damp wilderness. There were alligators there, but they had been recently fed and were not interested in the current proceedings.

"Throw him in," the Hyena said.

They threw him in. Danny landed feet-first in the muck and began to sink. Then he realized what it was. He screamed. It was quicksand!

He tried to struggle, but bound as he was, it only got him in deeper. The moist sand and water rose up around his body, sucking him down. "Help!" he cried. But they only watched.

As the quicksand came up around his neck and reached for his mouth and nose, the Hyena made a sign. Then, they threw in a

rope and began hauling him out. One man reached forward and cut the rope binding his wrists, so that he could hang on.

Next time he would move immediately when the Hyena spoke.

He did not need another such reminder, for he realized that the Hyena would not pull him out a second time. Instant obedience.

As his body came loose, an alarm bell clanged in the house.

The Hyena looked about, showing alarm for the first time Danny had seen. "Something on the wall," he barked.

"Probably a heron banging the wire, sir," the man holding the rope said.

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The Hyena caught him across the cheek with a backhand slap, knocking him to the ground. "Then kill that heron!"

The man licked blood off his lip, dropped the rope, and followed the Hyena toward the house. Danny was left to flounder in the quicksand, his feet still tied and mired.

Suddenly he realized the scale of values the Hyena had. Danny could die here while they checked out a routine impingement of the perimeter-by a bird! That was all the beast man cared.

And he had been ready to give his allegiance to the Hyena!

He struggled valiantly. He had been almost out when the alarm rang. If he could just haul himself the rest of the way out of the muck, then get the rope off his feet . . .

Then he would be loose, outside, with no guard, and the Hyena's attention distracted. His sister might have gone over to

the enemy-but he hadn't!

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Mustapha and Ilunga stood looking at me, disapproving black statues, listening to that ominous bell. I felt like the ass I was.

"Maybe they'll think it was a bird," Mustapha said after an interminable moment. "Let's hide."

We hauled our equipment hastily into a clump of bushes, and began setting up for action. We had C-3 plastic explosive that Ilunga knew how to use; we planned to blow up the estate's generator and sever the incoming power lines in a commando raid similar to the Hyena's own efforts against rich men. But we knew it would not be easy, for our enemy was more expert at this sort of thing than we were. We had assorted hand weapons, not firearms- none of us felt at ease with guns when it came to the crunch, for silence was essential-and these would very quickly be put to the test.

Three men came out, carrying rifles. We waited in a clump of bamboo, which is damned uncomfortable stuff, I discovered too

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late. There were all sorts of scratchy little branches that were too springy to bend permanently aside, and too tough to rip off, and that also had jackets of fine nettles. But we were stuck with it.

"There are seven regulars," Ilunga said. "Six men and a woman, all black. Not all of them fight. Plus the hyenas, both of them."

These three were not the Hyena's best troops (those had no

doubt been sent on the smuggling mission), for they marched right into the brush, rifles pointed ahead. Obviously they considered this a routine false alarm, and were humoring their master by combing the area quickly and carelessly.

We struck silently, together. Ilunga confronted her man, holding a silk handkerchief with a lead ball tied to one end. Before the man could fire, she flung the weighted end around his neck and tightened the silk into a garrote. He was eliminated silently. The ancient Thugs of India, in their practice of Thuggee, had used a similar method in their ritual killings in honor of their goddess Kali, the same goddess who had dominated the Kill-13 Demon cult. Ilunga's old ways still showed.

"The hyena!" Mustapha exclaimed.

Startled in the act of rising for the attack, I looked across, and saw a fourth man running toward us with the huge, vicious animal.

I also got hung up on a strong, claw-twigged bamboo shoot that ruined my lunge.

No point in silence now; we would be lucky to get out of this intact! It is bad business changing strategy in the midst of a surprise attack, but we did it. I tackled two men-mine and Mustapha's-while Mustapha dived for the fourth man. We had to down them all before the animal struck.

I had a manriki gusari, a thirty-inch length of chain with weighted ends. "KIAIII!" I screamed, swinging that chain. It ensnared the rifle of the first one and yanked it out of his grip. I

swung again, and the rifle, still caught, hit the second man across the face.

That softened them up. I did an okuri ashi barai foot-sweep on the first man, tapping him on the head with the free end of my

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chain as he fell. The second man, though blinded by the blow of the swinging rifle, managed to fire a burst into the air. Ilunga, finished with her assignment, tackled him from behind and lifted him in a sukui-nage scoop-throw: one hand grabbed his crotch, the other his shoulders. She pulled with the first and pushed with the second, scooping him into the air and hurling him against a tree. He dropped from the trunk, unconscious.

Mustapha, meanwhile, had donned brass knuckles. He stood up to the fourth man-and hesitated. "Oh, no!" he cried.

I realized the hyena was too close. "I'll take him!" I cried, launching myself at the fourth man. I got him in a stranglehold, my forearm across his chest and pressing down firmly. Then I discovered Mustapha's actual problem.

This was no man. It was an unarmed woman. Full busted.

I had no choice; I couldn't trust her. "Sorry, honey," I said, and tightened my strangle. She passed out painlessly. I held it long enough to be certain she would not recover too soon, then let her drop. She would be okay later.

The great spotted shape of the hyena leaped on Mustapha, who was trying to snag it with a length of rope. The impact bowled him over. His rope went wide. The awful teeth closed on his left

arm, crunching the bone. But as he fell on his back, Mustapha cocked his right fist and let fly with the most devastating haymaker of his career. It struck the hyena's skull and crushed it in, killing the animal instantly. But Mustapha himself was out of action with a badly mangled and bleeding arm.

Now we moved toward the house, leaving Mustapha with the guards' guns to cover our rear as well as he could. "I want to go in after my brother," Ilunga said.

"The Hyena knows we're here now," I reminded her. "First thing he'll do is get Danny and use him for a hostage."

"That's why I have to go after him," she said. "Now."

I didn't like it. In his own house, the Hyena would be virtually invincible. We had to make him come out. But I knew how

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she felt about Danny. "Well, I'd better prepare the way," I said.

"My arrows will be a pretty good distraction."

Few people appreciate the variety and deadliness of bows and arrows. Because a weapon is ancient does not mean it is ineffective; quite the contrary. Some bows are wood, others bamboo, metal, or combinations of these things together with bone, horn, leather, or plastic. Some are asymmetrical. The medieval Japanese archers used to shoot one thousand arrows a day for training, and some bows were so inflexible that they took as many as five men to pull the string back. What cannons they must have been! The arrows were

even more varied. There is a horrible "bowel raker" designed to be shot into the midsection of the enemy soldier, and a "willow leaf," double-edged.

But my arrows were simple and deadly, if cumbersome. Ilunga had molded C-3 plastic explosive around the shafts, and taped common nails onto the plastic. The resultant shrapnel would be worse than a conventional grenade. They were set with five-second fuses, and each weighed over a pound, so I had to be mighty sure of my technique. If I failed to get one off in time after lighting the fuse . . .

But first I had to light that fuse. I couldn't afford to pause each time to strike a match.

I knew what to do. I needed a permanent light, something that would keep burning for fifteen minutes or so. I brought out Fidel's cigar.

Only one problem. I don't smoke.

Ilunga saw me hesitating. "For God's sake, honky-light it!" she snapped. "That's the finest Havana you'll ever taste."

I lit it. It went out.

"Not that way!" she said, exasperated. "Draw on it."

I put the phallic monster in my mouth and sucked as the flame touched the end. Foul smoke poured into my lungs. I stifled a coughing fit. God, what torture! How could Fidel stand it? If this were the finest cigar, I'd hate ever to have to try a cheap one!

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A machine gun opened up on the roof of the house. We dived

for better cover.

"I'm going on in!" Ilunga said. "You stay here and smoke your cigar!" She crawled rapidly away through the brush, taking two swords with her.

I stayed. I puffed, this time managing to keep most of the pestilential vapor out of my innocent lungs. If this were my main pleasure, I'd be a revolutionary too! I touched the glowing end to the fuse and waited until it lighted. I fitted the arrow, aimed, and let go.

I had been too hasty, and the shaft fell short. It bounced on the ground before the house, then exploded, doing no real damage.

I had fouled up because I had been afraid the thing would explode in my face; I would do better next time.

The machine gun clattered into life again. Quickly I took another arrow and another puff-and choked again. My eyes went teary. But I got the arrow lit, aimed, and let fly. This time it struck the side of the house, dropped-and went off, blasting out a section of the wall. Ilunga had done a good job on these missiles; the Hyena had been, a good instructor.

But now the gunman on the roof, keen-eyed, had my range.

Steadily the bullets came nearer, covering the brush in a scientific saturation pattern. I tried to set up a third arrow, but got another lungful of smoke and felt nauseous. How could anyone enjoy this horror of a cigar? The name Havana would be a bad taste in my mouth for a decade! My face must be turning green already, and I

still had half a dozen arrows to go.

Ilunga had an easy task: all she had to do was brave the house

I was trying to ignite!

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Ilunga carried Sifu Tuh's two kung fu swords. She entered the house by a rear window, heedless of any alarm wires; the alarm was

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already clanging, after all, and no one had thought to turn it off.

Where would Danny be? Tied in a cell, she hoped. That would mean he had not enlisted with the Hyena.

A man leaped at her. She knew him: one of the house guards, the Hyena's loyal minion, and a bastard in his own right. She slashed open his belly with the broadsword. His intestines burst out as he collapsed.

Something stung her on the shoulder. She whirled. There was the Hyena, grinning. The loyal minion had distracted her, and now the Hyena's curare dart was in her flesh. Again.

She collapsed, feeling nothing but fury. When would she ever learn!

"This will be a genuine pleasure," the Hyena said. He turned her face up and waved his needle-nails before her face, so that she could see what he was about to do. "So you turned traitor after all, black mama!" The nails dropped toward her eyes, and she could not even blink.

A tremendous explosion rocked the house. "There're more of

them!" the Hyena cried angrily. "I'll get back to you, sweetie, never fear!" He ran to the door, as the smell of smoke came. The house was burning.

She would die, either way. If the beast-man did not return to torture her to death, the fire would consume her. She couldn't even cry for help. Danny, too, would die. And what chance would Striker have against those darts?

She could have been such a good karate instructor . . .

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Then the house exploded, and not from my arrow. Someone had set off a substantial charge. The lights went out and the alarm clangor ceased. So did the machine gun.

The power was off, the electronic defenses null. What a break!

Ilunga must have done it, somehow.

A black man charged around the house. I fitted another arrow,

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unlit, and aimed it at him. Even a dead arrow could do a lot of damage. But something made me pause. He was coated with mud.

I had never seen him before, I was sure, yet he seemed familiar. For some reason I thought of Strate, the drug rehabilitation program.

There was also something funny about his hand, as though it had too many fingers.

He saw me. "Don't shoot!" he cried. "I'm Danny! I found his dynamite, and some grenades, and I lobbed a grenade into the works and-"

And the grenade set off a sympathetic explosion that practically tore the house apart, set it afire, and put the generator out of commission. Our inside agent had come through after all.

I studied him. So this was Danny. All right and unbrainwashed.

"Where's your sister?" I called.

He stopped. "She don't matter."

"Doesn't matter!" I exclaimed. "She-"

"She went over to the Hyena. If I see her, I'll kill her!"

Sheer braggadocio. But that wasn't what concerned me. "She came back to save you. She collaborated only to save your life!"

"Nice try, honky," he said. He turned away, toward the huge picture window, miraculously intact after the explosion. "But I saw-" He stopped, as though something significant had happened.

"That's one-way glass!"

"Sure," I agreed. "Lots of people use it. Now get out of sight before the Hyena-"

"Sis-she couldn't see me!" he said, staring into his reflection in the dark glass. "She never saw me!"

"Well, she went in looking for you," I said. "She never knew you were here until Fidel told us. Now-"

"She never knew . . ." he repeated. Then he actually took a handful of his mud-caked hair and tried to tear it out with a single violent jerk. "How could I have doubted her!"

I realized that the brainwashing had affected his mind, even though it evidently had not broken his will. "Mustapha is back

that way," I said, gesturing. "Go stay with him, until I find out what's happened to Ilunga."

"No," he said. "I want the Hyena. He left me in quicksand, he deceived me, he tortured me."

So that accounted for his condition. Quicksand! "All right," I said. "Ilunga went in that house. Where would she be, if the Hyena got her? They must have been fighting when you got at that generator."

"Dead," he said. "That beast can fight."

"I mean the man-Hyena. We killed the beast."

"That's the one. Ilunga can fight too, but he cheats. He has curare darts."

"Curare!"

"Some kind of derivative. It paralyzes without knocking out.

You can't get close to him, unless he wants you to."

That was what Mustapha had said about this estate, too. But we were in. "Thanks. I'll watch it. Now, are there any booby-traps in the house?" Ilunga had told us what to watch out for; I was really testing Danny, just in case. If the Hyena had sent him out to divert me . . .

"Not any more, since I blew the power. But he's got peepholes in every room, so he can see you."

That checked. "Those are irrelevant, with all that smoke," I said.

The house was burning briskly now. It is amazing how rapidly a fire can spread when given a fair start in dry weather.

Suddenly the front door opened and the Hyena himself bounded out, unarmed. He wore nondescript work clothes and heavy paratrooper boots: obviously he had been caught off-guard. Our haste to reach him had paid off, but if he escaped now, there would be hell to pay.

I threw aside my bow. "Hyena!" I bawled, striking a stance.

There was no mistaking my meaning; this was our second meeting, where the unfinished business of the first meeting would be finished. I could have brought him down with an arrow, but even

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in a situation like this there is such a thing as fair play. By the same token, I doubted he would use his curare darts, if he had any with him; his pride in his personal prowess when challenged would not permit it.

He saw me, and charged. I had been right. He was no coward, and this settlement was important to him.

"You go in and drag out your sister before she burns to death!"

I snapped at Danny. "I'll take care of the beast."

Danny ran to the house, avoiding the Hyena. I didn't know whether Ilunga was alive or dead. But I would have no chance to search for her myself before I dealt with the Hyena.

The Hyena tried a showy kung fu technique, a high jumpkick.

Had those boots struck my face or chest I would have been in trouble. But I dodged it easily and countered with a powerful

round kick to his back, in the kidney region. The blow was enough to send a normal man to the hospital.

This was not a normal man. The Hyena fell down, but rolled forward and regained his feet, visibly shaken. Too visibly; he was a master of deceit, and I didn't trust it. He moved into me and gathered me in his arms, trying to crush me. His claws raked my back. He had terrible strength.

I got my right hand up and hooked my thumb in the corner of his animal-mouth. I ripped outward-and his face tore right off his head, to dangle loosely, a horrible flap of skin.

He screamed-no laugh this time!-and let go of me, covering his destroyed face with his hands.

It was the mask, of course. I had unmasked him, but I could not recognize his true face through the wreckage. My thumb-hook method would have made him scream, all right, had I caught his real face, but apparently the mask was as important to him as his flesh. By tearing it off, I had unmanned him.

He started kicking at me. His heavy boots slowed him somewhat, his aim was poor because of the flap of mask still hanging from his face, half blinding him. Also, much of his confidence was gone. I reached for the mask again, curious to know his real iden-

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tity-and he caught me with a crippling kick to my middle thigh.

It almost broke the bone, and the pain was incapacitating.

As I staggered, he charged me again, head down. He butted me in the midriff, but I was already jumping back, alleviating the thrust of his heavy skull. I grabbed his hair and mask and turned his head violently to the side. Again his toughness saved him; my move could have snapped his neck. As it was, he sprawled on the ground and now his face was masked again, by dirt.

Then I made another mistake. I thought he was through, so I did not move immediately to finish him. That instant of respite was all he needed. He grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it in my face, one of the oldest tricks in the rough-and-tumble business. I was momentarily blinded. The Hyena swiped at me again; I sensed the movement; thanks to my Shaolin training, and jumped back.

Still, his claws raked across my face.

I reverted to the automatic combat of my long experience. I made a round kick to his face, and another to the side of his neck, bringing him down as my vision cleared. This time I didn't pause; I tried to finish him with a powerful elephant stomp with my heel, but he caught my descending foot and sent me sprawling to the ground, twisting my injured leg.

I thought he was going to attack me again, and I scrambled aside. But now he wanted only to escape. He ran for the swamp. By the time my eyes cleared fully and I realized he was getting away, he had had a good head start.

I should have known. The Hyena had done the same thing the first time we met. As the ditty goes: "He who fights and runs away lives, to fight another day."

But this time I wasn't going to let him get away. There was no telling what mischief he would wreak upon the world.

I pursued him, but my thigh injury made me slow, and he was already out of sight behind the bamboo. His tracks led toward the swamp; did he have a boat there? He had to be somewhere near. I would find him!

Something stung me between the shoulders, just below the
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neck. The pain was minor, and I ignored it. But a coldness spread from that sting, suffusing my body I turned-and saw the Hyena standing behind me.

He made his hyena-laugh. I realized he had treacherously struck me with one of his curare darts. Now I was helpless, and surely that was what had happened to Ilunga in the house. I fell on my face in the mud at the edge of the swamp.

Yet I tried to fight it. The dart had passed through the cloth of my shirt; some of its poison would have been wiped off, leaving me with a minimal dose. I struggled mightily, and managed to get to my hands and knees. I sucked in air.

The Hyena laughed again, the pseudo-flesh of his mask billowing out from his face. He hurled another dart-and I lacked the reflex to dodge. It lodged in the side of my jaw, the point firm in the bone. This time I had gotten the full dose.

He stepped toward me, and there was no doubt of his intention.

He had tried twice to kill me fairly, and failed. Now he would

kill me unfairly.

I felt a fire in my hara, the seat of my vitality in my belly.

Slowly it expanded.

It was the ki!

The Hyena kicked my shoulder. I rolled over on my back in the muck, but that sphere within me was still expanding, revitalizing my body. The ki was overcoming the poison! The power of motion was returning to my body, my limbs. But too slowly. I was still weak, very weak.

The Hyena took my head in his hands and stared into my eyes. In that moment I recognized him-and was amazed. This was one of the most powerful political figures in America, the consort of Senators and Cabinet ministers and governors! If they only knew his real nature . . .

I recoiled in horror. Maybe they did! If so, our government was every bit as corrupt as Fidel said it was.

The Hyena smiled. He had wanted me to know him, before

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he killed me. Then he pushed slowly on my face, letting the mud come up over my ears, to my mouth.

His revelation of identity had given me time. My ki exploded, banishing the lingering power of the curare. The dart still hung from the flesh of my jaw. I moved my hand quickly, wrenched it out, and stabbed him with it, in the neck.

He rocked back as if fatally wounded. For him, it was as if the

dead had come to life and struck him down. Supposedly I was completely immobile.

Then he shoved at my head again, violently. My face went under, but as the mud covered my eyes and mouth and nose, I jackknifed. My legs came up and caught him in the belly. I boosted him right over my head and into the swamp.

I struggled out myself, wiping the muck from my face. I tried to stand, but the ki, its task completed, was already fading. The nerve damage of the two curare darts reasserted itself, and I sat down heavily in the mud. I was facing the Hyena, unable to do more than hold my upper body erect and clear of the swamp. If he came back to finish me now-

I saw him. He was sinking without a struggle. I realized two things, for my mind was clear despite the rigor of my body. The Hyena was immobile, because of his own curare poison; I must have scored directly on his carotid artery, so that the trace residual coating on the dart reached his brain quickly. And he was in no ordinary swamp. That was quicksand!

I would have pulled him out, for I would not voluntarily allow anyone to perish that way. But my ki was gone, and I was helpless.

As his head sank beneath the semi-liquid, I heard the footsteps of another man approaching from behind. The Hyena's last minion?

"I got her out!" Danny called. "She's alive! Where's the beastman?"

Then he stopped, realizing the situation. Together we watched

the slow bubbles burst at the surface of the swamp.

NINJA'S

REVENGE

Prologue:

FALL OF THE BLACK CASTLE

In the sixteenth century Japan was divided among a number of autonomous domains governed by feudal barons, or daimyos. In 1573 Oda Nobunaga, daimyo of the province of Owari, became the de facto shogun, or hereditary commander-in-chief of the army, the seat of power in Japan. The emperor was at this time largely a figurehead. For almost a decade thereafter Nobunaga consolidated his authority, subjugating hostile barons and restoring order in about half the empire.

But Nobunaga was a brutal man, even in a brutal age. He slaughtered wantonly. He destroyed the Buddhist stronghold on Mount Hiei, burning the temple and three thousand buildings and massacring thousands of monks, women, and children. This terminated all Buddhist pretensions to political power-but at what cost?

History records that Nobunaga was treacherously assassinated by one of his generals, Akechi Mitsuhide, in 1582. This was a half-truth, hiding a highly sensitive episode. The real manner of

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his demise was rigorously excised from all records, in a pogrom as

savage as any implemented during his life.

Only one person survived to carry the truth; and for reasons of his own, that person did not speak.

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The bright silk banners of the emperor fluttered in the wind: a great red dragon marching on the Black Castle. The samurai warriors wore armor dresses of glittering red, blue, and gold laminae; some had their heads bare, and others wore their hair tied in knots. Rank after rank they marched, an awesome display of power.

Fu Antos, lord of the ninjas, looked out from the sturdy walls of the Black Castle, seething with rage. Fifteen years before, Fu's grandfather had influenced the emperor to promote Nobunaga's career, and soon the daimyo had become the most powerful man in Japan. Fu's grandfather had continued with valuable aid and advice until his mysterious illness and death two years before.

Fu's father, also a gifted ninja leader, had spoken darkly of poison smeared on the apples of the old man's private orchard, but the source of that treachery was unknown. The ninja who had performed the deed had committed seppuku, ritual suicide, before he could be interrogated; surely some outside force had motivated him. Fu's father had pursued the quest for information with extraordinary diligence right to the emperor's palace itself-where he died, suddenly, in what was said to be a most unfortunate hunting accident.

Fu Antos, barely twenty years old when he assumed the lordship

of the Black Castle, was in many ways the most gifted ninja of them all. He required no further warnings. Someone highly placed was systematically eliminating the ninja leadership, and he was very likely to be next. He dismissed all personnel of questionable loyalty and prepared his defenses of the castle with exceeding care. And waited.

Now the enemy had manifested openly: the shogun himself!

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Fu Antos had harbored suspicions, but the confirmation was a shock. Nobunaga tolerated no rival source of power in all of Japan -especially, it seemed, that to which he was beholden.

Fu Antos was a young giant, drilled in the most sinister arts of warfare and adept at techniques unknown by normal men. Since the age of five he had trained rigorously, and still spent many hours a day perfecting his discipline. His ninjas were as devastating in man-to-man combat as any soldiers ever seen; in fact, the average soldier had an almost supernatural fear of the ninjas, with good reason.

Nobunaga was, it seemed, a skeptic. He had had years of ninja advice, and assumed he knew it all. He thought to eradicate the last of the line by this direct assault.

He would have a harsh education.

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The siege was horrendous. The numerical strength of the ninjas was small, while the shogun's army was the mightiest ever massed in that period of Japan's history. But the Black Castle was a virtually

impregnable fortress, and the ninjas were the most skilled siege and antisiege artists known.

Nobunaga was the first in Japan to appreciate the value of firearms. He had a corps of musket men, using the new Portuguese imported weapons. But the muskets were cumbersome things, heavy, each requiring a long forked stick like a tripod to support the barrel, because it was impossible to hold it up by the arms alone. The warrior had to be strapped to the weapon to prevent the recoil from sending him tumbling. Embossed in gold and silver filigree, the musket was more a work of art than a field weapon. It took a long time to set it up.

The ninjas, on the other hand, had special rapid-firing crossbows, capable of penetrating the armor of the musketeers even from the distance they were separated. They blanketed the sky with poisoned arrows; the slightest scratch was fatal. The ninja

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archers were protected by special leather shields erected on frames, neru kawa, so that the musketballs did very little damage. And they could shoot their missiles high into the air, like mortar shells, negating the shields of the enemy.

There would come a day when firearms were more effective than bows and crossbows. But not in this century.

The shogun's men tried to use a battering ram to break down the doors. The ninjas used catapults to lob homemade powder

bombs on them, nullifying the effort explosively.

Nobunaga directed the construction of a mighty siege engine, a tower as tall as the wall, shielded from fire arrows and bombs. It was on stout wheels, and capable of carrying enough soldiers to hold a beachhead on the ramparts. But the ninjas made a night foray and planted a cache of gunpowder within it, blowing it to pieces.

The soldiers tried to tunnel under the wall, but the castle was built atop a mountain, the foundations sunk into bedrock in all but a few secret places, impervious to any tunneling that could be accomplished within a year.

The shogun had many troops. He tried a human-sea tactic, heedless of the great numbers lost so long as some few got through to scale the walls and open the way. But only a few paths were available up the mountain, and above those were perched huge boulders, readily tipped to roll crushingly down. The vibrations of their irresistible descent set off small avalanches that further decimated the attackers. There were also pits, cunningly concealed, with poisoned stakes mounted in the bottom; only a supremely cautious approach could negate these traps, and caution was impossible under the gaze of the ninja archers.

But for those who did win through to the base of the walls, scrambling over the corpses of their companions, a special treat had been prepared: tremendous wooden vats filled with human excreta, dead animals, scraps of spoiled food, garbage, manure, and other organic refuse. It had been stewed in urine for several

weeks, until it simmered with its own heat of decomposition and

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bubbled bilious gases from its fulsome mass. This was poured on the heads of the soldiers, and the streams of foul-smelling slurry mixture coated everything with nauseous slime-walls, ground, and men.

The soldiers fled in disgust and panic, as experience had shown them that the slightest wound, the most minor cut or scrape or break in the skin, became infected. Soon it festered, blood poisoning developed, and the sequence terminated in the most painfully bloated death. The retreating men were hardly welcomed by their cleaner comrades.

A cavalry charge was met by two giant bears suddenly uncaged.

The bears rose high on their hind feet, swiping at soldiers and panicking the horses, who reared and threw their riders. The bears were finally killed by archers from a distance, but the carnage had been terrible.

The ninjas also loosed fierce dogs upon the enemy camp at night, to rove among the sleeping men tearing out throats. Deadly vipers slithered into the tents, striking at will, almost impossible to locate and kill. Hundreds of ferrets scurried through, lighted firebrands tied to their tails, igniting hundreds of structures and wreaking havoc throughout the camp.

Nevertheless, the samurais persevered, for they were the ultimate dedicated soldiers. They threw ladders against the walls and

scaled them. They were met at the top by the naginata, a kind of sword attached to the end of a pole, five to nine feet long. Vicious slashing arcs cleaned the troops off the ladders before they could get close enough to fight back with their swords.

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And so the siege settled down to weeks and months. The Black Castle could not be taken by storm; its walls were too strong and its defenders too valiant and clever. But it could not hold out forever. The castle water supply was secure, as it came from deep wells

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within the walled enclosure. In fact, it was the shogun's troops who suffered from thirst, for the few springs down the mountain had been poisoned, and water had to be hauled from a distance. Fu Antos had seen to a large food supply of grains and tubers, enough to sustain his personnel for a full year. There were gardens within the walls, to grow fresh vegetables and greatly extend the stores.

But there was one weapon against which the Black Castle was not quite proof, and to this Nobunaga at last resorted. Treachery. Months before, in anticipation of this need, Nobunaga had sent a spy to contact the beautiful concubine of Fu Antos, Mitsuko. It was delicately suggested to her that the shogun himself had conceived a certain passion for her beauty and wit, and should she ever be in need she would find a most royal welcome at his splendid palace. She would have luxury far beyond any possible expectation

of the rigorous ninja life. But the time was not yet, for the shogun did not wish to precipitate dissent in a loyal ally such as Fu Antos.

In all the intervening time, this suggestion had worked its indelicate magic on the girl's lquely-loving mind, abetted by tokens of extraordinary value and luster. The last was a gold signet ring containing an artfully broken portion of jade. "If ever you wish to contact Nobunaga privately, send this ring," the agent whispered. "The other half of the jewel is set into the ring on the finger of the shogun himself; there is no other perfect match. Even as these jewels must be united to be perfect, so must their owners be, in the proper time."

Now, faced with the increasing hardships of the siege, and rebuffed by the hard-driving, ascetic ways of her ninja lord, Mitsuko made her decision. She sent the ring out of the Black Castle by a secret route that only Fu Antos' inner circle knew. Soon the betrayal was complete; she opened the door to an escape tunnel deep in the bowels of the foundation, letting a picked squad of the shogun's men inside. They were able to defend this passage long enough for the first thousand samurai warriors to enter the castle.

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Mitsuko herself was escorted in the other direction. She had a long-awaited appointment with the shogun.

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Still the ninjas fought. Outnumbered twenty to one inside

the castle, and a thousand to one outside it, they defended themselves with unmitigated ferocity. One ninja was trapped in the castle courtyard, surrounded by samurai. He had a kusarigama, the chained sickle. He lashed out with the weighted chain and struck one warrior in the neck, destroying his windpipe. He caught the second with the blade, swung like a bola in a vicious circle around his head. The iron weight on the end of the chain caved in the chest of a third. A spearman thrust at him; the ninja caught hold of the weapon, pulled the man forward, and put the point of his sickle through that man's eye. A musketeer, given time during this battle to set up, fired point-blank, killing him at last. But as he fell, the ninja hurled the kusarigama at him. The chain whipped around the soldier's neck, and the sickle swung in a narrowing arc until it stabbed the body, and the man died.

Another ninja, cornered on a parapet, sprayed a cloud of poisoned needles from his mouth, bringing down half a dozen attackers before being shoved off the wall to fall to his death on the rocks far below.

One ninja held out for some time by wafting clouds of powder through a special blowtube. It settled over the heads of the soldiers, and the stuff got into their eyes and burned fiercely, blinding them, making them easy marks.

Another tried to escape by launching himself from the castle wall on a glider contraption, with huge silk wings and a rudder on his feet. For a moment he was airborne, to the amazement and fury of the samurai, whose swords could not reach him. But again

a musketeer prevailed; he braced his weapon to point upward, and tagged the ninja with the ball. He went out of control in the strong

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air current and crashed down the mountain slope, his blood flying out with the tattered silk.

Yet another ninja manned a cannon that squirted poison water.

Others threw eggs filled with chemicals; those that did not kill their targets outright filled the air with an unbearable stench.

Fu Antos himself operated a special large-barreled mortar made of wood and reinforced with paper, which blooped crude grenades from the highest tower, to explode among the men below. But the samurai charged up the narrow stair and finally overwhelmed him after sustaining tremendous losses.

But no enemy sword touched Fu Antos. When he saw that all was lost, he turned his sword against himself and slit his own belly. It was the start of the act of seppuku, or ritual suicide.

The samurai leaped forward, for their orders were to take Fu Antos alive for torture. They ripped the sword from his hands and from his belly, but too late. His heartbeat had stopped, his body was growing cold. He had escaped the remainder of the shogun's sport.

Others were not so fortunate. Of perhaps a hundred ninjas in the castle at the start of the siege, five were taken alive, and a score of their women and children. All the male captives were grievously

wounded, so the bulk of the retribution had to be exacted on their families, who had fought valiantly alongside their men.

Of the five, two were suspended, tightly bound, on wooden frames set above sharpened bamboo stakes. Positioned as if seated, their legs stretched widely apart, they were lowered anus-first onto the points. The ropes holding them were wet down, so that they softened and elongated slowly, making the impalement lingeringly inevitable. Two others were boiled in oil, and the last was skinned alive, slowly. Too slowly: he died of his prior wounds before the job was completed.

Not one of these men screamed, giving their torturers no satisfaction. Some frustrated samurai warriors tested the techniques out on one of the torture specialists, just to make sure they worked properly. They did; the screams were resounding.

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The ninja women were sorted out according to age and appearance, and mass-raped. The shogun's warriors lined up eagerly for these intangible spoils, twenty or thirty to a woman, and even more for the top choices. The action proceeded on an assemblyline basis in full public view, with a large audience to applaud especially dramatic thrusts.

The women, as resolute in adversity as their men, did not scream or cry or even fight. They tolerated it without visible show of emotion, accepting nothing, contributing nothing. But no chances were taken; all were bound and gagged for the occasion, their legs staked apart.

Suddenly a samurai began screaming. His private parts were burning! Awful blisters rose on the tender skin. In moments he sank to the ground, unconscious, his skin peeling off, while the lines continued to move.

Then others screamed, falling with similar symptoms. Ten, twenty, fifty-and every one had had connection with one of the ninja victims in the prior twenty minutes.

By the time they realized the source of their mysterious illness, almost a thousand men were doomed. The ninja women, knowing that they would be raped and killed, had secreted a slowstarting poison within their genitals, a suppository that dissolved into fluid at a controlled rate. Every early rapist died in terrible agony, and the later ones, who hastily washed off their members when the danger was realized, suffered castrating burns.

Now the women were stabbed, beheaded, or throttled where they lay bound. In moments all were dead. But, ironically, this quick emotional slaughter only spared them the slower agony of their own poison. They, too, had escaped vengeance, after killing as heroically and effectively as had their men.

That left the children, who had fought right alongside their parents, throwing sharp-pointed caltrops under the feet of the samurai, firing little crossbows, and darting at the legs of warriors, to disable them with spears and knives. A child could do a lot of damage, partly because he was not seen as a threat until too late.

The surviving children were tortured, and they, at least, lacked the discipline to stifle their screams. But they also lacked endurance, and far too soon they died. It was most unsatisfactory.

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Nobunaga had Fu Antos' body hung at the entrance to the royal tent, untouched. He had not yet decided the appropriate disposition of it, since all the other captives had been disposed of and Fu's only living relative was the traitress Mitsuko. How to make a man suffer-after he was dead?

For now the shogun had to settle for dishonor and symbolism: perhaps the spirit of the ninja leader would writhe in appropriate distress. Nobunaga took Mitsuko inside that tent and put her through a series of contortions almost as demanding as those of the battle. The flap of the tent was left open so that the corpse could witness what its trusted concubine was doing with such delight. Later, she would be discarded, her purpose served.

At last, sated, the shogun fell asleep. Mitsuko lay awake, still connected to his body; and now a nameless fear overcame her and made her want to scream, but she dared not. For the hanging corpse was in sight, and the guards were stationed well clear, and she had some inkling of what Fu Antos was capable of. She had supposed the body would be utterly destroyed and buried far from her sight. This was too close; she thought she heard something or saw something. Was it just the wind stirring the dead man, or was his ghost already coming back to haunt her?

In the chill of the night the seeming corpse of Fu Antos quivered.

The gaping, bloody wound in his belly closed up. His heartbeat resumed, and body heat developed.

For the ninja master was not dead. Through his secret studies he had learned the art of temporary suspended animation. He could control his internal functions, stop bleeding from an open wound by act of will, and slow his heartbeat to the point of undetectability. Thus he had feigned death after making his self-

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inflicted wound, in which his blade had carefully avoided vital organs. He had permitted just enough blood to flow to make it realistic. Now he was free, in the presence of the shogun, inside the ring of samurai guards, after hours of listening.

A contortion, and Fu Antos was free of his bindings. He flexed his muscles, restoring his flesh to serviceability. Then, like a reanimated corpse, he stalked into the tent.

Mitsuko's widely staring eyes met his. With a hypnotic gesture he silenced her and froze her in place, so that she could not even wake Nobunaga. Still clasped in her lover's arms, she watched, terrified.

The shogun lay snoring. For a moment Fu Antos gazed upon him. Then he took up the shogun's own katana sword and lifted it high. One cut would sever them both, making four parts of two.

But he hesitated. This lacked artistry. All that he had built had been destroyed by this man, and the last of the ninjas' children

still groaned feebly on the stakes, slow to die, though they no longer could be saved. Could one swift cut repay it all?

He set aside the large blade. From the remnant of his garment he brought out a small vial of liquid. He let a few drops fall into the open mouth of the shogun. It was a special ninja brew that would immobilize the man physically while not interfering with his sensations or mental processes. He would be conscious, but unable to react in any physical way.

Then Fu took a small fine dagger and began his work, while the horrified Mitsuko watched. He heated the blade in a brazier there in the tent, keeping the interior warm against the chill of the night. His cold eyes rested on the two figures, still embraced among the cushions, as his hand fanned the coals. Too bad he had not paid more attention to his concubine; she had talents he had not properly appreciated, both mental and physical. As a ninja he should have been the first to anticipate her potential for treachery, not the last. And as a man, he should have put her through her sexual paces long ago, instead of allowing the shogun to show him up. Hard lessons!

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The fire came up high, and the steel glowed red. It would automatically cauterize all wounds, most painfully, so that the subject would not become infected and die prematurely.

Then he took that searing blade and cut the tendons of the shogun's heels and wrists, laming him forever. He removed the

eyelids so that the man's eyes could never again close; he would soon be blind. He slit the nose, punctured the eardrums, and amputated the tongue. He carefully separated the two figures, slit the anus of the shogun, and severed his virile member. Though the man's lust would remain intact, he would have no way to satisfy it, and the very act of elimination would be a daily torture.

Lame, blind, deaf, dumb, half-sexed, and half-assed, Nobunaga would live out his life in whatever fashion he could. Fu Antos' vengeance was almost complete.

"Tell them who did it," Fu said to Mitsuko. She only nodded.

He garbed himself in a soldier's dress and walked out of the tent and out of the camp, unchallenged.

Mitsuko, knowing she would be blamed-for that was Fu's vengeance on her-drew forth a vial from her own hiding place.

Moments after the drops touched her tongue, she was dead.

*

When General Akechi Mitsuhide discovered them in the morning, he mercifully slew his commander and fabricated a story to conceal the awful truth. The shogun's body was buried in a closed coffin. Much of the blame, Mitsuhide had to take upon himself, for he had been responsible for his commander's safety. Thus it was recorded by history.

The domains of the Black Castle were given up to horrendous pillage. The castle itself was torn apart, the huge blocks scattered and broken up, until only a pile of rubble remained atop the mountain.

The fields, houses, and persons of all Fu Antos' peasant supporters were burned. The children were enslaved, and the prettiest girls taken for distant harems, after being thoroughly checked to

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be sure they had no poison. It was a better fate than that visited upon the older and homelier females. Everything in the vicinity was systematically laid waste. A foul pall of smoke lay over all. Fu Antos did not bother to swear further vengeance. It was futile, as he had already dealt with the principals of the betrayal, and there was no way he could save his people. But the odor of those awful fires stank in his nostrils for many years, and he developed an abiding hate of such destruction.

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Fu Antos made his lonely way to the far wilds of Hokkaido island, in northern Japan. There he recruited more ninjas and built a second Black Castle, all in secret. The job took centuries, for he dared not attract the attention of the Empire of the South. Laboriously they hewed and hauled the great stones, and diligently they trained.

The job was too much to be compassed by the life of one normal man. But Fu Antos also explored the occult mysteries of the deepest ninja secrets. Accounts differ; some claim that he lived for four hundred years, sustained by his immense power of ki, that phenomenal and mysterious inner force. Others believe that he transferred that awesome intelligence and will to the body of a child, his son. So he continued in a chain of incarnations, developing

his extraordinary powers to a level unknown in prior human history. Certainly he was a most remarkable man, though few outsiders knew of him or his talents.

The rulers of Japan changed, and so did its governments. The shoguns gave way to their emperors, and the unbroken line of this royal family continued, always on the alert for news of the hated ninjas. Population increased enormously, and technology blossomed beyond all prior imagination. But Fu Antos was determined to save this last wilderness from the ravages of the larger society. From time to time he emerged from his sanctuary to meddle in the affairs of ordinary men, always with his own basic objective in

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mind: preserve the original sanctity of nature, explore the inner nature of man.

On occasion he deigned to train worthy students-extraordinary men in themselves, who returned to the world but kept his secret scrupulously. One such was little Hiroshi, later the leading aikido practitioner of his time and a globally respected sensei, or teacher and philosopher.

Yet by the time of the twentieth century, Fu Antos' power was waning. There were fewer recruits, and the devices of civilization were phenomenal. Mighty demon birds called airplanes roared across the sky, and metal monsters called trains and trucks roved the earth. Fu Antos himself was aging, trapped in a decrepit body.

His few remaining ninjas, afraid of his continuing ambitions, refused to enact the transfer of his sentience to his prepared childbody -that son he had begotten in his only amorous liaison of the century was the sole purpose of that liaison, the woman soon forgotten -and they prevented assistance from outside. They could not touch him personally, because of his powerful ki, and they were loyal in their fashion. They simply did not understand his needs, and waited patiently for his eventual death. He was in dire straits.

Into this situation came a foreigner-Jason Striker, an American martial-arts instructor. Yet Fu Antos had made use of even less likely tools in the past.

Chapter 1:

HIROSHI

The little man entered the post office and looked about. He was in his sixties, Oriental, with a small wispy white beard and scraggly white locks blowing about his head. He wore a hakama, a Japanese pleated black cotton skirt that reached down to his ankles, and a kind of white blouse, along with wooden sandals that were elevated on cleats. This was a common garb in his own country, and seemed out of place in America only because of his advanced age.

He carried an envelope in his hand. He looked about, then spied the window for stamps. He smiled, and went to stand at the rear of the line.

In a moment a woman joined the line behind him. She glanced over his shoulder, for she was taller than he. He stood barely over

five feet tall, and massed a hundred pounds. "Say, mister," she said. Her voice had the city twang, able to penetrate the constant noise pollution.

He turned to face her. "Hiroshi, Japan. A pleasure to meet you." He made a little bow.

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Disgruntled by this unexpected courtesy, she pointed to his envelope. "You can't mail that. You forgot the zip code."

Hiroshi's brow furrowed. "Zip code? This is a letter from Mr. Diago, who is staying in Japan, to his cousin Mr. Drummond in America. I can carry it only this far, as I have other business. I believe the address is correct."

"I guess they don't have the zip code where you come from," she said. "It's a number you put on the end of the address. Nobody pays any attention to it, and it slows down the mail, but the P0 gets pretty sticky if you don't put it on. You better look it up. There's a zip-code guide over there." She pointed to a table across the room. "Go ahead. I'll save your place."

Hiroshi bowed again. "Thank you most kindly, lovely lady."

He walked to the table, leaving her flustered with pleasure, for she was stout and fortyish.

A large man of about fifty joined the line. He was overweight but still muscular under his overalls, with a hard hat and lunch pail, a tough blue-collar worker. He smoked a vile-smelling cigar,

in plain violation of the NO SMOKING sign. "Come on, move it along," he muttered impatiently at no one in particular. "I don't have all day."

Hiroshi returned. "The omission has been corrected," he said, showing the envelope to the woman as he took his place in line.

"No, please stand ahead. I have time."

She nodded, and he stepped behind her.

"Hey, what is this?" the big man demanded. "Line forms to the rear!" He puffed angrily on his cigar.

The woman turned. "It's all right. He-"

"Don't tell me it's all right!" the man exclaimed. "No goddamn Jap cuts in front of me!"

Hiroshi bowed to him. "I shall move back."

"You yellow bastards think you won the war!" the man bellowed, so that the whole post office could hear. "You think you can shove in anywhere! Well, I have news for you!" He blew a cloud of smoke down into Hiroshi's face.

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"For God's sake!" the woman cried. "All he did was-"

"I killed dozens of you stinking buggers in the war!" the man shouted. He jabbed the lighted end of his cigar at Hiroshi's face.

"We should of A-bombed every last one of you to hell!" He stepped forward as Hiroshi stepped back, advancing behind his cigar.

Now the whole post office was watching. People stood around awkwardly, not wanting to get involved, but not liking to see the bully go unchecked. Hiroshi was as visibly harmless as a man could

be, with his small stature, white hair, and dresslike hakama. The employee in the stamp window was leaning out.

"I regret if I have given offense," Hiroshi said mildly. "I am not familiar with all your ways."

"Get your ass out of here before I throw it out!" the man yelled.

He shoved Hiroshi with one stout arm. There he made a bad mistake.

Hiroshi caught that arm with one small hand. His other hand reached up to put a nerve pinch on the man's trapezius muscle in the shoulder. Even through the heavy material of the coverall, it was obviously a painful grip.

The man screamed and fell to his knees. His cigar dropped to the floor.

Calmly Hiroshi picked up the cigar, maintaining the nerve pinch. He shoved it into the man's open mouth. "Eat-it is for your soul!"

The man tried to spit the tobacco out, but Hiroshi increased his pressure. Sweat appeared on the man's face. He chewed the cigar and swallowed it.

Hiroshi let him go. The man stumbled out. "Police!" he bawled "Police! I've been attacked!" Cigar ashes fell from his lips.

Hiroshi calmly returned to his place in the line, waiting to buy his stamp.

"Listen, I'm sorry," the woman said. "The city is full of boors like him. Every last one of them needs a good lesson in manners! Are you all right?"

"Excellent, thank you," Hiroshi said. "I regret causing you alarm."

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"Alarm! I just wish you'd do the same to every ill mannered lout you meet!" she said. "Very soon there'd be less mugging, fewer rapes . . ."

"That's for sure!" the stamp clerk said from his window. "This whole country's in a crisis of contempt. The law means nothing, and common courtesy means less. We need to return to the oldfashioned values."

There was a general murmur of agreement throughout the post office. Hiroshi nodded thoughtfully. Perhaps he had been too conservative, not realizing that ill-manners were not irrevocably ingrained in the American personality. He would have to modify his reactions.

*

The phone rang as I was stepping out the door. I backtracked and scooped it up, irritated because I was already late for my trip to the dojo, or judo and karate practice hall. "Yes?"

"Striker?" a voice demanded. "Jason Striker?"

"Yes! What do you want?"

"You know a Jap named Hiroshi?"

"Hiroshi!" I exclaimed, remembering my little friend. "Yes, I know a Japanese sensei, an aikido instructor-"

"Well, get over here fast! He's disturbing the peace!"

"Now, hold on!" I protested. "Hiroshi is a highly respected martial artist, perhaps the top man in his field, and a man of peace and courtesy. He would never-"

"Just get down to the station, pronto!" he snapped. "Foreign national or not, one more episode and we'll throw the book at him."

"But I have a class to teach!" I said. Too late; he had hung up.

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The light turned green. Hiroshi moved sideways a few steps, because a recent shower had left a large puddle just below the curb where a drain was partly clogged with litter. The water poured noisily down the storm drains on both sides of the street farther along. He circled the area and returned to the pedestrian zone, as the others were doing. "Goddamned litterbugs!" one man muttered, leaning over to fish out a large plastic wrapper so that the water could flow more freely.

A big truck rounded the corner, its tires spraying out dirty water. The other people scattered, forced to splash through the puddle to get out of the way, soaking their shoes and cuffs. The driver evidently had no intention of stopping; he was arrogantly preempting the right-of-way, confident that no one who valued his life would argue against such a juggernaut.

Hiroshi stood where he was, directly in the path of the truck.

The brakes squealed; the truck shuddered to a halt bare inches

from Hiroshi, who had not moved at all.

The driver leaned out of his cab. He was a burly Italian-American with greasy black hair, weighing 225 pounds. "Goddamn chink! Don't you know enough to get out of the way?"

"I believe I had the right-of-way," Hiroshi said politely. "I did not wish to step in the dirty water."

The driver's face reddened. "Up your ass, yellow monkey! You're damned lucky I didn't run you down!"

Hiroshi paused, as if recalling a recent discussion. A crowd of spectators gathered, a number of them with wet feet. "Better move on, old man," one of them murmured. "Those truckers are murder."

"Now, fuck off before I clobber you!" the driver yelled.

"I am waiting," Hiroshi said, his voice level.

"Waiting?" the man demanded, his face purpling. Cars were already honking behind him as a traffic snarl developed. "You little fairy! What for?"

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"For your apology."

The driver, incoherent with rage, put his truck in gear and nudged forward as if to run over the little man. Hiroshi stepped nimbly to the side and approached the cab. The driver opened the door part way and brandished a tire iron threateningly, as though to bash Hiroshi in passing. There was a murmur of alarm through the crowd.

Hiroshi jumped near, caught the descending arm, and pulled

the man out of the cab. So skillful was the sensei's motion that the driver stumbled all the way across the street, almost bowling over the backpedaling spectators, and finally fell-to skid on his face into the dirty water flowing into the far gutter.

The truck, meanwhile, rolled on. It ground over the curb and lodged against a fire hydrant, bending it over and breaking the pipe.

A fountain of water jetted out, splashing against the truck and angling up over the street and sidewalk. The crowd withdrew hastily as this new rain descended. Hiroshi merely held out his hand, appreciating the refreshing shower. This was good clean water, in contrast to the puddles.

The truck driver pulled himself erect, gutter water dripping from his ugly face. He still had the tire iron. He saw the mess his truck had made, and he saw Hiroshi, hand angelically outstretched, facing away from him.

The driver roared like a wounded bear and charged, the tire iron lifted high. A woman screamed.

Hiroshi waited until the driver was almost upon him, following the sounds with his acutely trained ear. Then he turned, grabbed the man's wrist, and performed a kote-nage swing-throw, pulling back while swiftly turning the wrist. The driver somersaulted forward and landed on his back, his wind knocked out.

In the distance a siren sounded. The traffic snarl was such that the police would be a long time arriving.

Hiroshi walked on in the direction he had been traveling, nod-

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ding amicably to the gaping spectators. The lesson in courtesy was complete.

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The police lieutenant mopped his sweating face with a sodden handkerchief. "He arrived from Japan this morning; we verified that with the airline. Everything in order. Then he headed into the city on foot. First thing he does is beat up a man waiting in line at the post office."

"Hiroshi?" I repeated incredulously. "He would never-"

The lieutenant silenced me with an imperious gesture. "After that, he wrecked a truck and roughed up the driver and destroyed city property. No provocation at all-just yanked the poor guy out at an intersection and dumped him in the gutter. We have the victim's complete unbiased statement."

I shook my head. "This is a case of mistaken identity! Hiroshi is a man of peace. He always does the right thing."

The lieutenant grabbed his cap. "Well, come see for yourself, skeptic! If we're lucky, we'll catch him before he kills somebody."

I blew my breath out through puffed cheeks and followed him. I was now hopelessly late for my judo class; I only hoped Ilunga was able to cover for me properly, though her specialty was karate. Something was certainly wrong.

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The cab careened toward the pregnant woman. She had no

chance at all to get out of the way.

Hiroshi, unused to the ways of this violent country, did not realize the facility with which such vehicles maneuvered. The cabbie, intent on catching the 10:40 for a five-dollar tip, was shaving it close. He was an expert dealing with moving, changing spaces at high velocity, instinctively figuring what would be there for his cab before it actually manifested. He was acutely aware of the flex-

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ible pattern of traffic, for he had honed his skill on fifteen years' experience in this jungle, with no more than one accident a year, with only one-fifth of those actually his fault. He saw a gap developing ahead in the other lane, and the blockage shaping up in his own lane. He saw the jaywalking woman, twice a fool to risk her swelling baby, and had made due allowance. There was just room to squeeze into the inner lane without slowing. He would miss her by a good eighteen inches as he swerved. Like a fine musician, he played his singing vehicle through the shifting spaces available, phasing through a parameter of vectors, just so.

"But the little sensei did not know that. His field was hand-to-hand combat, not vehicular phase racing. He saw death in the making, and he acted instantly.

From his robe he drew a ninja weapon, a shuriken. It was a tiny star-shaped throwing blade. He hurled it almost in the same motion, with uncanny accuracy. It punctured the speeding cab's front

tire.

The tire exploded. The car swerved, for it had been under severe stress before the blowout. It slewed about as the driver fought for control in an abruptly diminished parameter. In a moment there was a three-car pileup.

But the pregnant woman was safe. "Idiot driver!" she bawled as she stepped back and lost herself in the crowd.

With surprising alacrity, two of the city's finest were on the scene. "There he is!" one cried.

They ignored the pileup. With guns drawn, they converged on Hiroshi. They were both beefy cops, red-faced Irish, with an aggregate of thirty-five years' experience on the force. They knew their business.

"Get over by that wall!" one snapped at Hiroshi.

Perplexed, the little man obeyed.

They made him lean against the building at a forty-five-degree angle, balanced on his fingertips, feet spread apart. One policeman stood with one foot inside Hiroshi's, in order to trip him if he tried to move. The other stood to the rear on the other side,

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covering Hiroshi with his gun. The first policeman holstered his gun and put his left hand on Hiroshi's spine, to feel for any telegraphic muscle movements.

It was the standard setup for frisking a suspect, a procedure considered foolproof all over the world. They were taking no chances, they thought.

But Hiroshi was an extraordinary man, and he felt that it was discourteous of them to treat him like a common criminal. He who had instructed thousands of policemen of many nationalities in the rudiments and refinements of the martial art of aikido. In fact, he was the author of an authoritative text on the subject. They should at least have explained what they suspected him of, and formally acquainted him with his rights. These minions of the law, like certain other parties, required a lesson in manners. After all, if the police were not polite, who else would be?

He moved like lightning. It was as though he disappeared for an instant and reappeared in a more commanding position.

Abruptly he had disarmed the frisking policeman and held him as a shield, his own gun to his head. The man's hand was twisted against his own forearm, the wrist bent inward at his back. Hiroshi's fingers pressed the pain centers at the base of that wrist and in the soft fold of flesh between thumb and forefinger. The other policeman could not shoot, lest he hurt his partner. At a gesture from Hiroshi, he dropped his gun.

Hiroshi shoved his hostage into the other man, and such was his skill that the big cop, over twice Hiroshi's weight, was propelled violently forward. The two collided belly-to-belly with a loud smack.

"Now," Hiroshi said, making a small bow, "allow me to run through that again, more slowly, so that you may see where you erred. Pick up your weapons; I shall stand at the wall again, so."

And he assumed the forty-five-degree lean.

One policeman looked at the other, shaking his head unbelievably.

They were now ringed by a substantial crowd. From some-

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where in the rear came a guffaw. Red-faced, they resumed their positions for the frisking. There was little else to do.

Hiroshi spun around slower than before, but still amazingly rapidly. One hand knocked up the policeman's hand at his spine.

He then seized this hand and twisted into the submission hold.

The officer tried to resist, but seemed powerless.

"One must frisk very quickly and lightly," Hiroshi said, as though addressing recruits. "So as not to be caught by such a motion. Instead of touching the suspect's spine with the fingertips, do it with the barrel of the gun, so as to be able to shoot him if he makes a break. But mainly"-here he frowned like a little professor, commanding their attention-"be alert. When it becomes routine, it grows careless, and a desperate man can strike.

Never take a suspect for granted."

The policemen were disgruntled but impressed. "I was alert," the frisker said. "But it was like I was frozen for an instant there."

"Oh, yes," Hiroshi agreed. "Never go against someone with highly developed ki. There are those who can stun you without touching you. I regret I had to use mine, so as to minimize the risk of injury to either party."

"Key," the man said, puzzled.

"Ki. Inner force. All people have it, but in most it is untrained."

"Yeah," the policeman agreed, shaking his head numbly.

"And now, farewell," Hiroshi said, bowing. He walked on, leaving the disgruntled policemen to unsnarl yet another traffic jam.

They had even forgotten they were supposed to arrest him.

*

I looked at the carnage: three cars wrecked, a hundred stalled in the press, three people injured, and the ambulances still trying to get through. The two officers on the scene were tight-lipped and uncommunicative; apparently Hiroshi had escaped them and made a profound impression. Positive or negative? Both, evidently.

"Satisfied?" the lieutenant demanded. "That little Jap is a

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criminal menace! He's turning the whole city upside-down, and he's got to be stopped. One more episode like this, and I'm issuing a shoot-on-sight bulletin!"

"I'll stop him!" I said. This officer was prone to overstatement, but I certainly didn't want Hiroshi in any more trouble. "Just give me a chance to catch up."

"You'd better!" he snapped.

I ran on down the street, forging through the throng. Quite a number of people were snickering, which was incongruous. Just what had Hiroshi done, to spread such simultaneous carnage and goodwill? Such mischief was hardly like him.

I was now certain it was Hiroshi. All descriptions tallied, and

no one else was capable of the deeds he seemed to have done. The police had called me because I had many worldwide martial-arts contacts, and he was obviously martial artist. Simplistic logic, but valid, in this case. It was just as well they had.

I had to catch him and stop him before someone really did get killed.

*

Hiroshi entered the dojo, the judo and karate practice hall.

The students were doing uchi-komis, or one-to-one practice drill.

They were trying the same isolated movement again and again, so as to perfect it. There is no easy way to achieve perfection.

A tall black woman with a broken nose and a remarkable figure was in charge. But she was having difficulties. Hiroshi's experienced eye took it in at a glance: she was a karateka, and this was a judo class. Karate is basically a system of unarmed striking, a deadly form of boxing, while judo consists primarily of throws and holds, like wrestling. She might be competent in her specialty, but was not properly equipped to instruct here, and was evidently a substitute.

He approached her. "If you please, miss . . ."

The woman whirled, startled, for he had come noiselessly. Beads

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of sweat stood on her forehead and upper lip. "Get out of my way; can't you see I'm busy?"

Undaunted, Hiroshi persisted. "I wish only to speak with Jason

Striker. Is this not his dojo?"

"Yes, it's his dojo!" she snapped. "But you can't see him."

Hiroshi's brow furrowed. "It is not like him to leave his students to one not qualified to instruct. Where is he now?"

The woman's lip curled. She had mobile features, and it was an effective expression. It was obvious that her temper was not normally long, and now it was unusually truncated. "You can talk to me! What the hell do you want?"

"I want to speak with my friend Jason Striker," he repeated patiently, as to a child.

"So I am not good enough for you!" she said challengingly.

Hiroshi realized that this person, too, required a lesson in courtesy. The people at the post office were correct: rudeness and disrespect were endemic in this busy city. Courtesy was fundamental to martial art, for such powers should never be used arrogantly. "I regret that is so," he said, making a little bow. "I seek your master."

"No man is Ilunga's master!" she cried. She rushed at him with upraised arm, ready to give him the bum's rush out.

The students, true to the mores of the city instead of the dojo, had formed a crowd of avid spectators. They stood in a tight ring around the two, watching silently.

Hiroshi now made a formal bow of welcome. He dropped to his knees and lowered his head, placing both hands flat on the mat. As it happened, by no coincidence, he made his obeisance right against Ilunga's knees as she charged. The momentum of her

rush carried her right over his body. She flipped in the air and sprawled on her back, hard. A driblet of blood flowed from her nostril.

Suddenly Hiroshi was on his feet and leaning over her. His two hands touched the sides of her head, putting pressure on the

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nerve centers behind her ears. It was a submission hold that had her powerless.

The students watched, amazed. "It is nothing," Hiroshi said, letting her go. "She is very tired. I will make it better."

He gestured to the shaken woman. "Kneel, please."

Like a dazed tigress, she yielded, reluctantly. Hiroshi made a little bow, then made a terrific kiai yell.

Ilunga jumped up, hands to her face. The blood was gone.

"Cold water!" she said. "Like a current of water up my nose!"

The students saw something she could not: the nose also appeared straighter, as though the fall had somehow reset the cartilage.

But that could have been a trick of the lighting.

Hiroshi nodded benignly. "An excellent description, my dear."

He looked about. "But where is Jason Striker?"

"We don't know," one of the students said. "He's usually right on time. Something must have held him up."

"Very well," Hiroshi said amicably. "I will instruct your class until he returns. My specialty is aikido, but a number of the techniques overlap."

And while Ilunga sat on the mat, amazed, he organized the

class and proceeded to give authoritative instruction in judo, demonstrating throws and holds with unparalleled expertise.

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The trail led, of all places, straight to my own dojo. Hiroshi had been coming to see me all the time!

As I entered the door, I saw a surprisingly well-organized class in session. But Ilunga was not conducting it.

Well, this was no wackier than the rest of the morning's activities.

Who had come to handle things, unbidden, in my absence? A little old man in a skirt.

"Hiroshi!" I cried. "What are you doing here?"

"Substituting for an errant judoka," he said mildly. The stu-

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dents chuckled, much as the people in the street had. He had done it again.

"You didn't come all the way from Japan just to visit!"

Hiroshi frowned. "I have a matter of some privacy to discuss," he said. "Look at this while I finish the job at hand." He handed me a small leather pouch, and returned to his instruction. I felt like an intruder in my own dojo.

I took the pouch and opened it. And gasped.

It was full of large uncut diamonds.

This meant something extremely serious. "Ilunga, can you wrap things up here?" I asked her. "I'd better talk with Hiroshi, alone.

Now."

She nodded sullenly. She looked subtly better, but I saw that her pride had been hurt. I would have to attend to that later. I had to settle with Hiroshi before the police caught up with us. His other actions were mischief enough, but with these stolen diamonds . . .

What was Hiroshi, the original impoverished philosopher, doing with what might be a million dollars worth of hot stones?

"There's a bar a couple blocks down the street," I said. I wasn't much for drinking, but that wasn't the point. "They carry sake, and it is private."

Hiroshi nodded amicably. We set off for our talk. I already felt like a criminal collaborator.

Chapter 2:

FU ANTOS

A young boy walked through the forest of Hokkaido island, Japan. He wore black cotton trousers, ragged at the fringes, a frayed white shirt, a wide-brimmed peasant straw hat, and cleated sandals fashioned from cut rubber tires. But he was no peasant child; he had obtained the clothing from a man who had a child his size, paying for it with the least of the several fighting knives he possessed. He did not like the outfit, for much of it was machinemade, and the composition of the sandals he did not comprehend at all.

Yet his eyes, under the wiry black hair, were bright. There was a certain aura about him, the way he moved and looked about,

that suggested a mind of uncanny comprehension. And he was well-armed. He used a long wood staff to assist his footing, but it doubled as a bo, an effective weapon. Under his hat were hidden several shuriken. From his belt dangled nunchakus, the linked clubs concealed by the overlap of his shirt so that their nature was hardly evident. Around his waist was the chain of a kusarigama, the chained

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sickle. He wore a small backpack, and in it were packets of poisons and blinding powders, a pair of tekagi, or iron spikes for the palms of the hands, a grappling hook with a long rope attached, the rope made of twined human hair, several caltrops, or spiked balls used to impede pursuit on the ground, and, almost incidentally, a little food.

Tonki, small throwing knives, were strapped to his back, and a kyoketsu-shogi, a double-pointed knife attached by a cord to a metal ring, was bound to one leg.

But to the casual glance, he was just a wandering child, and little in his manner indicated otherwise. One would have had to observe him for several hours before his true strangeness became evident. And that was problematical, for though he seemed to be paying only indifferent attention to his surroundings, no one could have followed him undetected for long.

He stopped at a stream to drink. But as his lips approached the water, he paused. He frowned, showing the irritation of a man

who had really expected better-though he was hardly eight years old, physically. He did not drink.

For some time the boy contemplated his wavering reflection in the moving water, as though meditating. What had he expected to see-the face of an old man? Physically he was undernourished, his stiff hair radiating out from under his hat in an unruly manner. His skin was faintly yellow, hairless, and his eyes were Oriental. He had good, clean white teeth and even features, but was otherwise undistinctive.

Then he looked up, noting a slight milky cloudiness in the water, and saw a fish floating by, belly-up. This only confirmed what he had already fathomed: the river had been poisoned.

He walked along the bank, upstream, seeking the source of the poison. As he proceeded, his strange mind sifted through an incredible store of information, remembering, reasoning, assimilating.

He recognized the river poison: it was predominantly mercury, one of the ninja staples. Yet it differed, being grossly impure; and there were no longer ninjas hereabouts.

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The boy was in a position to know, for he was Fu Antos, lord of the ninjas. His body harbored a mind whose awareness extended back four centuries.

But Fu Antos was a figure of the past. Once highly active, involved in intrigue in any part of Japan, he had lost touch in the past century. He had been confined to an inevitably aging and deteriorating body, physically helpless. Now, restored, he was surveying

the contemporary situation.

He came to a village and passed through it without making any stir. To the villagers he was merely an idle boy. He kept his compelling eyes averted, deliberately, or shielded them with his hand, preferring anonymity. And he observed.

He saw the ravages of the river poison. It was dilute, not immediately fatal, and because of other contaminants that gave it a foul appearance and odor, few people drank from it directly. But that tainted water seeped into the ground, and was used to irrigate the crops, and domestic animals drank of it. In due course, cows passed the poison on in their milk, so that it reached little children.

It became concentrated in the flesh of the river fish, the staple of the villagers. The government, becoming aware of this, merely upgraded the standards at which this pollution was deemed "safe"; thus there was no alarm and no action. So the mercury continued to infuse the village, subtly, giving no obvious alarm.

He saw blind, maimed, crippled people. Years of mercury infiltration had had its slow effect, strongest in the children. A young girl of about fifteen sat before her home; she might have been beautiful, for her face was elfin, but her body was grotesquely twisted by the bone damage of the poison. He saw another child, a boy about the same age as Fu Antos' own physical body, but naked, his arms and legs so deformed that he could neither walk nor crawl. Instead he wriggled through the dust on his belly, soiling himself from either end as he went. Yet the glance he gave Fu Antos in

passing was intelligent: the child's mind was whole.

Other children were, in contrast, idiots with whole bodies.

They contentedly played with their own feces, smearing them about

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over their torsos, smelling, tasting, forgetting. He heard villagers crying. When he approached the sound, he found that it was the funeral for a baby boy, stillborn. His casket was a small wooden box made from an old crate, cradled in the arms of his father.

There was evidently no money for anything better.

The mourners were dressed in white, the traditional Japanese color. Two villagers made sad wailing music with flute and cymbals.

A shaven-faced, angry Buddhist monk garbed in yellow robes led the procession, holding a small, fragrant-burning lamp.

Fu Antos was an accomplished spy and warrior. He had killed many times in his long history. But he considered himself to be a man of the people. He had always killed for good reason, always with the conviction that ultimate justice was on his side. And always with a certain artistry. This use of a ninja poison to maim and kill indiscriminately among innocents disturbed him. The villagers did not even know the cause of their woes.

For a moment he forgot to shield his eyes. The light of his wrath shone out from them, a subtle but terrible thing, akin, in its fashion, to the nature of the poison itself. Fu Antos hated torture and death, except in a necessary cause, and he was appalled by unnecessary destruction and fouling of the environment. His passion

against these things had built up through centuries. His nostrils still twitched with the remembered odor of his own lands devoured by the flame, so long ago in his true youth.

With that anger came decision: he would right this wrong. Fu Antos left the village.

He followed the stream on up, tracing the poison by the deterioration of the life in and around the water. He found a modern factory engaged in manufacturing tungsten and other metallic parts for rocket motors. The wastes from this factory poured into the river, contaminating it.

Fu Antos was not familiar with the Industrial Age. He did not understand mechanized mass production. To him this was a malignant castle, spewing out the burning urine of a dragon, killing the helpless villagers. It was his duty to destroy it.

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The castle was well guarded. It had massive windowless walls, and a fence of metal spikes surrounded it. The day was overcast, but electric dragon's eyes illuminated the grounds like sunlight.

Secret entry seemed impossible.

It was a sufficient challenge for a ninja.

Fu Antos did not like what he had to do, but he refused to be deterred. He removed from his pack his black ninja suit and donned it. He fastened it carefully so that it was virtually watertight, and brought the hood tight about his face so that little skin was exposed.

Then he dived into the polluted river. He swam strongly

upcurrent, his eyes tightly closed to keep out the poison. He relied on his ki for ultimate protection, but still the chemicals made his face burn. His body was young yet; neither its muscles nor its ki had been properly broken in.

Where the metal fence crossed the water, he handed his way down deep, passing under the bottom of the barricade. Then he floated up slowly inside the factory compound.

He broke water silently, shaking the fluid off his face before opening his eyes. Wherever the water touched him, he was smarting.

But he remained in it a few moments longer, for the river was in shadow here. The depth of pollution made it opaque; with his black hood he was virtually invisible. This, of course, was no coincidence; for centuries the ninjas had been the masters of invisibility, the spy class of Japan. Fu Antos was the master ninja.

Close to the building he drew himself out, shedding water in the manner of an aquatic bird. Concealment would be better in the river, but he didn't care to immerse himself in the highly concentrated effluence spewing out from the factory pipe, the penis of the dragon. He emerged like a shadow.

Now his uniform was a liability, black against a light background, and the lingering drips marked his trail. He doffed it, shook it dry, and reversed it. The other side was a light creamy hue that blended perfectly with the color of the gaunt walls. He would now be difficult to see when he froze against that background.

He tucked his kusarigama into the belt behind him, so that

the chained sickle did not show from front or side, and palmed two star-shaped shuriken, ready for instant use. To the casual observer, he was still an unarmed child.

He considered scaling the wall, but this would have been difficult in this body. But if he used a normal entrance, he would not be able to avoid the guard pacing in the dazzling light. So he did not try; he walked boldly toward the main portal.

The guard saw him. The man's eyes widened at the sight of this strangely garbed child. His mouth opened.

In that moment of confusion, Fu Antos could have killed him with a shuriken in the throat. The star-shaped throwing blades did not penetrate as deeply as the single-bladed ones, but a score on the throat would have been sufficient. Instead he used his fingers. From a distance of twenty feet he initiated the hypnotic kuji-kiri compulsion.

The guard could not break away and could not cry alarm. He seemed to be drowning in those eyes, drawn right out of his body and sucked into the orbs. Yet it was the hands that really compelled, their incessant mystic motions telling him something, numbing his brain, forcing it through a convolution, as though it were being thrown headlong, rolling over and over-yet he was standing still. Then, as it were, a door closed.

Suddenly the guard forgot to see the odd boy. He walked on, blithely unaware of anything unusual. The ancient ninja fingerhypnotism

technique had rendered Fu Antos invisible to this man.

Fu Antos opened the large front door, seeking the master of this grim fortress. He paused, startled by the blast of cold air that met him. What sort of a dragon had a cold lair? He had never before encountered air-conditioning. But after his initial surprise, he recognized it as a harmless phenomenon, and entered the front office.

A pretty girl looked up from the information desk. A maiden in distress? "Yes?" she said, then did a double-take.

"What are you doing here? This is no place for-"

Fu Antos used the kuji-kiri technique on her, hypnotizing her

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instantly. "I seek the robber baron," he said. "I will free you and the village from the grasp of the dragon."

The hypnosis gave her comprehension. "The directors are in a board meeting with the company president and the owner," she said. "The owner is a bit of a dragon! It is on the third floor, and there are instructions to keep everyone else out."

"Excellent," Fu Antos said. "Return to your duties for now, and do not let anyone else enter that room after me."

She forgot his presence, as the guard outside had. He climbed the stairs, disdainful of the elevator, because he hardly understood it.

A guard stood outside the boardroom door. He was a strapping big man, armed and tough. He was a mercenary, a hired goon who hardly cared what method he used to prevent intrusions.

In this sense, Japan had not become softer with the technological age; men still performed brutal tasks for pay. Fu Antos assessed the guard with one glance, realizing that he was too stupid to be properly susceptible to the kuji-kiri technique, and too loyal (well-paid loyalty!) to be subverted. He had to be eliminated, and quickly.

The guard saw him. There was no hesitation like that of the fundamentally decent outdoor watch; this man's hand was already reaching for a weapon. Fu Antos moved in so rapidly that his little body seemed a blur. As the goon's hand raised a short wooden club, Fu Antos drove his stiffened fingers-the spear hand-into the man's groin.

There was a scream, but it cut off as the man doubled up, unconscious.

For a moment Fu Antos listened at the boardroom door, verifying the identity of the occupants. ". . . to prevent an adverse profit ratio from developing," a man's deep voice was saying.

"No problem there," a higher voice replied. "Declare another cost overrun. They'll pay; it would cost them three times as much to change from our specifications, now that the contract is well under way. That's why we set it up that way."

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They were concerned with riches, not health. This was the place: the minions of the dragon.

Fu Antos pushed open the door a crack and entered with ninja stealth. The directors did not realize what had happened, for the outside action had been swift and concealed from their view. They thought the guard had merely let the intruder pass, despite the standing orders to the contrary. His pay would be docked accordingly.

Fu Antos turned to face the directors. "Men, you are poisoning the river," he said boldly as he approached the table.

The directors glanced around at each other. "One of your sons?" one inquired facetiously of another.

"Not mine! I teach mine manners!"

"I hope you also teach yours to dress according to their stations," a third said, eyeing the ninja suit with insulting directness.

"The poison must stop immediately," Fu Antos said. "You must make reparations to the villagers for their suffering. You must restore the wildlife of the river."

The president of the company faced him. "Son, you have blundered into the wrong room. When you grow up and have a hundred million yen to invest, you may play 'executive'; right now you must return to your mother."

It did not even occur to Fu Antos that he was being mocked; no one had mocked him and lived, for over a century. "I shall not depart until this wrong has been set right," he said firmly, absentmindedly scratching his posterior where a trickle of the river water still irritated it.

"We have played games enough!" a board member snapped.

"Get the brat out of here!"

The president called to the guard outside the door. "Kindly escort this young man out," he said.

There was no response from the hall.

"Orderly!" the president snapped, his facade of good humor evaporating. "Pay attention!"

Still there was no answer. One of the directors got up, opened

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the door, and peered out. "Hey, he's lying down!"

"If that dolt has been drinking on duty . . ."

"No smell of liquor."

"The man's ill!" a board member said irritably.

"Ill, hell!" another said nervously. "He's been sabotaged!"

"This must be a midget disguised as a child, sent by our enemies to assassinate us!"

The president sighed. "You're hysterical."

But now the others were distinctly uneasy. "Let's not take chances. Buzz the office."

"All right-this time," the president said. "Bunch of old women," he muttered as he touched a button on the table.

"Yes, sir?" a woman's voice said from an intercom.

"There is a child in the boardroom, disrupting our meeting.

Have the internal security force remove him." He glanced through the door at the prostrate guard. "And send a doctor; the orderly appears to have had a fit."

"Right away, sir," the girl replied.

Fu Antos had been caught unaware by the intercom; such things had never been part of his world. Now he realized that reinforcements had been summoned. The robber barons intended to fight.

He had made a number of embarrassing tactical mistakes, owing to his incompletely broken-in body and his unfamiliarity with the vastly changed outside world. Now it was time for action.

"This is your last chance!" Fu Antos said, preparing his body for what was to come. "Stop the poison. Make reparations, or suffer the consequence."

The paunchy board member nearest him lunged to his feet.

"You impertinent brat!" he shouted. "I'll teach you to-"

With a quick twist of his body, Fu Antos caught the charging man by the sleeve and lapel, ducked down, and executed the morote seoi nage shoulder throw. He had mastered it long ago by another name, before it had been codified in jujitsu or its recent offshoot, judo. His right elbow came up hard under the man's right armpit

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while his left hand hauled the man's right arm down. The man's inertia carried him forward into the throw.

Though Fu Antos weighed barely sixty pounds, and the man weighed a hundred and eighty, the throw was performed with such superlative expertise that the man flipped completely over and landed hard on the top of the ornate table. Although it was massive oak, it creaked and groaned under the sudden weight and

stress. The man groaned once and lay still. He was unconscious.

"Good God!" another board member ejaculated. "He fell!"

He had indeed fallen, but not by any accident. Fu Antos realized that he had made another error. Through centuries he had fought ninjas in practice and samurai warriors in earnest, healthy men, muscular, skilled in tactics and counters and falls. A samurai would have landed on his feet and whirled back to the attack without pause. An unfriendly ninja would not have waited that long; he would have stabbed down with a dagger while he was still in midair. In fact, neither would have permitted an unopposed throw.

So Fu Antos had erred doubly in attempting a throw that could not have been successful against a trained opponent, especially when his own body was so puny; and he had used unnecessary force against a novice. The throw was harmless on a mat against an opponent who knew how to take a fall. On a hard floor, or table, against this obese weakling, it was devastating. Fu Antos still was not properly adapted to his body; he was acting like the youngster he appeared to be. He had to correct that, for it would surely lead him into disaster.

Now all the men were rising. Fu Antos raised both hands, initiating the kuji-kiri compulsion.

The door burst open, and four burly guards charged in. They were all of the goon-type: huge slabs of fighting meat unrestricted by any excess intelligence. Seeing the man on the table, they reached for their holstered pistols. The original guard had by this time

recovered somewhat, and was ready to join the action.

Fu Antos shook his head in self-recrimination. He had certainly made an inartistic mess of it. He had not misplayed his

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hand this egregiously since his real youth, centuries ago. He had lost much of his touch, and would have to practice group-subduing techniques until he regained it. Now he had to deal with ten alerted opponents. If he had used the kuji-kiri at the outset, there would have been no such complications.

The hypnotic technique was ineffective against an aroused crowd; there was no proper concentration. He would have to retreat, or fight.

If he departed, they would never stop the poison; he could judge men well enough to know their basic nature. None of these money barons had any interest in the common people. None had any twinge of conscience about the horrors the river poison brought to the villagers. They were tyrants of the old, familiar stripe-possessed of dangerous new technology.

Well, he had tried to talk with them. He had given them a fair chance, not only by his words but also by his inexcusable series of errors. Now he would revert to more familiar tactics.

A guard advanced on him, pistol drawn. The others were not far behind. "Now, don't give us any trouble, youngster!"

Fu Antos' two hands moved. Despite his prior activity, he had retained the two shuriken in his palms. Now, in a motion so swift it seemed no motion at all, he placed the metal stars inside the

band of his belt and drew instead his two tonki from their sheaths at his back. The little knives whistled by the ears of the leading guard.

But the ninja had not missed his targets. The blades embedded themselves in the eye sockets of the guards immediately following. Too small and light to inflict severe damage elsewhere, they were most effective here. Both men pitched forward, clutching at their faces.

Suddenly the chained sickle was in Fu Antos' hand. He swung, and the blade cut off the front guard's gun hand at the wrist. The flow of blood was phenomenal, and the man was too much in shock to try to stanch it. In some societies, amputation of a hand is punishment for stealing, but in such cases a blazing torch is held

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to the stump immediately after the knife has cut, cauterizing it and stopping the blood. Here there was no such precaution. The man ran back screaming and waving his stump, the bright arterial fluid spraying the room, generating a climate of horror.

Meanwhile, the ninja swung the ball on the other end of the kusarigama chain. It struck one of the board members on the nose, crushing it and sending the shock of impact right through his head. Whether more damage was caused by concussion or by slivers of bone projected into his brain was academic: he was dead.

Even as that body fell, Fu Antos whipped the chain back

around the neck of another executive, who was half out of his chair.

A wrench, and the neck snapped; a jerk, and the chain swung free again.

Another guard was on him. Fu Antos struck up with the handle of the sickle, caving in the man's temple.

This action had taken mere seconds. Now the others realized that they faced no ordinary boy. They backed away.

But Fu Antos had overextended his small, imperfectly trained body, and was tired. Should the remaining enemies charge him together, he would be overwhelmed. Accordingly, he discouraged any such activity. He used his shuriken.

One star flew out to strike a man on the back of the neck, penetrating between the vertebrae and severing the spinal cord, killing him. His fallen body blocked the doorway, so that the few remaining men thought their escape was being cut off. That filled them with mindless alarm, and they scrambled over him to get out. Only two managed to struggle out the door, fighting each other like drowning men. One of the executives, surprisingly, straight-armed the last guard and broke loose first.

One man did not panic. This one Fu Antos fixed on. This was the major stockholder of the company, chairman of the board. Fu Antos, without comprehending the nuances of financial power, had nevertheless identified him as the real authority here, the one who could stop the poison, if he would. This one was gross, bald,

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fat, with oily sweat oozing from his pores despite the artificially

cooled air. Fu Antos moved to make him captive.

But under that fat was a cynical, hard-driving mind. Fu Antos cut the owner out of the fleeing pack, but the man was not really afraid. He had a weapon concealed under his coat, a gun of some sort, and knew how to use it; Fu Antos could read the signs. This man never risked himself unnecessarily, but he was no coward. He never forgot that one who dealt in violence of any type, whether financial or physical, could eventually suffer from it. He had, in his fashion, been expecting Fu Antos.

"I see you are not what you seem," he said.

"Stop the poison. Make reparations," Fu Antos repeated.

"That would bankrupt me," the owner said. And Fu Antos saw that the man preferred death to the loss of his money.

"I will destroy your castle," Fu Antos said. As Nobunaga destroyed mine, he thought.

"That, lad, is beyond your eerie power." The owner leaned forward, taking the measure of his opponent. He was an extremely talented infighter in his realm, for he had clawed his way up over the bankruptcies of his competitors. "What do you really want? Money? Education? Ice cream?"

"Ice cream?" Fu Antos had never heard of this.

"By the bucketful. You can grow fat, like me."

"Stop the poison."

"You're a talented young man. There's room in my organization for-"

The man was stalling. Fu Antos was thoroughly versed in such trickery long before this robber baron had been born. He heard the castle minions approaching down the ball stealthily, or so they thought. In a moment they would attack, and then the baron's hints and promises would be worthless.

Yet the man himself was more useful alive than dead, at the moment.

Fu Antos jumped at him so suddenly that the owner had no chance to react, as thumbs pressed through the fat of his neck,

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expertly seeking the carotid arteries. Even so, there was a moment's delay, for the training of centuries had been in full-sized bodies, and these shorter, weaker fingers were not quite right. The baron had a chance to reach for his weapon.

Then Fu Antos found the carotids and completed the strangle.

It cut off the blood supply to the brain, painlessly but effectively.

In five seconds the man was unconscious.

The baron was out for only a few seconds, but Fu Antos had timed this carefully. He removed the weapon from the man's shoulder holster. It was a Spanish Llama, a 9-mm automatic pistol, gold-plated and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. No Japanese weapon!

The money baron considered foreign equipment to have more cachet, so even when choosing a weapon for the defense of his life he betrayed his contempt for his native country. This was the consequence, Fu Antos thought, of allowing the good old ways of Japan

to be corrupted by foreign barbarians. It should never have been permitted.

He sat the man up against the wall. As the baron awakened, Fu Antos held the bloody blade of the sickle under his nose. "Look into my eyes."

The owner, disoriented, found it expedient to oblige. As he did so, Fu Antos sheathed his blade in the belt of his outfit and put his two hands on the sides of the man's head and exerted his ki, that potent inner force. In most people, ki was poorly developed; in some it was an art. Fu Antos had the most powerful ki ever known on earth; that was what had enabled him to survive so long. He remembered when he had discovered the ki-but he had no time to reminisce now. "Now you will stop the poison," he said.

Amazingly, the baron shook his head. "You have a one-track mind. I cannot stop it. I am a rich man, but this factory represents a far larger investment than I could make alone. I would have to close it down, for the tungsten processes and the other metallic rare earths we use-these cannot be economically modified. Then my creditors would take me to court, and the government itself is

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among those creditors. I would lose my money and my authority. Either the factory would resume production and pollution under new management, or a competitor would take over the contracts. The poison would continue."

The man was speaking the truth as he understood it, for Fu Antos had taken over his mind. There was no way to stop the poison without destroying the factory, and all other factories like it.

"Then we shall destroy it," Fu Antos said. "Show me how."

For it was more efficient to use the talents of this baron than to attempt to figure it out for himself. Had ninjas operated in the world of industry, this man would have been a master ninja.

The owner hesitated a moment, resisting the notion. Only the most powerful will could oppose the ninja's ki even momentarily.

But he was helpless. "You must blow up the boilers that make pressure for the turbines, the power plant. We generate our own operating current, can't depend on an outside supply. You understand?"

Fu Antos did not understand.

"Well, those boilers must be blown, otherwise everything will soon be repaired. But there are many safety precautions."

"Take me to the boilers," Fu Antos said. He had a mental picture of the huge vats his ninjas had used to heat oil in when repelling a siege against the Black Castle. "Do not betray me."

That was an order, not a plea; now the owner lost all ability to betray him voluntarily.

They left the room and walked down the hall, right through the personnel massing for attack. "Take it easy," the owner said to the surprised people. "This lad's with me. Go back to your stations."

Obviously they would not do that, since there were dead

bodies in the boardroom. But it kept them at bay for the time being.

They entered the power room. Surely this was the bowel of the dragon! Huge, incomprehensible monsters radiated heat and noise, with mouths in their distended bellies that opened to re-

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ceive coal from moving conveyor belts. Whenever a mouth opened, it belched forth awful heat and light. Fu Antos had never imagined anything like this, but he stayed close to the money baron and did not flinch.

"Where are the boilers?" he demanded, not recognizing what he saw.

"Eh?" the baron called back over the hideous background roar.

"The boilers!"

"Oh, some are on coal, some on oil. We've been converting to oil, against my better judgment; the board overruled me. It is true that oil is plentiful and cheap now, but we are dependent on potentially unfriendly nations for the bulk of our supply. Oil could become very expensive indeed if the political situation changed, and politics is the most treacherous . . ."

The man continued talking, but Fu Antos could hear little and understand less. In this din, communication was difficult.

The baron had not betrayed him, but someone, suspicious, had phoned ahead. Fu Antos had not thought to prevent that, still

handicapped by his lack of knowledge about the modern world.

He was going to have to retrain himself to take into account the modern devices. But first he would have to learn them all, and that would take time.

Yet he was ready, as always, for the unexpected. Two husky mechanics came at him as he entered the control chamber. One swung a heavy iron bar.

Fu Antos stepped nimbly aside, and the bar crashed into the door, clanging against the metal. The owner drew back in alarm, but made no move either to enter the fray or to flee. He had been neutralized by the ki.

Fu Antos turned, grabbed the mechanic's wrist, passed his other arm under the man's elbow, and grasped his own wrist. He levered his arm against the captive elbow, jerking upward. The arm snapped at the elbow. The man dropped the bar and fell to his knees. Fu Antos grabbed the bar and bashed him across the skull, knocking him out with a hairline fracture.

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The second mechanic had paused for a moment, startled by the sight of the owner. Then he grabbed at Fu Antos, who rammed the point of the bar into his solar plexus, provoking a fatal nervous shock to the autonomous system. The bar was so heavy that even the power of a boy was enough to make it devastating, provided he had the skill to direct it.

"Now-how?" Fu Antos demanded tersely, paying no further attention to the recent assailants.

"You have to fire the boilers at maximum and shut off the safety valves," the owner said. "And disconnect the alarms, for if they alert others to the buildup, certain other precautions will be taken to nullify whatever we might do here."

"Do it."

The owner did it. It had been twenty years since he had touched such controls directly, for like most executives he disdained physical work, even at the expense of his health. But his basic knowledge of the equipment sufficed. Soon the gauges were rising, and the fires heated the boilers, and the pressure built up intolerably.

"We had better get out of here," the baron said. "This will blow in minutes, and there may be a chain reaction."

Fu Antos handed him a knife. "If we are attacked again, defend yourself, for I shall not do it for you. Lead the way."

"I know a private exit," the man said, eyeing the blade in his hand with distaste.

So the moderns had secret passages too. Fu Antos followed him out of the factory.

They emerged from an elevator on the hillside above the complex. Just in time, for the boilers were beginning to go.

First there was a series of rumbles. Then a shock wave hit them, like a gigantic hand squeezing the chest, driving the breath out, throwing the whole body into the air-yet no visible explosion.

For an instant.

Fu Antos took a forward roll, protecting himself from damage;

this was second nature to him. The industrialist fell heavily in the

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gravel of the hillside, scraping his face, knees, and the palms of his hands.

Then it was as if a giant red blossom unfolded from the middle of the factory, outward. The boilers had started it; then the chemicals caught, and the oil storage tanks. There was a series of explosions, ripping open one part of the complex and then another.

Parts of human bodies were flung into the air like dolls. Some human torches ran screaming from the environs, crashing into the perimeter fence that still stood, burning to death while on their feet.

The river itself caught fire near the factory; it was so polluted it was able to sustain combustion, in this heat.

"Chain reaction," Fu Antos said, at last comprehending the term the executive had used. He smiled, liking this demonstration.

Slowly the two tall smokestacks tilted, their foundations undermined.

One fell, bending as its bricks separated, crashing into the holocaust, crushing whatever remained. Then the other chimney, as impressive.

After that, a mantle of oily smoke arose, shrouding everything in its thick, roiling mass.

"Now the poison will stop," Fu Antos said with satisfaction.

"Not yet," the owner replied. "That smoke is deadly; it contains chemicals few people knew we were producing. It will kill

everything it touches, horribly."

"Then it is time to move," Fu Antos said, for the smoke was already filling the valley, climbing toward them as though seeking new prey.

But the owner did not move. "My knee is gone," he said.

Fu Antos glanced at the position of the robber baron's leg.

It was true: the joint had been thrown out. The man, in severe pain, had not protested; now he was ready to commit an honorable suicide by remaining here.

"It is fitting," he said, saluting the baron's courage in adversity as the smoke rose up to claim him.

Chapter 3:

BASTARD BONES

We walked down the sidewalk silently, Hiroshi in his Japanese skirt and carrying his little bag. I was in my street clothes, never having had a chance to change. Those diamonds made me nervous, and I wished now that I had taken time to pack a weapon. I had walked this street a thousand times without molestation, but now, suddenly, I was afraid of trouble. That shows what a glimpse of illicit riches can do. I was especially afraid of the police, whom I normally considered to be my best friends. How could I explain that bag, after all the antagonism Hiroshi had already aroused in the minions of the law?

The crowds of people ignored me, but there were a number of curious passing glances at Hiroshi. The little man was blithely

indifferent. But I knew that he was here on important business, and that nothing escaped his attention.

We passed two teenagers in dirty blue jeans and leather jackets who were standing against a wall. "Get the little fairy," one muttered, and the other chuckled coarsely.

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Hiroshi stopped suddenly. "What is the meaning of that term?"

he asked me, loudly enough for the others to hear.

I tried to shrug it off. "They're just punk kids; they don't know anything or mean anything."

"I am not certain of that." He faced the two. "Will you elucidate?"

The two youths stared at him coolly, not deigning to reply.

"What is that picture?" Hiroshi persisted, indicating their jackets.

The emblem was skeletal, stick figures made of white bones.

Both boys were dark-skinned Puerto Ricans with curly black hair and bad complexions.

"It's a juvenile gang," I said. "Teen toughs. Call themselves the Bastard Bones."

"They are illegitimate?" he asked, surprised.

"No, just ugly. Better to leave them alone."

"They are impolite," Hiroshi said, as though that were important.

Perhaps, to him, it was.

"They're dangerous," I said. "Much of the crime in this country is committed by boys-and girls-in their teens. There are white gangs, black gangs, and Latin gangs. They all mean trouble,

but they won't usually bother us if we don't bother them. Live and let live."

"I am not so sure," he said. "I have seen much discourtesy in this city."

This wasn't like him. Hiroshi had never been one to seek a quarrel or to look for trouble. "Let's go on," I said. The last thing I wanted was to get diverted by an argument with these freaks.

Hiroshi seemed about to comply, but then one of the boys spoke again. "What you got in that bag, fairy?"

"A fortune in uncut diamonds," Hiroshi replied.

Both youths reacted with anger, thinking they were being mocked. "Listen, Chink-" one began.

"Jap," Hiroshi corrected him. "I am listening."

But they abruptly had had enough. They saw me standing behind Hiroshi, my fists clenched, a scowl on my face, and they

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had the minimum sense to know I was about to intercede with more than mere words. Like all their number of any age, sex, or color, they were cowards. So they were silent again.

At last Hiroshi went on, to my relief. We came to the bar called La Gruta, The Cave; it had a certain cultivated Latin flavor.

Inside it was dark, with a long bar to one side and tables on the other. A few booths were against the wall. A color TV set was on the bar, a bit incongruous.

I showed the way to the most secluded booth. "This place is

expensive, but they carry anything you want," I told Hiroshi. I gestured to the row of bottles behind the bar: aquavit, schnapps, tequila, pulque, mescal, aguardiente, chaca, ron-the emphasis on South American drinks, but with many others too.

The waitress came up. Hiroshi looked at me. "You can order sake; they have it," I reminded him. "They carry everything; it's a point of pride."

"Everything?"

"Everything legal, they claim."

"And you?"

I paused. "Oh, I don't drink intoxicants. I'll settle for milk."

Hiroshi smiled. "Milk, then. An excellent beverage, when water is not available."

"Milk?" the girl asked, thinking it a joke.

"Milk," I repeated firmly. "It is bottled under a number of prominent brand names; I'm sure you can locate some."

"Any particular kind?" she inquired, unable to resist her bit of sarcasm.

"Yak," Hiroshi said.

"Yak yak to you too," she said. "Now, how about your order?"

"Yak milk," Hiroshi explained.

"Beg pardon?"

"Himalayan ox. Very fine animal."

The waitress obviously felt she was being teased. Many people have never heard of the yak. "Yak milk," she said, making a note on

her pad. She turned to me. "And what do you want, Mesopotamian minx?"

"American bovine will suffice," I said.

A couple of barflies, overhearing, laughed crudely. "I'd like milk from them boobs," one remarked as the buxom girl walked somewhat stiffly by him.

I returned to Hiroshi. "That bag . . ." I said.

He shrugged. "We have known each other long."

"Not that long. We only met at the Martial Open, and again in Japan. You advised me and showed me the ki power." How well I remembered. I had been drafted as the judo representative in an interdiscipline contest: judo, karate, kung fu, boxing, wrestling, aikido and Thai kick boxing. For the first-and, I hoped, the last-time, all the major fighting arts of the world had been pitted against each other, to see just which was the most effective in terms of selfdefense.

The result had been a tie between judo and karate, with kung fu a close third, but it could easily have turned out otherwise, for all the contestants were deadly. Hiroshi had been the representative for aikido, the smallest and oldest man in the tournament; and only through his help had I survived that ordeal. For he was the man of ki, that phenomenal yet elusive force that could heal a sick body or generate incredible strength. Hiroshi had suffered from a recurrence of malaria, yet continued to compete until his arm had been shattered; and even then, in his fashion, he had

been active. There was no man I admired more.

"Time is of no moment when ki is shared," he murmured. I nodded. I could not refute that argument. The world he had opened to me by demonstrating the ki had fundamentally changed my life and prepared the way for the release of important buried experiences. The erratic ki I had developed after that had saved my life on several occasions and had enabled me to bring my karate assistant Ilunga out of her terrible drug addiction. My life, in one sense, had really begun with ki-and Hiroshi had been responsible.

His eyes dropped to the table. "There were many good men at 255

that tournament. Your judo partner, Takao . . ."

The milk arrived, two tall glasses. Mine was chill creamy cow's milk; Hiroshi's had a yellowish tinge, with a number of what appeared to be globules of fat floating on the surface, and it smelled sour.

He lifted it to his lips and took a sip. I refrained from grimacing.

He nodded sagely. "Excellent."

My brow furrowed. "You mean that really is yak milk?"

"Indubitably." He turned to the waitress. "My compliments to the chef."

She looked as surprised as I felt.

"A chef doesn't fix milk," I protested. "Or do you mean they put some kind of flavoring in it?"

"It is fermented, of course," he said. "This is the way they store it and use it in Tibet." He returned to the waitress. "I should

like to meet the person who provided this."

Nonplused, she backed off. "I'll tell him."

Hiroshi had certainly changed, or maybe I was just seeing a new side of him. First he had reacted to that "fairy" snigger outside; now he was making a big thing of this yak business, and I could not be certain whether it was serious. The bartender could have dumped some spoiled cream into the glass, reversing Hiroshi's joke, so that now he was inviting the jokester to meet him face-to-face.

Obviously there was still much I had to learn about Oriental humor.

"Poor Takao," I said, returning to the subject the yak had interrupted.

Takao had been an older judoka, there as a judge at the Martial Open. But he had become a participant and my team partner, until his death in a violent match against kung fu. Takao and Hiroshi had had a decades-long feud that was resolved just before Takao's demise.

"He was at heart a good man," Hiroshi said. "I paid a call on his wife in Japan, as he desired. She thanked me for the money-the money that you had so generously made available from your tournament winnings-but she elected not to leave Japan."

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"Money," I repeated. "Which brings us to the dia-" I broke off, not certain of our privacy. I nodded meaningfully at the bag sitting between us on the table.

"And do you remember when you suffered an injury and came to my dojo in Japan?" he inquired, still avoiding the subject.

I suppressed my flash of irritation. I owed Hiroshi a lot, and respected him a lot, but this pussyfooting was frustrating. It was also not like him. So I had to assume that he was working his way into the subject in his own fashion, and had good reason for his seeming indirection.

"That was no injury, that was the delayed-action death blow,"

I said, remembering with a shudder. "You sent me to O-sensei Fu Antos for the cure."

He nodded. "Now you understand."

"Understand what?" I yelped. But then I had to break off again, for someone else was approaching the table.

It was a Latin-looking gentleman. For a moment I thought it was the father of one of the gang punks we had met outside, but I knew this could not be. If the parents were cognizant of their children's activities, there would not be any juvenile gangs. This was a stranger.

"Señor," the visitor said to Hiroshi. "You asked to see me?"

Hiroshi stood. "Ah, the yak milk!"

The man inclined his head. He was a dark, swarthy man with a slight Chinese look and a bulging belly. "I am José Peon. This is my son, Robertico."

Hiroshi bowed. "I am Hiroshi."

I waited with ill grace. Hiroshi had been about to explain about the diamonds, and now this interruption!

"You are from Japan?" José inquired politely.

The boy tugged at his father's sleeve. "Papi-

"¿Qué quieres, hijo?" José asked his son.

"¿No lo conoces?"

"Lo acabo de conocer, como voy a saber quien es."

"That's Hiroshi! The aikido O-sensei!"

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I knew very little Spanish, despite occasional travels to Central and South American countries. This rapid exchange left me in the air. I could catch a word here and there, and the intonation. But obviously the boy recognized Hiroshi.

Now Hiroshi bowed to the boy. "Yo soy."

"For God's sake!" I said, exasperated. Perhaps I was jealous of Hiroshi's linguistic ability; it made me feel ignorant.

"My friend speaks very little Spanish," Hiroshi said. "We are being discourteous."

José turned to me. "My apologies, señor," he said.

"Quite all right," I said, unwilling to admit that I was unmollified.

The boy stared at me. "Ese es Jason Striker-el campeón de judo."

Now, that was more like it.

José frowned at the boy and spoke with a slightly sad voice.

"We are speaking only in English now, son," he said.

"I see the boy is a martial-arts fan," I said.

José rolled his eyes. "At any rate, he is taking lessons. Not like

his fat old papi."

I wondered what kind of a man would let himself go so obviously to pot while his son hero-worshipped martial artists, but of course I didn't say anything.

"You have studied in Tibet?" Hiroshi inquired of José.

The man shrugged, so that his fat bounced. It disgusted me.

"It is true, sensei. I developed a taste for yak's milk."

Now it was coming clear. This man had been to Asia for some reason-it must have been before the Chinese Communists took over the region-and picked up some exotic tastes in the fleshpots there, and somehow he could afford to indulge them yet. The bar manager must have known of this, and laid in a supply; or perhaps José kept his own, and sold some to the bar on demand. At any rate, Hiroshi had his yak milk. I wondered whether it was pure coincidence that Hiroshi had asked for this particular drink. Somehow I doubted it; he had an almost supernatural ability to make special connections in devious ways.

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"I have a friend who works at the city zoo," José explained. "In fact, he is in charge of hooved herbivores, so he gets me a gallon from time to time, and I store it here. I did not realize yak milk was becoming so popular." He made a gesture to show this was not seriously intended. "Yak cheese is also excellent, if you would like some."

"No, thanks!" I said quickly.

Hiroshi smiled. "We must talk again, amigo."

"At your pleasure." The two men shook hands, pausing a moment before breaking the grip and looking into each other's eyes.

Then the boy insisted on shaking hands with both Hiroshi and me, and finally they left, to my relief. I hate having the feeling that important things are transpiring when I have no part in them.

Probably all they wanted to do was discuss yak cheese.

"Now, let's get on with this," I said. "I helped Fu-Antos change to his new body, if that's what really happened; he helped me survive the delayed death blow. Fair exchange. What has that to do with your visit, or those . . ." I nodded at the bag. I still wondered about my fantastic adventure with Fu Antos, the legendary ninja mystic. What had been real, what illusion? Had I really killed his ancient body by attempting to disembowel myself? It was a lingering nightmare, half-real; it would probably continue to repel me all my life.

"Fu Antos needs you again," Hiroshi said. He pushed the bag of diamonds across the table toward me.

"Now, wait a minute!" I said, my throat tight. I shoved them back as though they were hot-which they probably were. "I don't traffic in stolen merchandise."

He turned on me a gaze of purest innocence. "Stolen? Why would Fu Antos steal?"

I realized I had made a prejudicial assumption. It was a natural mistake, on this unnatural day. "These are his, uh, items? He's

had them all along?"

Hiroshi nodded. "He mined them in Brazil, from land he has

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title to. Fu Antos cares little for wealth. He employs it only when necessary." Gently he moved the bag back to me.

Firmly I rejected it. This was like a game of Ping-Pong, with the diamonds bouncing back and forth. "I don't know anything about Fu Antos, but I don't like payoffs."

"I will tell you about Fu Antos," Hiroshi said. "That is why I came."

I raised an eyebrow.

He told. It was a compelling, awful, incredible history. Fu Antos, medieval warrior, top-level ninja, or jonin-betrayed by the shogun, or ruler, of Japan, betrayed again by his own lovely wife. A terrible siege, and a terrible sacking, and a terrible revenge.

Then, comparative isolation in the second Black Castle-for centuries.

At last, reincarnation in the body of a child. Return to the outer world of modern Japan. Destruction of a tungsten factory.

Flight from an army of police.

"And so Fu Antos realized that he had no proper place in the modern world," Hiroshi finished. "Japan is overcrowded, industrialized.

The ninja and samurai traditions are forgotten. Destroying the factory was symbolic, but it was not contemporary civilization that went up in the explosion. It was Fu Antos' own illusion that he could reverse the tide.

"For he did not stop the pollution. He only threw hundreds of

poor employees out of work. A number of them lived in the very village he had seen. The father of the dead, deformed baby lost his livelihood and cursed the unknown perpetrator of the sabotage.

Fu Antos realized, to his horror, that the peasants did not want to be liberated from either their commercial tyranny or the poison of their environment. Even as the famous modern Japanese writer Mishina came to the same realization. He harangued the troops, but found his ideals were not shared by those he sought to help, so he committed seppuku."

I sat bolt upright. "Fu Antos committed suicide?" I demanded, shocked.

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"Mishina, of course. Fu Antos did not live four hundred years merely to desist because of a slight reversal."

"Oh. Sorry."

Hiroshi spread his hands. "And so he has left Japan. He has removed with his remaining ninjas to the wilds of the Amazon River in South America, there to build his third Black Castle and to form a medieval enclave apart from the modern scene. In a few more centuries, when even that desolate region becomes too crowded, he will remove once more, to some other planet, and build the fourth Black Castle."

"A good decision," I agreed, sipping the dregs of my milk.

"He's really thinking ahead." Travel to another planet! From the

medieval straight into science fiction.

"But there are complexities. Passports, immigration visas, permissions . . ."

"I thought you said he had already moved! What does he need with passports now?"

Hiroshi merely looked at me. Oh, no-Fu Antos had entered the Western Hemisphere illegally, and now he wanted me to make it right?

"That matter will be handled elsewhere," Hiroshi said. "Fu Antos also requires building materials for the castle, and special equipment, and weapons for defense."

"Weapons! The ninjas are well-armed." I remembered how viciously the ninjas had fought when I went to the ruins of the Second Black Castle.

Hiroshi shook his head. "They have not used guns. Now they will learn. Their preliminary survey indicates that there can be resistance to the establishment of an enclave. The enemy may come with very rapidly firing rifles, mechanized guns . . ."

"Machine guns," I said. "BAR's-Browning Automatic Rifles.

Yes, I see your point. Even the most proficient swordsman would be at a disadvantage against a modern trooper." I paused. "But if the ninjas chose the most remote wilderness, no one would ever seek them out

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"Ah, but they would. Fu Antos did not choose the region merely because it was remote; he also considered its resources, until now

unknown to others."

"Oh, the diamonds!" I said, catching on. "Fu Antos must have psychic treasure-hunting powers!"

"Of course," Hiroshi said seriously. "It is an aspect of his ki. He can sense the ki of the inanimate. However, do not lose the diamonds; there are others, but they are impossible to recover without extensive mining operations, not worthwhile at present."

"Then there is still no danger. No one's going after a nonpaying diamond mine."

"You see, there is also oil."

"Oil! In the Amazon?"

"Yes. Fu Antos dowsed and discovered a massive oil-bearing stratum not far from the diamonds. He recognized it as the same substance the businessman in Japan set such store by."

"The one he let die in the poison smoke?" I asked dryly.

"The man is not dead. Fu Antos does not waste material. He is merely blind and disfigured. Fu Antos took him to Brazil as a technical adviser, and he confirmed the oil."

"I can't believe that man would help Fu Antos!"

"Subject to the ki," Hiroshi said gently. "At any rate, such secrets are very hard to keep. Eventually there is sure to be an intrusion."

"I should think so, with the price of oil what it is today," I said. "Maybe Fu Antos had better build elsewhere."

"But he requires money for the supplies and construction.

These diamonds are all that he has at the moment. The oil should solve that problem."

"And bring a thousand more problems!" I said. "So he'll stand and fight against impossible odds. Well, I guess he knows what he's in for! His way obviously isn't my way, but each to his own. I must admit he's pretty damned sharp, the way he goes about things. But you'd better return the diamonds to him, since he obviously needs them more than I do."

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Having made my decision, I thought that would be the end of it. I should have known better. Again, Hiroshi pushed the bag at me. "He requires an agent in this country, a native. For the acquisition of building supplies and drilling equipment. One he trusts."

"Now, just a minute!"

But he nodded his head authoritatively. "You. You can not refuse."

"I can and I do refuse! I'm no contractor; I know nothing about the Amazon, less about building a castle. I can't even get the oil out of my car's crankcase without gunking up the terrain!"

"It is possible to learn," he murmured.

"I have a job to do here! I'm a Fifth Dan judo instructor. I can't go traipsing around construction companies or oil combines; I wouldn't even know what to ask for!" My eye fell on the bag again, and I shuddered. "With a cache of uncut ice, yet!"

Hiroshi put his hand on mine, and I felt his powerful ki. The

force pulsed through me, making the world seem surrealistic. It was like a hallucinogenic drug high, except that I never took drugs. Not voluntarily. "Indeed, for all these reasons, no one would suspect you. Therefore you are ideal."

But I summoned my own ki and fought it off. "Any other way, I would try to help Fu Antos," I said. "But this would be crazy. I would do him no favor by attempting something for which I am plainly incompetent. I'd only waste the only wealth he has. So for his own good, no. Hire a contractor, or a lawyer, or both. Or enlist the help of someone skilled in such ventures, like Johnson Drummond or Vicente Pedro." Drummond was the multimillionaire industrialist father of a lovely girl I had trained in judo, Thera. I still looked her up once in a while. Pedro was a Nicaraguan power who had been with me when I encountered Fu Antos; Pedro's hand had wielded the sword that finally ended the animation of the ninja's old body.

"Neither man is able to undertake such a project without immediate suspicion," Hiroshi said. But he removed his hand, and the ki ceased. "I must return to Japan."

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I was both relieved and sorry. He had come all this way, and I could not help him. Yet what a crazy notion: me, builder and oilman!

"These matters are not, after all, within your sphere of competence," Hiroshi said.

"That's it exactly!" I agreed, refusing to be shamed.

"Fu Antos also required weapons of the modern type, as I mentioned. This would seem to be more within your sphere."

"Well, I'm hardly expert in guns," I said modestly.

"He accepts that level of expertise you offer." Yet again he moved the bag.

What a sucker's trap! I had used the pretext of ignorance in one area, and now I was half-committed in another. Hiroshi had in effect forced me into an off-balanced resistance to a forward throw, and then flipped me neatly to the rear.

But I wouldn't have it. I ignored the bag and signaled to the waitress, indicating we were ready for the bill.

"That has been taken care of," she said.

I shook my head. "We're the ones who ordered milk."

"I remember," she said. "Yak." She made a wry face.

"We haven't paid yet."

"The management is declining the money," she said. "The yak is on the house."

I realized that Hiroshi's new friend had spoken to someone on the way out; there wasn't much choice now, though I really didn't like being beholden to the man even for a glass of milk. It was hardly worth making an issue. "Tell the management thanks," I said gruffly. I deposited a tip that should more than cover the price of the drinks, and we moved out.

"In certain ways you are less than gracious," Hiroshi murmured.

"Yet it becomes you."

"Umph," I said, out-of-sorts.

Our friends the Bastard Bones gang were there, augmented by eight more of their number. Two of them were female, one a darkcomplexioned girl, Latin, with luxurious long wavy hair, but dis-

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tressingly fat and dirty. The other was a Caucasian girl, actually quite pretty under the dirt; her hair was blond, her eyes blue, her skin pale. She was very small and thin, childlike; she couldn't be more than thirteen.

The males spread out to impede our passage. Hiroshi stepped off the sidewalk to let them pass, while I stopped where I was. But two of them stepped out to block him again.

"Excuse me, please," Hiroshi said politely, seeking once more to get around. But the toughs formed a circle around us. There had been other people on the sidewalk, but they abruptly faded out.

"I think you hurt someone's feelings," I muttered.

"I apologize," Hiroshi said brightly. "I was only curious about their emblem, the little bones." He made to pass through the ring.

Acutely conscious of the bag of diamonds he still carried in one hand, I stepped close behind him. I didn't like the look of this, but I suspected the punks were bluffing. I had run into some of them before, and once one of them had worked out briefly in

my dojo, practicing karate. I had discouraged his attendance once I ascertained that he wanted to learn only how to crack skulls, not absorb philosophy along with the physical discipline. These kids knew my business and generally steered clear of me.

But the line held firm. "What's the matter, gook?" the Bastard leader demanded of Hiroshi. "We're not good enough for you to walk the sidewalk with us?"

"By no means. I have admired your emblem, the illegitimate skeleton."

"What's in that bag?" another youth demanded. "Snow?"

"He's with me," I said sharply, hoping to warn the Bastards off. If they realized that Hiroshi was a martial artist, they might quit.

But the gang was hungry for violence, and its numbers gave it courage. The word had evidently leaked out that Hiroshi's bag

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contained something valuable; I regretted having let my voice rise in the bar.

The leader grabbed Hiroshi with his left hand, taking the loose material of the kimono over the little aikidoist's chest and hauling him forward while he cocked his right fist.

Then the Bastard leader screamed and dropped to his knees.

The other gang members looked on, startled at this seeming display of weakness or of cowardice, not comprehending what had happened.

I knew. There may be more dangerous men in the world to

attack than the little old aikido sensei, but the average person will go a lifetime without encountering one. I myself, opposing Hiroshi in the Martial Open, had suffered a broken finger, and he had been not trying to hurt me. Age is no barrier to prowess, not when you happen to be a man like this. Hiroshi had applied a thumb lock to the gang leader's left hand, grasping the wrist so as to prevent escape, and with his other hand pressed down on the thumb. He bent that captive thumb inward against the palm of the hand. It was a submission hold.

There are a number of submission holds in the martial arts.

Some apply to the fingers, some to the wrists, some to the elbows, some to the neck-in fact, just about any part of the body is vulnerable to some kind of compulsion. Anyone who has experienced a submission hold applied by a competent person knows there is only one reasonable reaction: to submit. It is not just that there is pain; it is that even the attempt to fight out of it is very likely to result in severe injury of a crippling nature. I'd far rather risk being knocked out by a powerful blow than suffering a dislocated elbow; I'll get over the effects of the first in minutes, hours, or days, but the second could impair the use of that arm for the rest of my life. But the Bones leader could not submit-not in front of all the Bastards, including the girls. Pain prevented him from acting with his body, so he used his voice. It was a mistake. "Kill him!" he screamed.

A small ratty-looking kid lunged at Hiroshi from the side. The

leader gave a piercing scream accompanied by a loud crunching sound as his thumb-socket articulation was destroyed. Hiroshi, his attention divided by the second attack, had allowed his hold to become too strong. At the same time, he launched a side kick, yoko geri, to the other kid's face. The second Bastard fell back, his face bent out of shape, his jaw broken.

Meanwhile, I was moving into position, covering Hiroshi's rear, watching for weapons. They appeared, as the remaining eight, including the girls, closed in. Knives, an ice pick, a tire iron, baseball bat, potato stuck with razor blades-the usual alley assortment.

These punks were cowards, but they did not yet realize what they were up against, and they were armed. Such cowards are a genuine menace.

Then I saw the nunchaku, like two billy clubs strung together on eight inches of cord. It was a weapon I was well familiar with, having been trained in it in Asia. Now it was becoming popular in America, as it was easy to make at home, and potent in combat.

There was my obvious target. A man who is skilled in the nunchaku, or "chukas," can tackle a crowd; but an amateur only fouls himself up. I was sure this was an amateur; I could tell by the manner in which he held his weapon. That was a double advantage for me.

I charged the nunchaku. He swung at me overhand, the loose stick whistling down. But I was moving fast, ducking under the

blow, and sure enough, he was inexperienced. He did not have the proper wrist action, stick speed, or aim to score effectively. I caught his descending arm as I turned about, so that the force of the wood was almost spent as the point hit my back. It stung, but it was no more than a bruise.

Now I put my right arm around his neck, thrust one leg deep between his legs and threw him with the uchi mata hip technique.

One has to be careful when executing this throw, or it is possible to mash a man's genitals as his crotch gets hauled across your leg.

I was careful-to hit him right where his thighs met. He got mashed. I can't say I'm proud of such lapses in sportsmanship, but

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in a combat situation against weapons I want to be sure the man I put down stays down. Then he landed on the concrete, hard. That took whatever fight remained out of him. I plucked the weapon out of his flaccid hand.

That was my second advantage: now I was armed, and unlike this clod, I was proficient in its use. I had not just disarmed an opponent, I had quadrupled my own fighting effectiveness. I whirled to meet the six remaining Bastards, for Hiroshi had dispatched another in the interim.

The youth had run at Hiroshi from the back, and he obviously had had some wrestling training at school. He grabbed the little sensei in a full-nelson from behind, intent on breaking his frail neck. Very calmly Hiroshi took one of the fingers and bent it

until it popped out of its socket. The pressure on Hiroshi's neck relaxed with this pain, and he threw the punk to the left with an eri otoshi shoulder throw. The Bastard had the misfortune to land on his shoulder on the curb, dislocating it. He was out of the fight.

Too bad we were in this fray, I thought as I searched for the most dangerous remaining Bone. The kids were mostly Puerto Rican, but it was not their origin that set them off, it was their criminality. Many Puerto Ricans worked out in my dojo, and several were real whizzes. In fact, some of the best American karatekas come from that island. Their numbers and importance in the martial arts are all out of proportion to their strength in the population.

But people, seeing the Bastard Bones, would assume that all Puerto Ricans were gangsters, forgetting that the white gangs were just as bad.

One had a knife that he thought to plunge into Hiroshi's back.

Knowing Hiroshi, I doubted the blade would ever touch him- but why take chances? My nunchaku shot out, striking the jerk in the solar plexus, knocking him out. Then I turned on the one with the potato razor.

This is a more formidable weapon than it looks, perhaps the most deadly nickel's worth of armament available. Several razor

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blades are embedded in half a potato. It is usually used to maim during close contact, though death can occur from bleeding. A

scraping motion is used, and the face is the preferred target. The blades are, by definition, razor-sharp; where they touch, they cut.

The potato anchors them and protects the hand of the wielder.

Very nasty.

But not against a weapon like the nunchaku. I scissored his potato hand between my sticks. Over the noise of battle I could hear the sound of his bones breaking. I let him drop just in time to catch a tire-iron wielder next, across the jaw, smashing in a tooth or two.

Hiroshi, the pressure relieved, relaxed. He stood calmly by, watching me perform, as though I were an apt student, a benign half-smile on his face. He wasn't worried; only three of the Bastard Bones remained standing, and two of those were girls.

But the fat dark girl was opening her purse, and the gang leader, the one with the broken thumb, was reaching for it. I knew it was no cosmetic she had in there, but I had to deal with the last male Bastard, who was coming at me with a piece of metal pipe.

He had a certain skill with his weapon, and I could not afford to take my eye off him. Not until I had put him away.

I wrapped the chain of my nunchaku around his arm, jerking him forward. Then I hit him with a straight inverted fist, uraken, a punch in the middle of his nose. He evidently did not feel the formidable pain of that strike, as is sometimes the case in the midst of combat; he continued to fight.

I glanced at my companion. But Hiroshi had the situation

well in hand. He was across the circle of bodies and could not get to the girl in time. For it was a gun she took from her purse, a cheap "Saturday Night Special" that was no aristocrat among firearms but would kill just as effectively at this range. Instead, Hiroshi let fly with his tonki, a tiny throwing knife. He must have learned this weapon from his ninja mentor, Fu Antos. At any rate, his aim was true, and the blade skewered the reaching hand of the Bas-
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tard. Now neither hand was any good for holding a weapon or anything else.

The girl had spunk. She lifted the gun herself, snarling like a cat at bay, and pointed it at Hiroshi.

But I had finally tapped my opponent, him of the potato, on the head, putting him forcefully to sleep. Now I shot the chuka sticks at the girl. The tip of one struck her arm and knocked it upward. Then Hiroshi was on her, having hurdled the bodies with surprising agility. One hand caught her wrist, the other gently wrenching the gun upward and backward so as to disarm her without maiming her hand, whose index finger was still caught in the trigger guard.

Something landed on my back, hard. It was the blond girl- and what a little wildcat she was! She clung like a sucker, her hard, pointed nails racking my face, going for the eyes. Her legs were locked around my waist, and though she was so small and light I found it hard to dislodge her, especially while fending off those claws, I was also aware of the feminine mass of her thighs. Childlike,

but no child.

I didn't like to do it, but I had to. I reached over my shoulder and grabbed a hank of her long straggly yellow hair and pulled, twisting hard backward and sidewise. Hair-pulling is frowned on in formal judo, but so is eye-gouging. A good yank on the hair at the proper moment can break the strongest man's neck or easily bring him down to the ground. In certain respects street fighting differs from polite practice.

Having loosened her clutch, I hauled up, hard, and she had to come. She fell off my back, twisting sidewise, and landed on her buttocks, what there was of them. The hard blow at the end of her spine must have been felt all the way to her brain, addling it even more. She had probably fissured her tailbone. At any rate, she gave a cry of anguish, and despite the circumstances, I felt remorse for hurting a girl.

The fight was over. The few Bastard Bones who were still mobile fled; the rest waited in their assorted agonies for whatever was

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to come. I would have felt sorry for these youngsters, but they had asked for it. They had terrorized the neighborhood for several years, with new young punks coming in to replace those who grew out of it; many people had been robbed or beaten and possibly killed. So we had done the neighborhood a favor, and given the gang a good taste of its own medicine.

I heard a police siren coming. I remembered Hiroshi's diamonds, and knew they would be impounded as police evidence.

"Come on," I said. "We don't want to get tangled up in police reports."

No indeed! The police were likely to arrest us, not the Bastards.

After all, we were grown men, established martial artists, and I was holding the nunchaku, a legally defined "deadly weapon."

The lawyers would have a field day ridiculing how a martial-arts champion took that weapon and beat up a bunch of underprivileged children. And how could I deny it? That was exactly what I had done. Which shows what a lie a half-truth can be.

Hiroshi had not answered. I looked about. He was gone. He must have departed while I was dealing with the blond bitch.

Bastard, I mean.

Except . . . I looked down in amazement.

The bag of diamonds was in my hand.

The bastard-sensei, I mean-had stuck me with the ninja exchequer after all, thereby committing me to its cause. For I had either to return the diamonds or to use them, and I knew I would never find Hiroshi unless he wanted to be found. It would be easier to investigate the weapons-supply situation.

Chapter 4:

NYMPHO

By the time I got back to my dojo, I had made up my mind: I would try. Hiroshi was obviously determined to see me committed to this effort, and Fu Antos-well, I was really quite curious to

know whether this child really was the four-hundred-year-old ninja master. I didn't believe it, of course, yet one part of my mind could not shake off the awe of what had happened, or had seemed to happen, in the second Black Castle on Hokkaido island. Only by meeting this boy again, and observing him, could I resolve that nagging doubt. And only by cooperating would I have the chance. So I would at least make the effort. Perhaps for the wrong reasons, but what man really understands his own motives? If it turned out to be impossible, legally, to obtain weapons for export, as I rather suspected was the case, I would then admit my failure and try to contact Hiroshi again. At least I would have tried.

First I had to convert those diamonds to cash. I didn't care to take them to a bank or jeweler; I knew they would ask me a multitude of unanswerable questions. Hiroshi had assured me the stones were legitimate, and I believed him, but a whole bagful of uniden-

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tified diamonds would arouse instant suspicion that would foil my purpose.

The judo class was gone, but Ilunga remained, putting things in order. I had never been able to afford really good exercise mats, so each day the small ones had to be rolled up and put away so the place could be cleaned, a tedious chore. Ilunga was a good housewife to my dojo, though she would have clobbered anyone who called her that. She was fiercely independent, yet she had artistic

sensitivity, and I suppose she liked the feel of legitimacy and proprietorship.

At any rate, I was satisfied with her performance on several counts: she was a good karate instructor, she kept the dojo neat, she handled the accounts well, and her presence encouraged both female and black attendance. I had never had any great number of either type-black or female-before; now business was improving, and it was because of the increase in female and black attendance. As I saw the black karate mistress, I remembered the humiliation Hiroshi had visited upon her in front of the class. I would have to set that right, somehow.

"Don't bother," she said, as if reading my mind. "Hiroshi came by not five minutes ago and apologized."

"He's here?" I asked, startled.

"When I turned around, he was gone. The man moves like a little old ghost."

"He studied under a ninja master," I explained. "Ninjitsu is sometimes called the art of invisibility. The ninjas were a kind of spy class in medieval Japan, highly trained warriors who usually specialized in stealth. So it's not surprising that Hiroshi has that talent. He just pulled the same thing on me. Disappearing."

She shrugged. "You know, he has the ki."

"I know."

"Like yours, only he can call it up anytime. He's quite a man."

"He's the leading aikidoist of the world," I said. "But that isn't what you meant, is it?"

"No."

"Look, Ilunga, I need some advice."

"He told me."

I looked at her, surprised again. "Told you?"

"The bag of rocks. Hot ice. You need it fenced."

"Fenced! That's what criminals do with stolen goods!"

She smiled a trifle bitterly. "How does it feel, white knight?"

"But I'm no-I mean, I couldn't help-"

"Lots of suckers in jail say the same thing."

"But these are legitimate diamonds!"

She shrugged. "Who's to know the difference?"

Who indeed! Already I liked this business less, and I had hardly liked it before. Selling uncut diamonds to a fence to raise money to buy quasi-legal arms for export! Was this the way all criminals got started, step by step, just trying to help out a friend? I would watch myself before I talked about any "criminal type" again.

But I had already decided I had no conventional alternative.

"You have connections?"

"I used to," she said.

I understood her reticence. Ilunga had a criminal past, tied in with the drug addiction: kill-13, the demon drug. Now she was going straight. There had been a police inquest, and I had testified as to her character and the vital assistance she had rendered me on more than one occasion. No adverse witnesses had shown up, and the judge had finally put her on probation, on condition that she

remain in town and behave. She had no incentive to associate with criminal elements, now that she was off the drug and gainfully employed.

In fact, I doubted she had ever been a criminal. She had been gang-raped as a child by four white men, and had no reprieve from the law. So she had turned to karate, so as to deal with such men. She had been an apt student, and her anti-rape campaign, while lacking in grace, had been remarkably effective. Rarely did any woman get raped or mugged in this area today. All the chronic offenders were now castrated. Then she had gotten hooked on kill-

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13, the most compulsive habit of them all, and been forced into criminal behavior. It was the drug, not the person, responsible. And in the end she had helped me to demolish the demon cult and wipe out its leader, Kan Sen.

Kan Sen. The name still sent an ugly little shiver through me.

That man had killed my fiancée. If I had not killed him already, I would love to do it now. In a way, I was sorry he did not have nine lives, like a cat, so that I could kill him eight more times.

But such reminiscences were not profitable. "Can you give me a name? Don't involve yourself, just tell me whom to contact. Someone with money, discretion, and some integrity, if that's possible."

"You want the moon," she muttered. "My information is not current. These things change awful fast sometimes, and I've been out of touch. I'd have to research."

"Okay, research," I said. "Meanwhile, I'll try to figure out how to spend the money."

"You do that. Meanwhile I'll need someone to instruct judo while you're gone."

"Who says I'm going anywhere?" I retorted. "I'm just going to make a few phone calls, get some permits, and place a few orders."

But it sounded phony, even to me. If this were really so simple a matter, Hiroshi would have handled it himself.

She shook her head, her dark eyes on me. Ilunga was a striking figure of a woman, with only the misshapen nose marring her face, and the nose looked better than it had. We had once had an affair of sorts, and it wasn't really over yet; she knew me too well. "You're going, and I don't know if you'll be back. Take care of yourself, white master."

I always felt uncomfortable when she called me that. I wasn't quite sure what this fiercely independent black woman meant by it. She called no man master, so it could be ridicule; little boys are addressed as "Master" instead of "Mister." In another sense it could be a complementary version of "black mistress," but I doubted that was the whole of it. The plain fact was that Ilunga was smarter than I, and I could not fathom all her thought processes. "Well,

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see if you can find a name for me by morning," I said. "I'm going home."

She nodded, and I left, feeling ill-at-ease.

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The phone was ringing as I entered my apartment. A phone call had started this hectic day; I was tempted not to answer it. But before I could build up resistance, my hand lifted the receiver.

"Jason Striker," I said.

"Ah, I am glad you are home at last," a familiar voice said.

There was a Spanish accent, but I couldn't quite place the man until he identified himself. "Luis Guardia here. Cuba. Remember? ¿Te acuerdas?"

I remembered with a rush. Luis, small and lame and older than I, but a Fifth Dan judoka, like me. I had met him in Cuba during the recent world team competition. We had done randori, and he had wiped me out. But he had tried to help me out of trouble there, too, being less naive than I about the political machinations of that island. "You're calling from Cuba?" I asked incredulously.

I hadn't realized this was possible.

He laughed. "No, Señor! Miami. I am an exile now; I escaped with my family by boat."

"But you were so well-situated there!" I exclaimed. "You gave up everything just to-?"

"Just to find freedom," he finished for me. "My time was short; the G-2 was after me because of my underground connections. I had to go."

"You-underground?" I asked, amazed. "I never suspected!"

Yet how else had he known of my own problems when I was in Cuba? Naturally he had not tipped his hand to me.

"I was a receiver of weapons for the anti-government guerrillas," he said. "I met the boat on the coast and delivered the weapons to the underground. But the G-2 was almost too clever. They cut me off, and I could not deliver my shipment. So I set course

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with it all for Miami, and now I am here. But I do not know whom to trust-except you, Señor. If you will help me. I have no money."

"Of course I'll help you!" Then I paused. "But there's something you should know."

"That you did a favor for Fidel? I know of that. But you are apolitical; you are not Fidel's man."

An accurate assessment. Then something else registered. "You have weapons-here in America?"

"I did not say that," he said, and I realized I had been crude. If he had weapons here, they were surely illegal, and he hardly needed that sort of trouble. Yet it opened up a fantastic possibility, for I needed weapons of exactly the sort he was likely to have.

In fact, this very connection might have been what prescient little Hiroshi had in mind. Perhaps Fu Antos had known that Luis was on his way and that he would contact me.

"I have money," I said. "A lot of it. Or I will have soon. And I need-certain supplies. Where can I meet you?"

"I do not have an address," he said. "I can not trust the parent

exile organization, as I suspect the chivatazo came from there."

"The what? I don't understand much Spanish."

He chuckled. "The chivo is a goat."

"A goat?" I felt dense.

"Goats bleat, they squeal."

"A squealer!" Suddenly I understood: he did not feel safe, as a defector so recently from Cuba. Castro's G-2 agents would be liberally sprinkled throughout the sizable exile community in Miami.

If there was one organization whose deadly efficiency I appreciated, it was the Cuban G-2. That was why he could not trust the exiles. Only one Cuban in a thousand might be his enemy, an informer, but that would wipe him out in an instant.

"Perhaps I can get to you," he said.

"Sure. Can you make it tomorrow?" I asked eagerly. Not only his weapons, but his skills—he could really help me in this ninja

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business. If nothing else, he could instruct my judo classes while I went for Fu Antos' supplies.

"Yes," he said after a pause.

"Can you get here okay? I can wire you money."

"No need." What he meant was that he didn't dare give out his precise location; someone might be bugging the line. I doubted it, but such fears are much more immediate to people from totalitarian countries. Actually, our own country has not set any shining examples recently. "I will get there. Tomorrow, by nightfall.

Thank you, amigo."

"Thank you, amigo!" I replied, hoping he was not being overconfident.

It was a long way from Miami, and he had no money.

No doubt he could hitchhike.

The phone went dead, and I hung up. The call exhilarated me; now I knew that I could do much of what Hiroshi had requested.

And reestablish a valuable friendship in the process.

I stripped off my shirt and trousers as I munched a carrot from the refrigerator. I was hungry, but too unsettled to sit down and eat properly. Anyway, since when do I have to apologize for eating something as healthy as a carrot? A few calisthenics, some practice breakfalls on the floor, and maybe I'd unwind enough to digest a real meal. What was I going to do with those diamonds overnight?

The doorbell rang. That was all I needed, some peddler selling magazines or brushes. I strode across the room and flung open the door, ready to tell him off. Maybe he was selling life insurance; maybe he'd need some!

A lovely woman stood there. Not beautiful, technically; her black hair was a bit frizzled, and her face was acne-pitted. But her black eyes were alert, her lips full, and her figure had definite sex appeal. She wore a bright red sweater that made the most of a modest bust, and her hips were broad, serving as a magnet for male attention. Some women have a middle section that makes all the rest irrelevant, and she was certainly that type. She was tall-about five-ten-and her face showed character. Undoubtedly an interesting person to know.

She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place her. And I stood there in my undershorts, carrot in hand. "I think you have the wrong apartment," I mumbled.

She looked me over from shoulder to crotch. "No, I think it's the right one."

"I don't think we've met." I felt stupid as hell. But what was there to say, in this circumstance?

"Aren't you the wrestling instructor? I'm sure you are; you have the muscle. My daughter goes to your class."

It began to fall halfway into place. "Judo. Karate. I have lots of children in my classes. What's her name?"

"Jan. She said you wanted to see me."

I remembered. Jan Green was twelve years old, big for her age, and just getting serious about judo. Under age ten they don't have the attention span to get very far, but the older children can become relatively proficient, and I like working with them. It astounds outsiders to see a child throw a man my size in a somersault to the mat, but it can be done, and Jan knew how. I had hardly met her parents; she usually came to class alone. There was a definite family resemblance, which explained this woman's seeming familiarity. The girl had said something once about her folks being separated or divorced; that could account for their absence. I still didn't like her walking unaccompanied through the city.

These days it simply isn't safe for girls of any age, and most areas

have not had the benefit of Ilunga's anti-molestation campaign.

So I had told Jan I wanted to see her mother. I had wanted to say something about safety, and also to obtain permission for Jan to enter a junior tournament at another dojo. I could take her there myself, along with the others. But I had meant for the woman to stop by at my dojo, not my apartment.

"Better chew on that carrot before it rots," the woman said.

"Your daughter's doing fine," I said hastily. What a time for this female to show up! "She's a yellow belt now, and I expect her to make orange next month." In judo and karate, a person's skill is shown by the color of his belt. White is the lowest grade, followed

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by yellow, going on up to black. Perhaps one student in twenty makes it all the way up the ladder; most drop out somewhere in the kyu, or lower grades. Many more could make it if they had the determination and attitude. Work, more than aptitude, is the critical factor.

"That's fine," Mrs. Green said, stepping forward. I hastily stepped back, and she moved on into my apartment.

"This really isn't the time," I protested ineffectively. Now it was coming back: I had seen this woman at the dojo, in other clothing. I have a terrible memory for people out of context; I can recognize a parent with his/her child, but not in some other situation, and a woman's change of clothing can baffle me entirely.

Especially when she switches from dowdy street outfit to bright,

tight sweater and lets her hair down. I hadn't realized who she was, then. She sat through a couple of class sessions avidly watching me as I demonstrated throws and holds. The seoi otoshi shoulder-drop throw: I have a good memory for judo, anyway. "I just wanted your permission for Jan to enter a tournament. I think she-"

"You doing anything tonight?" she asked, looking about my messy domicile.

"Look, Mrs. Green-"

"Onelida," she said.

"Who?"

"Onelida. Ms. Onelida Green, if you want it formal."

Divorced, undoubtedly. Few married women used the Ms. in lieu of the Mrs.

"All right, Onelida. I don't entertain strange women in my apartment, and I've had a busy day."

"Why not relax, then? I know an excellent restaurant, and I'm very good company. You look as though you need a change of pace."

I paused. I did need a change of pace. Hiroshi, Bastard Bones, Luis Guardia, Fu Antos . . . What the hell. "All right. I'll dress." She smiled. "I knew you'd see the light."

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As I passed the table, I saw Hiroshi's bag of diamonds. Good God, I had almost forgotten them! I swept it up and took it into

my bedroom, hiding it under my hamper of dirty laundry. Not an ideal place, but who would suspect? Anyway, my door would be locked.

In retrospect I can hardly account for my carelessness. I must have been very tired. I had a forceful lesson coming.

Onelida insisted on using her car. We went to Chang's, a Polynesian restaurant on I-9 north. The decor was semi-authentic Polynesian, including stuffed fish on the walls.

Onelida talked. I tried to pay attention, but kept thinking of those diamonds in my laundry. What was I doing here with a woman I hardly knew?

On the other hand, she was intriguing. Some women are like store-window mannequins, impeccably dressed, ideally formed, and unrelievedly neutral. Others, with far less substantial physical endowment, manage to animate it so well that they are far more appealing. Gradually my concerns diminished, and my attention oriented exclusively on her. It was not a romantic attachment; it was sexual. There was a fascination about her, a touchability. I became aware of a burgeoning need for expression that could not be satisfied in a restaurant.

But was Onelida really the type? Perhaps I was misreading the signals. So I bided my time.

Liquor was served: apertif first, more with the meal, and more yet after it. I don't drink, but once in a while, against my better judgment, I yield to temptation and make an exception. We had

an exotic concoction, mai-tai-rum in a hollowed-out pineapple-
so I sampled it. Later there was another rum drink made of three
distinct layers of different density and color, each of which stayed
at its own level. All I did was taste it, through a straw, first one
color and then another. Hardly enough to intoxicate a man, I
thought. Now I know why they call it demon rum. It was deceptively
mild; perhaps the fruit juice hid the taste of alcohol.

I knew damn well I ought to cut this date short and go home

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to the diamonds, but those rocks symbolized an entire complex of
developments I wished I could forget for a few hours.

And so I lingered, and imbibed a bit too much. The impact
was greater on me because of my inexperience as a drinker. I felt
pleasantly dizzy, and I paid absolute attention to everything
Onelida said. I can't remember a word of it now.

The meal was as exotic as the beverages. A pu-pu platter-a
Polynesian volcano. A veritable cornucopia of small plates around
a fake volcano of blue flame to heat the food. Giant fried shrimps,
skewered squares of steak, spareribs, chicken wings, deviled crab,
small bits of chicken liver with bacon around them.

I was a novice, or maybe just drunk. I made the mistake of
asking for the Polynesian chicken. It was too much food. I had
already consumed what amounted to a normal meal, and this-
well, let me just describe it.

The waiter arrived with a cart loaded with bowls. He poured
heaps of pieces of fried batter-covered chicken, mixed it with Chinese

and Polynesian vegetables, Chinese melons, and celery-I don't know what went into it, but it was a lot. Then he lit a saucer of some kind of wine and poured the flaming liquid over the mixture. It burned eerily blue. He mixed everything together in the flame, a phenomenal performance. If I didn't imagine the whole thing in an alcoholic nightmare . . .

But the taste was out of this world. And during the meal the waiter kept filling our pot with hot fragrant Chinese tea.

"You're not used to it," Onelida said, surveying me with an experienced eye. "I'd better get you home." Or something like that; as I said, I can't recollect. I think they call that an alcoholic blackout.

I nodded, not speaking for fear I'd say something really stupid.

In that, I think I was really smart.

But it was not to my apartment she took me; it was hers.

"Oh-your home," I mumbled brightly.

"What did you expect, Jason?"

Well, I didn't exactly know. But one thing I know now: watch

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out for mild, multicolored drinks! No, she hadn't given me a mickey; the alcohol alone was sufficient.

She let me in-I think she must have supported me somewhat

-shut the door, and began to undress me.

"What. . . ?" I inquired, hardly resisting.

"Of course," she said soothingly.

"Oh." That seemed to make sense. I was certainly sharp! I was lucky I could still stand without staggering.

But that was academic. I wasn't standing now. She set me down on the bed-it was a big, soft, queen-sized affair-and lay beside me. I realized, somewhat late, that both of us were now naked.

That reminded me of something urgent I had wanted to do, only I couldn't quite recollect what. But I had no time to think about it. Onelida was all over me, kissing my face and body with feverish abandon. "I'm an awful sucker for a good physique," she murmured as her lips cruised past my right ear. "I saw you doing that wrestling . . ."

"Countering the kuzure-kamishihogatame broken upper fourquarter hold," I said. "You do it like this." And I actually started to break what I thought was her hold, though the resemblance was coincidental. Why I struggled, I don't know; it really is quite an intriguing hold when applied by a naked woman, since her upper torso is almost across your face, her head on your stomach, her arm reaching around your-well, never mind.

"The feel of all that muscle . . ." She tweaked my triceps as a man might tweak a feminine posterior.

Unfortunately, all this inhibited me; she was too aggressive.

The rum, of course, had dulled my sexual capacity, so that my response was slower yet. The result was that my performance in what should have been an ideal situation was distinctly lackluster.

More correctly, fuzzily lackluster.

Nevertheless, thanks to her enthusiasm, we were getting there.

Perhaps my slowness gave her a better chance to get aroused, more time to titillate herself with my muscle. Then she climbed on top

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of me, spreading her body the length of mine. "Tate-shihogatame,"

I muttered. "Vertical four-direction hold . . ." Actually, she was straddling my torso, her thighs spread, getting into position.

"Give me a baby! Give me a baby!" she screamed, biting me on the neck.

That shriveled me. First, I didn't really like her sexual assault; it made me feel less masculine, as though our male-female roles were reversed. Second, her words reminded me that she had a daughter in my class, her baby; I wondered where Jan was, and how I would face her in class next time. Third, I hardly wanted to give this woman a baby. And fourth, I was afraid her bite would mark me, to my embarrassment before Ilunga and others, who would surely know.

As a result, I sobered up some and performed, but there was very little force or pleasure in it. And that half-failure mortified me too, for it was obvious that she was still en route.

Then I had a notion that would not have occurred to me in my normal, sober mind, but seemed terrifically original at the time. The fact is, I am rather straitlaced about sex; I know this because several of my partners have been at pains to so inform me.

I suffer, they say, from undue conventionality.

So this time I became, for me, radically unconventional. I went, if the vernacular serves me correctly, down on her.

She reacted like a wind-up doll with its regulating mechanism haywire. Her arms and legs flexed spasmodically; her head banged back and forth on the bed, knocking off one of the pillows. She groaned, whether in ecstasy or pain, I was not certain. Both, probably; I think there was a sadomasochistic streak in her, sexually expressed.

"No one ever did that to me before!" she exclaimed. "Don't stop!"

No one before? Not more than a thousand times, anyway! She was obviously well familiar with the procedure, primed to respond to it.

Then she came, explosively, catching my head between her

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thighs and crushing it with painful force. "Oh, that's good! My husband never socked me like that! Not in three hours, he couldn't do that to me!"

He had tried for three hours? At the time that seemed like a pretty good testimonial for someone. Him or me?

Soon she subsided, and I made as if to dress. I had fought the good fight and won a victory of sorts, I thought, and my head was beginning to clear. "Oh, don't go!" she exclaimed, horrified. "The night is young yet!"

Young? Maybe so, but I felt old. I tried to demur, but she clung to me, literally. Her arms caught firmly around my hips, and one of her breasts was wedged into my crotch. It was a difficult plea to deny. I couldn't even think of an equivalent judo hold to name. And of course I had no convenient way to go home at this hour if she didn't take me. Not that I had any clear idea what the hour was.

It turned out to be true: her night was young. Like an indefatigable warrior, she was soon after me again, eager to arouse and be aroused. "I am a nymphomaniac," she said candidly.

A nympho! I believed it. The dream of the Playboy-type American male. But I doubt that many of those studs have actually tried it. Enthusiasm diminishes with each too-rapid repetition, until the act becomes extremely uncomfortable. I know; I learned the hard way.

"Keep going-that's good," she murmured passionately. "It reminds me of Larry, short but oh so wide, it always hurt the first time . . ."

I wondered just how that description applied. Was it Larry who was short and wide, or merely a portion of him?

"I used to work for the telephone company," she continued.

She certainly liked to talk. She kept up a running monologue throughout, which was just one more disconcerting thing about her. It was like having a play-by-play report on a sport event, only I was one of the players. Well, at least I knew what the score was.

"My hours were eight to twelve and six to ten, a split shift. I had

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two boyfriends. I'd split for Zack from twelve to four, and for Aaron overnight."

Split shift indeed! Sex from A to Z. Was she teasing me? I wished one of those boyfriends would spell me now. She had bitten me so many times I felt as though I'd been in a fight to the death. My loins certainly felt deceased. If Ilunga saw me now, she'd probably castrate me. Here she was getting information for me on how to fence the diamonds, while I-

The diamonds! When was I going to get out of this?

At last Onelida had mercy and let me collapse into sleep. I dreamed of Cuba and judo tournaments: the anticipation, the excitement, the agonizing loss. Luis had been there, my friend, though his team opposed mine. I seldom meet people I really like, but those I do like are normally in judo or proficient in another martial art. Luis had beaten me in informal randori, judo practice, yet he had made me feel like twice a winner. The right remark at the right time.

It would be good to see him again.

Then I dreamed of Fu Antos, the ninja mystic, now reincarnated as an old-eyed child. I did not like Fu Antos; I was afraid of him. I respected his formidable powers, but I knew his basic philosophy was not mine. He was not a violent throwback to medieval times; he was a native of those times. That factory destruction . . . I would try to help him, of course, out of respect for

Hiroshi. But the faster my part of this effort was over, the better off I'd be.

The thing about Fu Antos was his ki. It was too strong, an overwhelming magic. Call it super-hypnotism, if you will, or voodoo come true. I am a twentieth-century man; I do not believe in magic or voodoo, and I distrust hypnotism. And none of these are perfect parallels to his ki. That demonstration Fu Antos had made, when he made me think I had committed suicide when I was actually killing him-if he could do that, where were his limits? Then, to see him reincarnated immediately in the form of a young boy-this defied common sense.

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So I preferred to forget Fu Antos, just as I had to forget my prior experience in the northern Shaolin monastery and my lost fiancée, Chiyako. I was strong physically; I feared no man in honest hand-to-hand combat. But I was weak emotionally; my mental and spiritual wounds had never really healed. I had never achieved any lasting certainty of values or peace of mind. How comforting it would be to turn off my doubting mind and exist the way so many other people did, certain of my own worth and morality. But somehow I could not.

Chiyako smiled at me, her stunningly beautiful face framed by soft black hair. Half Chinese, and, as it were, half kung fu. Behind her I saw the old Shaolin monastery where I had, almost,

found spiritual relief.

Then all vanished in the flare of bursting bombs, and I felt the utter helplessness and horror of the destruction my presence had wrought. The monastery was rubble, Chiyako was dead-because of me.

I woke in a cold sweat. The monks had given me life, but where was my soul? They had told me I had a mission, and I thought at one time that mission was to abolish the scourge of kill-13 from the world. But that was done, and still I was unsatisfied. It was as though my mission remained unfulfilled.

Yet I had been through similar nightmares before. Always, the new day came, as it did now, and I busied myself in the trivia of contemporary routine. Today I had diamonds to fence and weapons to buy. Tonight Luis would come. Some trivia!

I paused in my thoughts, looking around. Something unpleasant rippled up my spine. It was daylight, perhaps nine o'clock.

Someone was knocking on the door.

After a moment of disorientation I remembered that I was not in my own apartment. Onelida was just emerging from the bathroom in her negligee, looking flower-fresh. She had the stamina of an ox.

She heard the knocking. "Omigod, I forgot! That's my husband!" she whispered.

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Her husband! What was this?

"He's a brute of a man!" she said urgently. "Run out the back

way. Hide in the car!"

I was not afraid of any "brute of a man" per se, for I have fought the best. But if she were, after all, still married, then I was an interloper. I wanted no part of that.

I slid out of bed, grabbing my clothing from the chair in a messy bundle. Naked, holding it defensively before me, I barged out the back just as Onelida opened the front. Had the man seen me?

I scampered barefoot across the pavement, searching for her car. Something moved, and for a heart-stopping instant I thought it was a person, a housewife. But it was only a cat jumping down from a garbage can. All I needed now was an arrest for indecent exposure-me and the hickeys all over my body.

Luckily I found the car without being seen. I dived inside, banging my forehead on the steering wheel. I huddled there, trying to get dressed in a hurry in that hellishly cramped space.

A man emerged from the same door I had so precipitously exited from. He carried a pair of shoes in his big hand.

My shoes.

I would have driven off in a panic, but I didn't have the car keys.

The man came purposefully up to the car. I waited, chagrined.

I could not fight him; I was in the wrong. Why hadn't the bitch told me she was still married? I would simply have to take whatever he dished out, and she had not exaggerated about his size. A stevedore,

by the look of him.

I saw Onelida standing in the doorway, looking scared. Beside her was the child, Jan. The prior absence of her daughter should have alerted me; nine times out of ten the woman gains custody of the child in a divorce action, even if she is a poor mother. Where else would Jan have stayed, with only one parent? Obviously she was out with her father, who would return. Had returned.

He peered in the window while I cowered. "You did not have

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to run," he said mildly. "The bitch does not mean anything to me.

I only came to bring my daughter back."

I opened my mouth but could not speak.

"All I care about at this house is my little girl," he said. "I'd ten times rather take her out for a night than her mother. I'm even sending her to self-defense school so no one can hurt her. I don't give a damn about Onelida; I quit bothering after the first dozen lovers she had. You know, she was even cheating on her A.M. and P.M. lovers when she worked for the phone company?"

I made an explosive exhalation of breath, half-laughter, halfamazement.

Every part of this misadventure was incredible.

He nodded. "Every time we have a quarrel, she goes out and finds another stud. Anyway, she's insatiable. You can visit anytime you want, as long as you can stand it. You don't have to sneak around. Just make sure the child's not there, okay?"

I nodded dumbly, not having the nerve to tell him I was Jan's

self-defense instructor. But maybe he knew.

"Here's your shoes," he said, handing them in. "Nice meeting you. I know what you've been through." And he ambled away.

I would have felt better if he had bashed me one.

Fifteen interminable minutes later, Onelida, dressed, came out to the car. "I'll take you home," she said.

She drove. On the way we passed a park. She halted the car.

"This is pretty quiet this time of day," she said. "We can do it right here in the car." And she opened her blouse, revealing her braless bosom.

"Thanks, no," I choked. Now I was really feeling my hangover.

The sight of her body made me feel sick, literally. It had been quite a night of conditioning. "No time, got to get home!"

"But I haven't had it this morning!" she protested indignantly.

"My husband won't touch me, the bastard."

Which reminded me of the Bastard Bones-another unfortunate association. So that was where she had spent that fifteen minutes, trying to make her brute of a husband oblige her. But he was

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too smart to start in. "Home," I said firmly. I knew we'd never get out of that park if I made any attempt to fill the bottomless pit.

To my immense relief, she acquiesced. I suppose she had an eye to the future; if she made a pest of herself this time, she might lose out the next time. I had no intention of there being any next time, but had sense enough not to say that. She started the car

again and drove me without further comment to my apartment.

Her very silence was a reprimand; and so help me, I actually felt guilty. Was she hoping I'd invite her in for a two-hour quickie?

No chance!

"See you again," she said as I stepped out.

"Sure," I lied.

Chapter 5:

HOT ICE

As I entered my apartment, I remembered yet again Hiroshi's bag of diamonds. I rushed to the laundry hamper, fearing the worst.

They had to be there, but if they weren't-

And they weren't. The bag was gone.

I looked wildly around the apartment, refusing to believe it.

The place was its usual sloppy self, dusty and not too clean. My judo gi was hanging over the back of a chair, undisturbed. My ancient black-and-white TV set sat in one corner, and my shelf of martial-arts books was along one wall. Overall, the place was in need of a woman's touch, but the one woman I ever wanted to touch it was dead. It certainly did not look as if anybody had been here in my absence; everything was exactly as I had left it.

For an hour I ransacked my own apartment. I was sweating. I had no air-conditioner, but that was only half the reason. Because I didn't like a stuffy room, I had locked my door-and left my window wide open to let in the night breeze.

Some protection! But ordinarily I had nothing worth stealing.

Naturally I should have taken better precautions this time, but it was a bit late for recriminations.

I had no luck. The diamonds had been stolen while I was out on my ridiculous hot date. What a price I had paid for my foolishness.

I might as well have put up a billboard: DIAMONDS IN HAMPER-PLEASE STEAL.

I fell back on the bed. Who could have done this? I had been criminally careless to leave the diamonds exposed; yet who would have suspected I had them? I had never been robbed before, and nothing else had been touched. The thief had obviously known exactly what he was after, and where to look.

Who had known, then? I ran over the list.

First, Hiroshi himself. No, he was no suspect. He had no motive; he wanted me to have the diamonds. He had nothing to gain by stealing them back, when I would gladly have returned them. And he was honest. I could not imagine him acting in a criminal fashion.

Second, Ilunga. Again, no. She had been a criminal, technically, but was changed now. Her basic nature had never been criminal, and she had never lied to me or coveted anything that was mine. All she wanted of me was-me.

The Bastard Bones gang? They didn't really know, and most of them were in no condition to attempt a robbery right now anyway.

And they would not have stopped with theft; they would

have laid into things with sections of pipe, ripping up my apartment in an orgy of vandalism. This was a more dispassionate, professional job.

Who else? Had the waitress at the bar overheard our conversation?

I doubted it; she had other duties, and we had desisted when she was near. The general hum of conversation in such places provides a certain privacy, anyway.

What about Onelida? No, she had been with me all the time.

Even in my sleep I had been aware of her insatiable hands running over my body, her torso pressing near, as if to wring out the last vestige of experience. Her husband or daughter? They would have

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had to be in collusion with her, and I doubted either was the type. And it really made no sense, distracting me all night when an hour or so would have done. On top of that, there had been nothing furtive about any of them; I had been the furtive one.

Then it came to me: the yak-milk drinker. He could have caught on. Hiroshi might even have confided in him. I hadn't liked his face, anyway; too oily and sweaty.

Well, I could run him down. Hiroshi would know where to find him.

Hiroshi! How could I locate the little aikidoist?

The phone rang. I jumped; was that Hiroshi, presciently calling in?

No; it was Ilunga. "I have a name for you."

Oh, no! She had the contact, but I had no diamonds. If I had regretted my night's dalliance before, I felt abysmal now.

"You awake yet?" Ilunga inquired in response to my silence.

Suddenly a new notion came to me. "Did you tell your contact what we had?"

She sounded disgusted. "I was not born yesterday, honky. He thinks I have skag."

She meant heroin. Smart indirection. "There's a hitch."

She caught on instantly. "Not even a white man's that stupid!"

"I was. I went out on a date." No, better not go into that. "I've got to find Hiroshi."

"That must have been some date," she muttered. "But you're in luck, more than you deserve. I saw him with a fat Mexican and a boy, not fifteen minutes ago. Going down toward the bar."

The bar! "Thanks!" I said, hanging up. I scrambled into my clothing and headed that way.

No Bastard Bones punks were about. Not surprising.

They were there, having a breakfast, naturally, of yak's milk.

And if I judged correctly, yak cheese. Hiroshi and the boy were on one side of the table, José Peon on the other. I slid into the booth beside José, so as to block any attempted escape.

"There has been a theft," I said grimly.

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José turned toward me, and I tensed. "Señor, I do not know what you have lost, but I think it is your temper. I suspect you

suspect me of something."

"José is blameless," Hiroshi said.

That put me in an awkward spot. Hiroshi was a trusting soul, but he was no fool. He could touch a person's hand and know by his ki whether that person was friend or enemy. I could not accuse José now.

"Perhaps we had better excuse ourselves," José said. His son sidled out.

"The boy," I said, thinking how easy it would be to scramble in a window and out again. An invitingly open window.

Hiroshi shook his head. "My friend means well," he said to José, as though apologizing for me.

"Say no more," José said, smiling. "If we can help-"

"Perhaps another time."

I had to move out of the way so that José could leave. I did not feel at all comfortable as his bulk passed me.

"How can you be sure?" I demanded when we were alone.

"The diamonds are gone, and you met this man only yesterday.

What do you know about him?"

"All acquaintances must have a beginning," he said calmly. "I excused José because this misfortune is not of his making, and it would not be polite to involve him in it." He looked at me with that gentle yet soul-penetrating manner he had. "Do not blame yourself. It is not possible to keep a matter such as Fu Antos' mission entirely secret. I have been aware of the inimical presence of others since I arrived in America. I thought it was merely the fundamental

arrogance of your Western society, but when you accepted the diamonds, that presence deserted me and followed you.

Then I knew that someone was after that wealth."

Some of Hiroshi's inexplicable actions became explicable. "You were being tailed, so you tested to see what they were after!"

He nodded. "I was sure no harm would come to you, or I would not have done it. The parties never approached me closely

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while I retained the bag; for some reason they doubted their ability to take it from me, though I sought to provide opportunity."

"I'm not surprised." Hiroshi had been seemingly careless with that bag, but he was always alert, unlike the lummoX I had turned out to be.

"Now, fortunately, we have succeeded in transferring the diamonds."

"Fortunately! You said you needed the money for-"

"That is true. But it became more important to identify our enemy. So long as he was unknown, we could not safely proceed with our mission."

"But how-?"

"It is possible to orient on specific objects," he explained. "I have attuned my perception to the diamonds. I shall be able to trace them, if they are not too far away."

This smacked of the supernatural, but I kept my hackles down.

I had heard of strange new discoveries about the human brain and

its perceptions. Some people could receive the aura of particular objects and tune in on those objects even though blindfolded. It had been demonstrated in the laboratory, I understood. Certainly, if anyone had such a talent, Hiroshi would be the one. His power of ki was miraculous, second only to that of his ancient mentor, Fu Antos.

"Have you a map?" he inquired.

"At home."

"Excellent! I shall also need one of your metal coat hangers."

"A map and a coat hanger?" I asked blankly.

He nodded. "To locate the diamonds and identify our enemy."

I shrugged mentally. Everything Hiroshi did made sense, eventually.

He had strategies and perceptions and ways of thinking that fell outside any conventional scheme. In time it would come clear, I hoped.

At my apartment he took my map of Manhattan and laid it out flat on the table. Then he took the coat hanger, cut off the hook, and twisted the remainder into something like a slingshot.

He held it up. "Does that suffice?" he inquired, for all the world like a harmless nut.

"I think you need a rubber band," I said, making a gesture as of a slingshot being loosed.

He smiled. He took the ends of the Y in the fingers of each hand and held the point over the map. He reminded me of nothing so much as a charlatan dowsing for water.

Dowsing? Oh, no! "Hiroshi, you aren't seriously trying to. . .?"

He ignored me. The point moved back and forth over the map, as though questing. Hiroshi's eyes were closed, his face serene.

I suspected he had gone into a light trance.

Emanations from an object-that I could understand, cynical though I might be about a person's ability to perceive them. But to locate such an object by dowsing over a map!

Hiroshi looked up. "Nothing. Have you another map?"

"There are other sections of the city and suburbs. What do you want?"

"Evidently the diamonds have been removed from the immediate vicinity. They should show up on a map of Greater New York."

"That figures," I said. "Only eight million people to choose from."

I dug out the map, and he spread it out as before, weighting it down with knives and spoons to flatten the creases. He resumed his dowsing.

The point dipped. Hiroshi's eyes opened. "There." I looked at the map. The clothes hanger pointed to Long Island.

"You have a map of Long Island?"

I rummaged in my collection and produced a tattered map.

Again Hiroshi dowsed. Again the stick dipped. This time it pointed to an area I remembered as a classy suburban neighborhood where I knew there were a number of wealthy estates.

"One of these people would hardly need to steal," I remarked

dubiously. Was this dowsing real, or merely random? And if real,

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was it because of his sensitivity to the diamonds, or did he actually have a notion where they might be? If he had a prime suspect, why didn't he just say so?

"It is not for the money for them," he said. "It is to take the money from us. So that the ninjas cannot move equipment to the Amazon."

"Oh." I should have seen it for myself. "Then you do have some idea who is behind this theft."

"Yes. But there are several possibilities. We must be sure before we act."

A good policy anytime. But it left me still in doubt whether he was sure, or guessing, or trusting to magic. If he proposed to make demands on some wealthy New York person simply because his dowsing rod had dipped over that spot of the map . . .

"How do you propose to act?" I inquired suspiciously.

He turned innocent eyes upon me. "Why, you and I shall go there tonight and recover the diamonds."

"Just like that," I said. "We just knock on the door and say

'Please give back the ice,' and hold out a hand?"

"No, I think we shall not ask. We shall take."

"One theft doesn't justify another!"

He ignored this point. "It must be done swiftly and privately.

We do not want your newspapers to exploit the matter."

I sighed. My certainty that Hiroshi would never commit a crime was taking a beating. And what about me? I was in it with him. The thing was impossible, but what could I do?

*

It was no private estate. It was the Brazilian embassy. Or consulate, or residence for the staff thereof; I wasn't clear on that. But I did know it was the property of a foreign nation, and that hardly eased my concern. Were we about to be involved in an international incident?

Horried, I tried again to talk Hiroshi out of it, but he was

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unshakable. His dowsing had shown the way and identified the opposition, he claimed; now he wanted the diamonds back. If I didn't go with him, he would do it alone.

It was a big old house surrounded by a garden. The main domicile was hardly visible from the streets because of the high stone wall, theoretically decorative, but with little pieces of colored glass embedded in the top to prevent ready access.

We decided the best approach was through the garden. I boosted Hiroshi up so he could peer over the top; he was amazingly light, hardly a hundred pounds.

But inside, we discovered, were vicious attack dogs. I could hear their swift, businesslike approach; there seemed to be four of them. It would be possible for us to subdue them, but it would be an ugly, noisy business that would rouse the neighborhood, defeating

our purpose. Even a harmless lapdog can be excellent protection because of the noise it makes, alerting its owner to intrusion.

Robbers don't like dogs.

I didn't like dogs much either, at the moment. Which showed the current state of my conscience.

Well, we had come prepared, in ninja fashion. Hiroshi tossed doped meat over the wall to them; one mouthful would put the canines to sleep for hours. That was one reason this approach through the garden was best; the people inside would not pay undue attention to noise, assuming it was the dogs. We might even have to bark a bit.

No joke! In medieval Japan the ninjas used to carry tame crickets with them, so that when the wild crickets were silenced by the surreptitious approach of the spy, in this way warning an alert guard, the tame ones would take up the musical slack. Thus there was no interruption in the background noise of the night, and no one suspected the presence of the ninja. We could do the same by imitating the sounds of the dogs.

Alas, not so easy. These dogs were well-trained and well-fed; they would not touch the meat. So Hiroshi produced his second trick, a tiny vial containing a milky liquid.

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"They won't go for poison," I said dubiously.

He unstoppered the vial. I didn't smell anything special, but

suddenly the attitude of the dogs changed. They leaped at the wall where Hiroshi poured the fluid, whining. "Essence of bitchin-heat," he explained.

Clever! For a male dog, that was the ultimate perfume. Human beings are to a large extent eye-oriented. Dogs are nose-oriented. They could no more ignore this smell than I could ignore a shapely nude belly dancer performing in the street. Certain matters require immediate attention.

We did not, after all, try to scale the garden wall on this side; our presence just might distract the dogs from their futile romantic quest. I wondered fleetingly what Hiroshi would have come up with if they had turned out to be bitches. How much of his technique was skill and how much luck, I could not guess.

We moved around to the rear, following the wall. At intervals there were small iron spikes set vertically in the top. Presumably these were intended to further discourage intrusions, while beautifying the premises. As it happened, those sharp spikes had the opposite effect on us.

I had a *kyoketsu-shogi*, a double-bladed knife attached to a genuine woman's-hair cord with a ring on the end. Another handy little ninja item.

I threw the ring at a spike, as though I were playing horseshoes.

I missed. I tried again, and missed again. Then Hiroshi took it from me, skimmed it up once, and the ring settled neatly over the spike.

I donned *tegaki*, the spiked brass knuckles, took the cord in

both hands and walked up the wall. The broad iron bands around my hands protected my palms from the glass as I seized the top of the wall. This ninja equipment was actually pretty good. They had really known how to infiltrate, those Japanese agents; their tools were simple yet sophisticated.

I pulled the knife up after me, unhooked the ring, and jumped down inside the garden. I crossed quickly to the rear wall of the
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house, concerned lest the dogs discover me after all. Now I had a harder ascent: up the rough wall like a human fly, no rope this time. For a true ninja this might be child's play; for me it was horrendous.

Now I donned some more of the artifacts Hiroshi had provided, tabi, Japanese socks with metal spikes to give my feet purchase. They actually worked; I scaled the wall as though I were climbing a tree.

Hiroshi had told me where to look for the diamonds. I still hardly believed his dowsing, but he seemed so certain that it was easier simply to go along. I squatted on the broad sill, feeling terribly exposed; one shot from inside the room would finish me. But Hiroshi had assured me that the man guarding the diamonds was asleep.

I brought out the little glass cutter and stroked it along the pane. The cutter had a diamond blade, and theoretically would do the job. Nothing seemed to happen, so I stroked again, bearing

down harder. Unsatisfied, I ran my finger across the cut, and lo! a channel was forming. Hiroshi had instructed me in its use during the day, but that's not the same as doing it while perching insecurely on a window ledge.

I never really fancied myself as a second-story man, but I did feel a certain responsibility for the diamonds I had lost, so I suppressed my misgivings and continued with the job. First I made a horizontal cut and covered it with sticky tape. Then I made a vertical cut from each end, and finally a bottom cut. The tape hinge held the severed panel in place. When the cuts had been completed, I drew out the panel with a small suction-cup device so that it would not fall. I freed it from the tape and set it carefully aside. Now I could enter.

Inside the room was a bed with a cabinet beside it. Obviously the diamonds were in the cabinet. Sure enough, the guard was asleep. Evidently he didn't believe there'd be any trouble, especially in the early evening. How could we know where the diamonds were, let alone recover them?

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I stood indecisively. Maybe we didn't know. All we had to go on was Hiroshi's dowsing. If we were wrong-well, no wonder the man was asleep. He had nothing to guard. In fact, he was probably a functionary of the embassy or consulate, snoozing away his off-shift, as he had every right to do. He might be on duty at night, so he had to sleep in the daytime.

With resignation I went to the cabinet. Might as well finish this charade and get out. I checked the top drawer but didn't see any alarm wires. I tugged at its handle. It was locked.

I looked at the sleeping man. There was a key on a string around his neck. I reached across him and carefully cut the string. How many ninjas had performed just this sort of chore in ages past? I took the key and tried it. Success: the drawer slid open. And it was empty. So were all the other drawers. Just as I thought. A wild-goose chase. Disgusted with myself for ever getting involved in this, I turned away.

"Do not move, señor," a gruff voice said. Something hard jammed into my back.

I reacted automatically. The man was an amateur; he should have held his weapon back, not making contact with my body. I turned rapidly, twisting my torso sidewise so as to remove it from the line of fire. My right hand shoved the gun aside and up, catching the barrel, twisting. But his finger caught in the trigger guard, and the gun fired. I felt the burn of it on my wrist.

Then I reversed my swing as I wrenched the weapon out of his hand. I felt the crack as his finger snapped. I clipped him on the chin with the metal butt. He fell back on the bed, unconscious.

The bullet had hit the ceiling. I was not hurt, except for the powder burn. But I had only seconds before the whole house would be on my back. And I hadn't recovered the diamonds. In fact, I was now guilty of breaking and entering, and battery, for no reason

the authorities would believe.

Feverishly I searched the man, just in case. Nothing. Then I ripped the sheets off the bed, flipping them over the man while I checked under the mattress. Nothing.

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I looked up-and saw the safe in the corner. Fine sleuth I was!

There was the obvious place-and I had no way to get into it. My time had been wasted from the start.

I turned, ready to sneak out, and there was a huge goon blocking the doorway, the biggest monster I had seen in a long time. He was about six feet six inches tall, wide in proportion, and must have weighed three hundred pounds, only some of which was fat.

An ugly scar ran down his face. He was hairy, with wrists as big as normal hands. He was wearing incongruous sky-pink pajamas.

There was no mistaking his intent, however. He charged me with a hideous roar: pure kill-lust.

I grabbed him by the head, one hand on each side. I turned and twisted that head to the side while pulling forward with all my strength. It was a forbidden neck lock, but this was no polite tournament match. We know a lot in judo and karate and the other martial arts that is never used in sport, for reasons of safety.

In a normal man the neck would have snapped instantly.

But this giant had such a neck! It was so big that it hardly seemed to exist. A column of muscle and gristle that filled the region between ears and shoulders, leaving scarcely any indentation.

I succeeded only in wrenching it, causing him discomfort

that hardly improved his disposition, and in throwing the man against the bed.

The bed collapsed under his weight, dumping its other occupant.

The giant twisted about like a crocodile and started to get up. I planted a swift kick with the heel of my foot to the back of his knee, breaking the meniscus of the joint and tearing the tendons.

It was a brutal injury. Another man would have sprawled on the floor screaming, for such damage to the knee is extremely painful.

This one got up somehow and lunged at me as I turned to leave the room via the window. But with all his weight on it, his leg collapsed under him, and he dropped heavily to the floor. Still he tried to crawl after me, and I had no desire to grapple with him!

I could not get past him to the window; and if I could, I

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would not have time to don my hand and foot spikes for the descent before he grabbed me. The giant's knee was broken, but the rest of him was more than I could handle in the time I had. At any moment the rest of the household would be upon me. So I had to use the door to flee.

I sidled into the empty hail. There was a landing leading to an ornate staircase complete with curling banister. I trotted down, resisting the irrational urge to slide down the banister.

But another man appeared at the bottom. As he spied me, he tried to pull a gun. I jumped the rest of the way down, both feet

forward. I struck him on the chest, my feet crushing several of his bones and his sternum. He was knocked unconscious, and his body served to break my fall. I completed the action in a front roll, ducking my head to let my shoulders and back bear the brunt of the impact harmlessly. The first thing a judo student learns is how to take a fall, and it is well worth knowing. I came neatly back to my feet, and there was the front door.

The giant was crawling down the stairs, dragging his leg, doggedly pursuing me. I didn't have the diamonds, but I had to get out. I opened the front door.

Two policemen were charging up the walk as I looked out.

Hastily I drew back, but there was the giant, pulling himself erect against the banister, able to hop on one foot, and still plenty dangerous.

I could not afford to tangle with either the giant or the law. I froze.

Then an old blind man with a white cane and dark glasses appeared on a crosswalk. What on earth he was doing here I couldn't guess; maybe consulates were soft touches for beggars. I was hardly concerned with him; right now I had to foil the two police guards and find Hiroshi and get the hell out of here. What a disaster!

Then, surprisingly, the blind man stepped into the guards, holding up something small and round. They both stopped and stared. The blind man swung his cane to strike the first man on the back of the head, knocking him out. Then a flourish like that of a kendo bamboo sword master, and the cane hit the gun hand of

the other guard and continued straight into the solar plexus. Had it been a sword, it would have skewered him. Both guards were out, but not wounded.

"Hiroshi!" I exclaimed, catching on.

He made one of his little bows. "I did not really hurt them.

Come, we must depart."

"But I didn't get the-"

He stopped me with a gesture. In his hand he held another little bag, and I knew by his manner that it contained the diamonds.

"They had placed the diamonds in a secure place," he said. "I discovered this too late to inform you."

He was trying to spare my feelings, but I saw through him. I had, I realized, been a decoy, sent in after the decoy guard and decoy safe. Hiroshi had allowed me to spring the trap and distract the guards and make a commotion, while he zeroed in on the bag himself. No sense leaving the job of recovery to an incompetent. Or was it even more insidious? Hiroshi had been incredibly nonchalant about the diamonds from the outset, and he was not a careless man. There had really been too little time for him to enter the house, open a safe, emerge unobserved, and don the blindman disguise. If he had the real diamonds now, he must have had them all along.

I felt a prickle of discovery as we made our rapid, silent way out. Could he have given me imitations for stealing, while he kept the real ones safe all the time? Why?

I could not ask him directly, for he would never hurt my feelings by admitting such a ruse. But as I mulled it over, it made sense of a sort. The job had been done: the diamonds had been stolen and yet kept safe, the enemy had been exposed, and my commitment to the dubious cause of Fu Antos had been tested and cemented.

Still, there were loose threads, elements that didn't quite jibe.

If the diamonds I had had were fakes, and had not been recovered by Hiroshi, surely the enemy knew it now. So they would naturally plot to obtain the real ones. That would renew the danger.

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We should have left things strictly alone, allowing them to discover the ruse in their own time, too late to stop the fencing of the diamonds and the delivery of the arms to Fu Antos. Why had Hiroshi insisted on complicating the picture, antagonizing the enemy at peril to our lives? These were not small-time hoods we were dealing with; these were thoroughgoing international gangsters, a tough breed. That giant . . .

There, too, an answer of sorts emerged from the shrouds.

Hiroshi did not want merely to identify the enemy; he wanted that enemy to know that he knew, and to feel the weight of Fu Antos' retribution. Not only would it be clear that no place was safe from the ninja lord's infiltration; a new dimension had been opened. For they would now check the diamonds in the safe and have them appraised by experts, and the stones would be exposed

as fakes. They would have to assume that the raid had after all been successful.

To blast open the safe and steal the diamonds back would have been one thing, an impressive demonstration. To exchange them for paste without tampering with the safe was quite another thing. Only the legendary ninja talent could accomplish such a feat. That would put the awful fear of the supernatural into the hearts of the enemy. These people would be ten times as nervous about tangling with Fu Antos, or anyone connected with him, again.

Hiroshi had committed no real crime, but he had made his point with a vengeance! If my understanding were correct, and I would never be sure of that. And in the process, he had given me an unforgettable lesson in the imperatives of a ninja: the need for strength, stealth, and desperate measures. The inevitable ruthlessness.

Perform or die! I could no longer question the motives of Fu Antos; he was what he had to be.

So I let that aspect rest and asked a different question. "How did you make them stop-those two policemen? I saw them freeze, and I can't believe the sight of the diamonds would have done that. What did you have in your hand?"

Hiroshi opened his bag and showed me.

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It was a gruesome shrunken head.

I paused, just as the guards had. "What are you doing with a headhunter's trophy?" I demanded. This was the last thing I had

anticipated, despite the bizarreness of this episode.

"It belongs to Fu Antos," Hiroshi said. "I merely safeguard it while he is otherwise occupied."

"But why bring it here?"

Calmly he ran his nail along the back of the head. The leathery surface parted, revealing the interior. The entire head was a kind of pouch, and inside it were the diamonds. The real ones, I was sure.

I realized I had asked the wrong question. "How did Fu Antos come by this head?"

Hiroshi smiled. "It is best that you know, Jason Striker," he said, handing the whole grisly package to me. "I shall tell you."

And on our way home, he did.

Chapter 6:

ASSASSIN

Medieval Japan was restive. Barbaric Western nations had been demanding that Japan open her ports to world trade, and the American Commodore Perry had impressed upon the empire the ruthless power of uncivilized warships. The feudal system was ending, but a wave of antiforeign sentiment was building up.

Fu Antos shared this feeling. An open Japan would be a modernized, commercial Japan, the antithesis of the society he valued.

The ancient ways were the proper ways; these could not be permitted to dissipate without resistance.

But the leadership of the nation was drifting toward Westernization.

One of the prime movers was the powerful regent Ii Naosuke, Kamon-no-Kami. Lord Ii, as he was called, had arranged treaties with the Netherlands, Russia, Britain, and France. He was an unashamed internationalist. He had to be stopped. Perhaps the trend was already too strong, and like the tide, it would inevitably have its way; but if it could be reversed, the elimination of Lord Ii was the way.

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But Lord Ii was powerful. He was always well-guarded, and no one could approach him without his permission. So the job was up to a specialist in assassination, the fabled ninja master Fu Antos.

It was the twenty-second of March, 1860. Fu Antos was no longer young. He had lived, by some accounts, exactly three hundred years, and he appeared to be about sixty. He was garbed as a ronin, an unattached samurai warrior. Like many of these masterless martial artists, he was shabbily dressed, as though quite poor. The days of rich patrons were declining, but professional pride remained. The sheath of his long sword was covered with cracks where the lacquer had worn away because of long use and exposure.

In Yokohama he had to make his way through a crowd. He had made a long journey—a fit ninja could travel a hundred miles in a day on foot, and Fu Antos was the best—and though he was not really tired, the sharp edge of his alertness was off. His long scabbard stuck out behind his back, and it happened to brush the

scabbard of one of three stalwart youths passing by. This was sayaate, scabbard-striking, an offense against dignity.

"You have insulted me!" the youth exclaimed dramatically. "I demand satisfaction!"

Immediately his two friends drew in beside him. All three were tipsy: the odor of sake, rice wine, was on their breaths. "You have insulted us all, dull ancient!"

Fu Antos was not looking for incidental trouble; he had quite another mission in mind, which would bring him all the trouble he needed for this century, though it might also preserve his culture as he knew it. As a ninja he had little superficial pride. All he cared about was accomplishing his purpose expeditiously. So he apologized. "I am most regretful, honored sirs; I was unpardonably clumsy."

Others stopped in the street to watch his humiliation. But the three half-drunken samurai, sensing easy prey, refused to be mollified.

"Your apology is worthless, old man; for this offense you must pay a steeper price." And three right hands crossed to the

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hilts of the swords thrust through their obis, or sashes. The meaning was unmistakable.

Privately, Fu Antos was furious. These clowns were foolishly arrogant, a disgrace to the samurai class, and ignorant of whom they faced. But he did not want to attract attention to himself; that could interfere with his mission. "I humble myself before

you," he said, bowing even deeper, until it seemed as though his forehead would touch the ground. "I admit my fault, and beg your indulgence for an old man." If they only knew how old! But this only aggravated their impertinence. "We shall settle for nothing less than the ultimate, reprobate!"

The utter idiots! "Are you challenging me, then?" Fu Antos inquired softly, rising to his feet. An observant man would have noted the subtle change in his bearing, and taken warning. Indeed, there was a well-dressed samurai in the crowd who took note, allowing the faintest of smiles to touch his lips. But this man said nothing.

By this time a fair number of spectators had gathered around, ranging from street urchins to warriors. Though there were murmurs supporting the lone ronin, sympathizing with the underdog, no one offered to intercede directly.

"Yes, I challenge you, dotard!" the offended warrior said loudly, playing to his own audience.

Fu Antos did not smile. "You alone?" The implication was manifest, and a chuckle rippled through the crowd. The brash youngster realized too late that he faced a seasoned warrior: no easy mark.

"All three of us!" one of the others said, and the third nodded.

Now they had confidence again, for the odds were satisfactory.

"Then I shall identify myself," Fu Antos said, as protocol required.

But he did not speak loudly enough for the crowd beyond

the three to hear, for he hoped no word of this would reach Lord
Ii. The man, no fool, might recognize the presence of the ninja
and be alert.

The three youths gave their names. Then, the formalities com-

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pleted, all four unsheathed their swords. Fu Antos drew his slowly,
as though he were not accustomed to strenuous activity; the truth
was, no living man could match the speed of his draw. The blades
glittered in the sun.

Fu Antos fixed his gaze on the center samurai, advancing behind
the unwavering point of his weapon. That youth, fixed by
the steely eye and blade, slowly gave way, dismayed by the evident
confidence of his single opponent. Small wonder, for it was impossible
to conceal completely the competence of the finest swordsman
in all Japan. It had been a century since he had actually fought,
but Fu Antos had trained when more stringent standards of swordsmanship
prevailed, and still practiced daily in private.

The youth on his right thought he saw an opening, and rushed
to the attack.

Fu Antos, who had anticipated that very move, parried with
lightning speed, then cut the man down with a stroke across his
neck. Even as the hapless man fell, Fu Antos whirled to meet the
charge of the left-hand samurai. A single motion severed the youth's
head from his neck. The head flew into the air, its startled eyes
staring, then dropped to roll in the street. The masterless body
assayed a few drunken steps, while a crimson fountain of arterial

blood jetted upward a good two hands of—driven by the still furiously beating heart. There was a gasp of amazement and morbid delight from the crowd.

The one in the center suddenly revealed himself to be a coward.

He whirled away and started to flee down the street.

Fu Antos hurled his sword like a spear so that it transfixing the coward's back and stood out from his chest. The youth looked down, amazed. He tried to claw the steel out of his body, "But he was so old!" he protested, as though he had merely suffered an indignity at the hands of an incompetent, an accident, as it were.

Then he died.

The spectators applauded as Fu Antos calmly drew out his blood-wet sword, wiped it on the dead man's tunic and coolly

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returned it to its sheath. His feat of arms was warmly congratulated by the samurai in the audience.

Fortunately, none of the three who had heard his name had survived. The secret was safe.

Fu Antos turned to go. "Sir!" someone called. "Aren't you going to the magistrate's office to report?"

Annoyed, Fu Antos paused. He saw that the speaker was one of the samurai spectators, obviously a man of good breeding. Because it was the fashion of the ninja to notice everything, Fu Antos had observed this man's smiling anticipation of the climax. Had it

been mere professional interest, or something more?

But obviously the man intended no offense. "What interest have I in this affair?" he asked, glancing at the corpses. "What interest does the magistrate have?"

"It is the law. Do you not remember?"

Fu Antos had not forgotten. He had never known of this law, as it had not been in force when he was current with affairs of the world. He had emerged from his seclusive retreat only because of the urgency of his mission, and would return to it the moment that mission was done. "I apologize, sir. The quarrel confused me; I had forgotten."

The samurai smiled. "No apology necessary, but I hasten to accept, as I hardly wish to share the fate of the three buffoons who declined your plea! It was a natural error on your part. These regulations are a nuisance. The office is right down the street, here; I will escort you, if you have no objection." And he fell in beside the ninja, though Fu Antos had not solicited his company and did not want it.

"I do not recognize you," the man continued. "I thought I knew all the superior swordsmen of Japan-God knows they are fewer than they were in the old days!-but surely you are among the finest. I have seldom seen such efficiency in a duel, such composure. I am Yonezuka, of the Mito clan."

The busybody was soliciting a return introduction. Fu Antos could not decline without insulting the clansman, and that would

mean another duel, this time against no bumpkin. In the end, the samurai would indeed share the fate of the three. But if he gave the name, Yonezuka would surely recognize it, for he was a weapons sophisticate, collecting reputations like butterflies. That explained his intense interest.

Still, the Mito clan was a formidable one, much attached to the ancient ways. Fu Antos had intimate knowledge of this clan of old, and was intrigued. Perhaps this chance encounter could be turned to advantage after all. "Your pardon-I must first ask a question," Fu Antos said.

"Granted, certainly!" Now Yonezuka was doubly curious.

"Do you support the ancient ways?"

This was no superficial question; it was the leading issue of the day. "Indeed I do!" the samurai said warmly. "Do you know that they are trying to let accursed foreigners into Japan? The filthy French, the dastardly Dutch, the ridiculous Russians, even the awful Americans! What is it coming to?"

Fu Antos' eyes widened a trifle. Here was a man after his own heart. The Mito blood was running true. "Yet what can any man do?" he asked rhetorically. "The leaders sign the treaties, not the real Japanese warriors."

"There are ways," Yonezuka said grimly. Then he remembered himself, and backtracked. "I mean no treason, of course."

"Of course." They both understood the implication: the treason was by the leaders who were opening Japan to the foreign

element, not by the warriors who defended the old ways. Thus, by definition, it was not treason to consider ridding the nation of those leaders, but it could be death to speak it aloud.

"Here is the office."

"Thank you. I am Fu Antos."

Yonezuka paused. "I don't believe I-" He did a double-take.

"Impossible!"

Fu Antos did not take offense. The samurai's reaction was in fact encouraging. "Perhaps you recall my ancestor, him of the Black Castle. Men called him a traitor."

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"Not the men of Mito," Yonezuka murmured, staring at him.

"That swordsmanship-yet it fits. It could be! I had thought that particular ninja line was extinct."

"Not quite. We have been in hiding, for reasons of expediency. My ancestor was no friend of the shogun."

"There are others who have had less courage in expressing their objections to certain high officials." The samurai still stared at Fu Antos. "I have heard certain rumors, surely false, of long life-extremely long life!-of absolute seclusion, of extraordinary spiritual powers."

"On occasion the seclusion must be abridged, when there is necessary work to be done."

"Necessary work," Yonezuka repeated thoughtfully. "There is that today!" Abruptly he straightened. "You cannot put your name

to that magistrate's report! Allow me; then we shall talk."

Fu Antos nodded. They entered the office, and the samurai assumed credit for the killings. "This ronin was witness," he concluded, indicating Fu Antos. "Those three ruffians would not be satisfied with anything less than bared blades."

"We understand," the magistrate said. "Strange they did not recognize your name."

"I admit to feeling some affront on that score," Yonezuka said.

"But these days many worthy warriors go unrecognized." He glanced meaningfully at Fu Antos.

"Yes, it is too bad," the magistrate agreed, misunderstanding, as he was supposed to. "All those accursed foreigners disrupting our sacred customs . . ."

They were hardly outside the office before Yonezuka resumed.

"You come for Lord Ii!"

Fu Antos shrugged. "Perhaps."

"But you cannot approach him alone! There have been many attempts on his life, and as many executions. His guards are alert, the pick of the samurai. They leap to dispatch any fool who intrudes even accidentally into the regent's party."

"That is edifying news."

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"One man-it is impossible. Even for the nefarious ninja!"

Fu Antos shrugged again, eloquently.

"I have friends," Yonezuka said thoughtfully. "Strong men of

my clan, and courageous. But not foolhardy. They lack the proper leadership, they have no feasible plan. If that leadership and that plan were provided-"

Fu Antos smiled.

Fu Antos repaired that evening to the ill-famed "Nightless City," Yoshiwara of Edo. Here many of the houses were extraordinarily tall-four, five, and even six stories high.

They were brightly illuminated, of almost palatial aspect.

For this was the home of the licensed hetaerae.

He entered at the main gate, where he divested himself of both his katana long sword and his dirk. As a member of the samurai class, he did not, of course, carry the special ninja weapons.

He understood the need for this disarmament; it was not that the proprietors feared mayhem-though certainly they had no desire for drunken brawls-so much as the fact that certain of the hetaerae so loathed their captive existence that they would quickly kill themselves if they ever had access to a suitable weapon. Fu Antos had considerable sympathy for the plight of the common man, but this did not extend to that of women. There were, after all, limits.

He proceeded on foot to one of the introductory tea houses.

He was ushered into a private room, where an attendant brought him a cup of tea. It was, he had to admit, excellent tea.

As he sipped, a parade of young, pretty, elegantly attired girls passed before him. Some carried decorative fans with which they concealed portions of their faces, vastly enhancing the allure by

means of this affected mystery. Some showed portions of their anatomy—a hip, a breast, or intriguing fractions thereof. Some smoked their little kiseru pipes containing a few puffs' worth of fragrant tobacco. All had gorgeous raiment, brocade of gold or silver, high clogs on their feet, with black hair piled high and set with rows of light tortoiseshell hairpins. Their faces were pow-

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dered white, their lips gilded, and they were completely expressionless.

Some proudly bore aloft phallic emblems, in case there should be any lingering doubt about the nature of their profession.

These were the queenly oiran, the first-class courtesans. Fu

Antos watched without expression, remembering that he had possessed

one more beautiful than any of these in his youth. At length

he indicated his choice, an extremely attractive specimen, not altogether unlike his wife of centuries past.

He was then conducted to a more comfortable and private

locale equipped for diverse entertainments. In due course the selected

girl entered. "I am Little Butterfly," she said, making obeisance.

Fu Antos surveyed her charms at closer range, giving no advance

sign of his reaction. Yes, she was indeed lovely. Just as she

was about to withdraw, thinking herself rejected, he spoke. "Please

have some sake." In this way he signified his final acceptance of

her.

They went through the ceremony, exchanging cups of wine

three times in the symbolic marriage. Little Butterfly was now his girl; if ever he should come to this house again, she alone would be his companion.

She had, he knew, been sold into virtual slavery for the term of her greatest sexual charm. After age twenty she would no longer solicit new patrons, and at age twenty-seven she would become her own property and retire, her allure gone. Women aged rapidly in Japan; the Western notion of beauty extending into middle age-thirty or even thirty-five!-was plainly an opium dream having no reality. There was no shame in this profession; in fact, it was hardly more stringent for a woman than that of legal wife.

They chatted about inconsequentials, and she fed him supper: excellent raw fish, rice balls, bean soup, shredded cabbage, fried shrimp, and, of course, copious sake. She acted very shy whenever he hinted at the amorous consummation for which he had, handsomely, paid, thereby extending and intensifying his desire

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for that climax. She giggled in a high pitch as she put bits of delicious jellyfish into his mouth and danced away before he got proper hold of her.

At last Fu Antos, acting the tipsy celebrant, though the wine had not touched him at all, brought her to the soft couch. She would not disrobe completely, for a woman naked is a woman stripped of her mystery, but she allowed him to survey in tantalizing installments her most intimate attractions. Her breasts were large and round, unusual in an Oriental girl; that was a point

against her. Only barbarian women were huge-uddered cows! But her thighs were sleek and firm.

Like a man performing a jujitsu technique, he wrestled her into a suitable hold, his crotch against her supple buttocks. Neither of them had disrobed; instead, the relevant portions of the attire were opened or pulled aside, so that the vital action was largely concealed. This, again, heightened the effect. Fu Antos did not need to pretend interest; he was well ready for the explosive culmination.

Flesh met flesh, seeking that rapturous lodging, the hard within the soft. As the experienced martial artist conquered by seeming to yield, so the female conquered by accepting the thrust.

And his member failed him.

It was as though he had drawn his sword confidently from its scabbard and found it broken. With a skilled samurai awaiting satisfaction. Most embarrassing.

"Ten thousand fools!" he swore. How could this happen to him? Him, of all people! He did not care about the girl; sex was something he could take or leave, and he had been too busy at the Black Castle to indulge in such pastimes often. But when he did, he did, proving himself no less a master of the fleshly sword than of the steel.

The geisha stirred, bemused at his delay. Had she not brought him to the fever pitch, making it physically impossible for him to stave off final expression, even had he wanted to? How had she

failed?

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Fu Antos touched her neck with the ki, and her mind went blank. She remained frozen in position, aware of nothing but her own respiration and heartbeat.

His mind remained active. He remembered back almost three centuries, to the time before he was married. Then he had been potent, even in wildly adverse circumstances. Actually, it was like his test of this afternoon, though there was a superficial dissimilarity in the episodes. In each case there had been a fundamental challenge not obvious to the outsider; in each case he had vindicated himself and gained tremendously.

Fu Antos closed his eyes, remembering, comparing, savoring, while the girl stayed still, a living statue. But the memories, new and old, would not converge properly, as though the impotence extended from his groin right into his brain.

"Listen, Little Butterfly," he said.

The girl looked around, aware of him again. Now she was frightened; she had felt his strange power, not the kind of penetration she had anticipated. He liked her fear; it recharged him. And so he spoke, not entirely with his voice, but with the hypnotic control of his hands, the kuji-kiri. Hands and fingers moved in exotic rhythms of their own, tracing eldritch patterns, while his eyes fixed hers.

Though the geisha's eyes were locked on his, still she had to be

aware of those queerly moving hands, as though they were independent of each other and of the rest of his body. The fingers intertwined like nests of vipers. The combination made her react far more expressively than she could otherwise have managed, for all her training. She not only heard, she saw the image forming behind the facade of his body. Her psyche, like her physical presence, was now captive to his thrust.

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-There is one thing, the samurai said.

I glanced at him. -You wish to be certain I'm really a ninja, not an agent provocateur of the government.

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Yonezuka nodded agreement -I would not send the Mito clan into such a trap. If you will give substantial evidence of your sincerity, your commitment to the ideals you have expressed . . .

I put my hand to the hilt of my sword. -Need you other commitment than this?

He shook his head. -I could test you with the blade, it is true. But if you are not whom you imply, you will die; if you are, I will die. In neither case is there anything to be gained.

-I, too, need an affirmation, I said cautiously. Did he think me a fool, to lay myself vulnerable to the commitment of words alone?

-Certainly, he agreed, perhaps too readily.

I looked about. The crowd had dissipated, and we happened

to be on a street bereft of people. Yonezuka's request was legitimate,
but so was mine: each of us had to be sure of the other
before either made any treasonous (by certain definitions) commitment.

We required a demonstration that would implicate
Yonezuka and the Mito clan as irrevocably as it did me. Of course,
I could test him with my ki, but I preferred not to employ that
indiscriminately. It is not to a ninja's advantage to reveal his fundamental
assets prematurely, if ever.

We happened by a house inside whose lighted interior two
aliens sat. Their loud voices attracted my attention, irritating me.
Why should they be in the warm shelter, while I roamed the gathering
chill of the winter evening?

-Who are these creatures? I inquired, wrinkling my nose.

Indeed, their odor offended me, even through the window; it was
of leather and tobacco and overindulgence in the flesh of animals.

-They are British, from an isle across the world, Yonezuka
replied, his own face mirroring my distaste. -Such things are
appearing all over Japan, but especially in Yokohama. Their fat
merchants come to practice the extortion they call trade; their
villainous soldiers come to protect their merchants from the righteous
wrath of those they cheat.

-And this is tolerated? I asked incredulously.

-What can one man do? he asked rhetorically in return, glanc-

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ing sidelong at me. -The British battleships have truly awful

cannon that can shell the city.

I considered. -I think that direct action against the merchants would not be politic on our part, and shelling would not be politic on theirs. It is money they want, not rage. Eliminate the soldiers, who are, after all, paid to fight and die, and the merchants will not long remain.

-Yes, certainly! But who can eliminate a beast who wears a revolver?

-I do not understand your question, I said, giving him a direct stare that showed I understood perfectly.

-I mean that even a redoubtable warrior (not that we know of any in these parts!) might find himself at a disadvantage against even so lowly a pair as these, unless, of course, he attacked by stealth in the night.

I shook my head as if perplexed. -It is, of course, the ninja way to utilize stealth. But in a case such as you mention, that would hardly be necessary. Anyone who could master three stalwart Japanese samurai could certainly deal with a mere barbarian. To imply otherwise is nonsensical.

-Perhaps. But there happen to be two barbarians.

I looked again, feigning surprise. -Why, so there are. To me a pigpen is much the same whether it has one pig or ten. It ought to be cleaned.

-Yes. The stink is oppressive.

-Perhaps a ninja and a samurai would not find it beneath

their dignity to dispatch the chore.

-So it would seem, he agreed.

We marched up to the door and hailed the two barbarians.

-What a stench! Yonezuka bawled.

After a moment the door opened and we beheld the aliens at close range. One was a British major, and he was indeed hoglike of jaw and snout and gut, with porcine bristles on his moist fat lip.

The other was a lesser swine, a lieutenant.

-Eh? the major grunted.

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-We feel constrained to request your departure, I said.

-Beg pardon? the major squealed in bad Japanese, his hairy lip quivering.

-Pardon can be granted only after an act of contrition, I explained.

Now both barbarians frowned. How ugly their white faces were! -Contrition?

-Depart, Yonezuka put in helpfully, realizing that they were too stupid to comprehend an indirect statement.

The major turned red, in the way that only an obese palecomplexioned foreigner could manage. -Sir, these are our premises!

Where would you have us go?

-Back to your barbarian isles, I said.

Both Britishers jerked as if stung. Apparently an insult could after all penetrate their stout hides, if it was delivered with sufficient accuracy and force. -We don't have to listen to this! Get out! And they bulled out the door as if to push us with the might

of their flabby bellies.

-Your presence in fair Japan fouls the air, I said, stepping back to give them more room.

The major's right hand descended to his revolver. At last!

I performed the uppercut. My right hand drew the sword from its scabbard at my left hip with eye-blurring speed. The blade emerged, gaining velocity, moving from left to right and upward at a sharp angle. The point touched the beast's right hip and continued the sweep diagonally to his left shoulder. Such was the force of the strike that his spinal cord was severed. He was dead before he toppled, his intestines spilling out in a boiling mass.

Then his snout crashed into the ground as I stepped back to avoid contamination from the splash of his alien blood.

I whirled immediately on the lieutenant. But Yonezuka had already taken care of the matter. His cut had not been as deep or clean, so that he had to remedy the matter with a second slash at the barbarian's neck, but the job was done.

-Jo-i, Yonezuka muttered with satisfaction. -The barbar-

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ian-expelling spirit.

-Let us not remain longer in the smell of this offal, I suggested.

-Unless you wish to register the matter with the magistrate?

He laughed. We both knew that there would be serious repercussions for this double execution if we were caught. The last thing

we wanted to do was tell the magistrate.

But the gesture had been made: the ninja and the samurai had established their credits as serious opponents of the current policy of Japan's unworthy government. Now we could trust each other. No agent provocateur, no spy of the capital city Edo, would have gone so far as to challenge and kill ranking foreigners.

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"And so I came to you," Fu Antos said to the terrified geisha.

"A man is entitled to a bit of entertainment after a good day's work. Yonezuka is out rousing the Mito clan, moving them into Edo, twenty miles to the north. I am obviously a tourist with nothing on my mind but my genitals."

"But this is Edo!" the girl said. "You speak as if you are still in Yokohama."

"I am," Fu Antos said. "At least, the ronin is, officially."

"It is impossible for a man to be in Yokohama in the afternoon and in Edo at dusk," she said. "Unless worn out from riding."

"I have no horse. Where I go, I go on foot."

"Then-"

"Correct. So I am there, not here. The perfect alibi."

"Let me go!" the girl pleaded, wanting no part of this. She had encountered many men and experienced many things, but nothing like this.

"What, before our business is finished?" he inquired mockingly.

"Then finish it! I shall not tell."

"Indeed you shall not." His eye moved to his long sword, so

recently bloodied, and she gave a little cry of horror.

"Did you not leave your weapons at the entrance?" she demanded, cringing.

"I did. It is required."

"Then how can your sword be here? I am sure you did not carry it in."

"My blade is never far from my hand, though I can kill as quickly with another weapon, or with none." He savored her fear.

"Intriguing that my weapon, like myself, is where it can not be! Is it ninja sleight-of-hand, or is it magic?"

But she was deaf to the intellectual humor of the situation.

"Magic . . ." she whispered, believing.

"The code of the bushido, the way of the fighting knights, includes benevolence," he said. "I shall deprive you of the memory of this night, so that you will not suffer unduly. Later that memory will return, but by that time it will not be so frightening, and my business will be long finished."

She stared at him, her apprehension unabated.

"But first I must complete my narrative," he said. "Surely you find it fascinating?"

"Yes, yes!" she agreed with pathetic eagerness.

"You are too much like my wife. How readily she agreed with me, yet she betrayed me." He scowled, the memory bitter even after three centuries. He had had too much sake; his tongue was

loose. He could control it with the ki, but did not, at this moment, choose to. "Listen."

Wide-eyed, hardly breathing, she listened.

*

The year was 1576. I was then a youth of sixteen, as yet unburdened by the demise of my honorable grandfather and fathers

I was on a training mission. My assignment: to obtain a lock of the hair of the enemy lord and to steal his list of secret spies and informers.

I had already passed the simpler tests of ninja proficiency,

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such as hanging silently from the branch of a tall tree for six hours, then dropping safely to stun an unsuspecting watchman. This current mission, I was certain, would be more challenging.

Suddenly I came upon a glade below the castle, a clearing through which a stream passed. A girl was there, washing herself.

I came near, silently. I had intended to swim up this stream to where it entered the castle, thus gaining secret entry; this girl's presence complicated that. But perhaps she would soon depart, and in any event I would not make the attempt until nightfall.

The cover of darkness has ever been the ninja's best friend.

Meanwhile, I was curious; she was facing away from me, her glossy black hair tumbling across her shoulders attractively. She was naked, humming tunelessly as her hands dipped in and out of the water.

I had not lacked for women. But my interests had been primarily

with my martial art. The girls my grandfather sent to me were like unarmed peasants before the katana: so little challenge as to be meaningless. But this stranger intrigued me: she was an enemy maiden, no pawn of my family. No peasant, by the look of her; surely the young wife of a noble, unaccustomed to the drudgery of the peasant class. Why not take a really significant trophy home: the conquest of such a female?

No, I had better stick to my original mission. It was my impetuous gonad urging me to divert my energy, not my brain. Discipline was crucial to a ninja, and this was really part of my test.

Still, I could at least examine the front of her before I moved on upstream to survey the castle itself.

-Ho, stranger! a man's voice called.

I froze. Had I been discovered?

Rising from the brush on either side of me were armed men, a party of warriors in the habiliments of the rival clan. There were some thirty of them. They had anticipated my coming and laid a trap for me, with the girl as bait. I, like an inexperienced, overconfident fool, had fallen into it. Where was my ninja cunning and caution now? I should never have allowed myself to become so

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distracted by one thing that I neglected to observe my surroundings.

Who had betrayed me? Suddenly I realized the full nature of this test: my grandfather had done it. For an ordinary man this mission would have been impossible. For a ninja it would have

been a challenge. But for the scion of Fu Antos, it would have been elementary, unless the degree of difficulty were artificially elevated.

So the cunning old man had sent word ahead.

It was not that he hated me. I knew that he had a deep if hidden affection for me, and pride in my development. It was that he simply could not tolerate a weakling as eventual heir to the Black Castle. The ninja master had to be able to prevail in any situation, however difficult, and to be alert for anything, even betrayal from those closest to him. If I survived this mission, I would have proved myself a fit master.

If I survived.

Immediately I sought to withdraw, wriggling through the undergrowth like a snake, taking advantage of natural cover. But others rose ahead of me and behind me, cutting off my retreat. The trap had sprung; I was captive.

Or so they thought. I drew my sword as the ring of fighting men closed in. I did not wait for their attack. My blade flashed in a terrible uppercut, disemboweling the nearest attacker and slicing across the midsections of two more on the return swing. Then I lunged ahead, spearing a fourth; and back, catching a fifth.

-Hold! the enemy leader cried. -This is a bold one!

The warriors drew back, leaving their five dead in a half-circle about me. Actually, my swordsmanship had not been remarkable; we were trained to be aware of the entire picture and to rapidly reverse direction of attack. They had been crowding in so close that they could not maneuver, and had been setups for a standard

combination. Had I essayed that trick against a similar number of samurai, only one would have died: me. But of course I had taken that into account.

Their blades were ready, and reinforcements had swelled their

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numbers, and a number of these were samurai. They seemed undaunted by my prowess; I would not catch many more so easily.

There was no apparent way to come out of this alive.

I burned inside to think of the embarrassment I had caused my grandfather. He had naturally expected me to anticipate this action and avoid capture. But I had been heedless, and now might never get beyond that stage. The question was, should I commence seppuku, the ritual self-disembowelment, now, or dispatch myself by less formal means? The longer I waited, the less likely I was to be able to redeem myself even to that extent, for they would surely seek to prevent it.

-You must be the cub of the Black Castle, the leader said. I recognized him; I had studied artist's pictures. It was his lock I was supposed to have shorn.

-Yes, I replied. There is no point in lying when the truth is known.

-It is not meet that you should die a dog's death. We shall put you to a fitting test for your life.

My tongue paused on the poison pellet hidden in my mouth.

So long as I did not bite down hard, cracking open the shell, I would live. I returned it to my cheek. -My sword is ready, I said.

-Indeed it is. But we shall make you this bargain: perform one task, and we shall set you free without animus. Fail, and you must join our clan, replacing our losses with your service.

I surveyed the ready weapons. My ninja training had taught me to prevail by any means at hand; the prime ethic was survival. They could not trust my word given in this circumstance, and they knew it; they would kill me regardless, and I would try to escape regardless. So we were merely entertaining each other with dialogue, seeking verbal as well as physical ascendancy. -What is your task?

-Only to complete the action you contemplated, the man said, smiling. The other warriors laughed.

Strange. -I sought no more than to explore the region.

He did not even bother to challenge the obvious lie. -Ex-

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plore that region, he said, gesturing toward the river. He smiled.

-It is virgin territory.

The girl still bathed, oblivious of the commotion. That, too, was strange. -I sought no more than a glimpse in passing. That, at least, was the truth, not that it mattered. I was parrying his thrusts without comprehending the nature of his strategy.

-Broaden your perspective, the man said.

-I do not understand, I said, for the first time employing a verbal device that was to serve me in good stead for centuries. For

suddenly I understood, all right; I merely didn't believe.

He shrugged this off. -To be quite sure you perform, we shall watch. All of us.

Oh. That did add to the challenge. Still, it made no sense.

Why should they demand the defloration of one of their own by an enemy?

-She is sick? I conjectured.

-By no means! Her body is strong and healthy.

Again, a round of chuckles.

-Then where is the challenge? I asked, not ashamed to show my perplexity.

-She may be resistive.

That meant a rape. No doubt their own men had tried her and been repulsed. A woman trained in martial art? -She is your captive? I asked. -One you mean to torture, to degrade?

-She is my daughter, the chief said. -My only child.

I have encountered many remarkable things in my life, but seldom more so than this. -So be it, I said. -I accept your terms.

These people were crazy!

The armed circle parted, allowing me access to the river. I walked to the brink, and stopped. -Hello, girl! I called.

She did not turn. She continued to wash herself, as she had done throughout. Why such extraordinary concern with personal hygiene? I saw the swell of her breast under her arm, and the strong curve of her spine. -She is deaf? I inquired, trying to fathom

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the mystery of her and of their attitude toward her. Their chief's daughter?

Had my grandfather anticipated this turn of events? The crafty dog!

-Call her Masami.

I obliged. -Masami!

Now she turned slowly.

She was grotesque. Her teeth were gross and yellow, the skin of her face mottled with a huge purple birthmark covering half of it, her cheeks sunken, and from her crossed eyes burned the light of madness. Crosseyes were an ill-omen, but I was not much affected, as the ninjas normally utilized the superstition of others for their own advantage. But this was more than that.

Yet her body was robust, even muscular, and her nails were long. As she moved, the muscles of her torso rippled like those of a samurai. This did not enhance her beauty. Healthy, yes-but repulsive.

No man would voluntarily accept such a woman to wife.

I did not know it then, but I was gazing upon my first example of mercury poisoning. Somehow the girl or her mother had imbibed the poison, and it had damaged her head, not her body.

-Ninjas did that, the chief said, not smiling now. -They poisoned the spring where we traveled. Her mother was about to give birth; she bathed in it, drank of it. She died; thus the rest of us were warned. Now the child likes water like a fish, and we let

her bathe for hours each day; what else is there to do with her?

-I am sorry, I said, meaning it. -We do not seek to poison women and babies.

-Then give me an heir! he cried, and I saw the agony in the man. His wife was long dead, and his daughter an idiot; no one would put a child inside her. Yet she was nubile; she could bear.

And I was the grandson of the ninja chief, one day to be lord of the Black Castle. I had to admit this was a fitting retribution. If the seed of the Black Castle were united with that of this clan through Masami, we would share the onus of that black deed of the past.

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Why should this clan kill me? If I performed here today, my power would be forever theirs; never would I turn against the kinsmen of my issue. Yet if I did not perform, there would be no leash on their fury.

How my grandfather must be laughing!

Or was this his way of making amends? The old man had such a devious mind that it was impossible to tell. Had he anticipated my decision?

What was my decision? Did I have any way to salvage both my life and my seed? If not, there remained the pellet in my cheek.

What did the enemy really want? Obviously they doubted my ability to perform. Certainly in public!

The water was deep. I was a strong swimmer, as all ninjas are.

I could escape them if they did not suspect my intent.

I stripped, ostensibly to perform the ritual, but actually to free myself from encumbrances that would hamper underwater swimming. I could hold my breath for five minutes; they would think I had drowned. I took care that no ninja secrets remained in my clothing, for they would surely inspect my garments closely. I had to leave them on the bank, as evidence of my supposed intent to return to them. The enemy would not expect a man to run away naked.

But now that I knew I could get away, my pride asserted itself. They did not think I could handle the mad daughter. I would make a demonstration. Actually, the chances of her swelling with child after a single contact were small; normally a man must lie with a woman many times before his seed takes root. This is another aspect of the inferiority of the female.

I stood naked at the shore, staring at the girl. Fleshed she was, but in the manner of a man: lean and sinewy. Her breasts were almost flat, her hips narrow. Only her luxurious hair gave her any sort of appeal, and that primarily from the rear; her ruined face negated all else. Even in the most advantageous privacy, arousal would have been difficult. Here, in broad daylight, with smirking warriors watching, it seemed impossible.

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That angered me. I had, indeed, been shown a challenge. I would despise myself if I let it master me. As a ninja, I was ready to

bury myself in human excrement, awaiting the chance to spear an enemy through his nether aperture; why not bury myself in this?

I had excellent control over all my body. I could dislocate my joints to escape bonds or squeeze through narrow passages. I could swallow a capsule containing a small blade and belch it up again upon need. But not before had I had occasion to force voluntary control over this particular function. Success would be obvious to every spectator; and so would failure.

I willed it so. I dared not even shut my eyes to the specter before me; that would be a confession of failure. Masami would fight me, I knew; she was virgin not only because of her ugliness but because of her madness. It was a double challenge.

Sweat beaded my forehead; I felt the rivulets tickle. My muscles tensed, relaxed, tensed. I held my breath and bore down, making the veins of my skin stand out. Could I do it?

I heard a murmur among the warriors. By this token I first realized that I was succeeding. In the absence of personal lust, I was forcing an erection.

At last I stood tall and proud. There was even a smattering of applause. But I had achieved only the first stage. Could I complete the task?

I stepped into the water. The girl stared at me; evidently she had never before seen this phenomenon. That gave me confidence. But the chill water sapped my control. There was laughter from the shore. Angry, I concentrated again, and managed to raise

the standard high once more. That quelled the mirth. I resumed my advance.

Now came the real trial. The girl was standing. I could not lay her down; we both would drown. At least, she would, in the event I completed the act while holding my breath. And that culmination would not be apparent from the shore. The conditions of this challenge required that the act be so plain as to be undeniable.

On the other hand, if I took her to the shore, I would have no

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ready access to the deep water. Twenty swords could transfix me before I got there. I had to remain here, hip-deep, upright, where I could sink out of sight quickly. Then I could swim well away before the warriors realized their noose had slipped.

That meant I had to perform vertically.

It was possible, with a cooperative woman; I had done it before.

With an indifferent female it was questionable. And with a resistive one-

I put my hand on her. She uncoiled like a striking snake, knocking me back. I splashed in the water, my head going momentarily under as mud swirled up from below.

The warriors were laughing uncontrollably. Some were slapping their thighs, some were rolling on the ground, and some were emulating the splash of water. I failed to discern the humor in the situation.

Now was my chance to swim for it. But I did not. I knew my pride was folly, but I intended to perform.

I stood, dripping. I had lost my erection again. This caused a new outburst of merriment amidst the audience. I bore down, restoring it, and approached Masami again.

This time I leaped on her, encircling her torso, holding her arms to her sides, keeping her upright, facing me. She could not avoid me; she had to spread her legs to keep her footing.

And she threw me off.

I picked myself up again. If the mirth had been boisterous before, now it was deafening. I could have stalked out of that river, snatched up my sword, and slain another five men before any of them recovered enough to oppose me. But I didn't. I intended to shut them up by conquering the most ambitious challenge:

Masami.

As I concentrated on my erection yet again, I pondered what she had done. She had seemed helpless, yet she had sent me splashing.

Some kind of torso throw? I doubted it; I had practiced long and hard on every type of throw known to my trainers, and thought

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I was proof against them. Some throws involve the legs, others the arms; none was like this.

I clasped her again, hanging on tightly. This time I paid attention to her bony torso, not the crutch of her legs. She would not catch me another time!

But she did. A shock ran through my body; my arms loosened,

and I fell away, half-stunned.

She had not moved.

This was my first experience with the ki. Young and rash as I was, I remained alert enough to grasp two things: I could not, after all, conquer this woman by direct force, and I had been shown a skill of incalculable potential.

But I had not given up. When direct force does not avail, indirect force often suffices. By yielding to her force I hoped to overcome her.

I launched myself at her again, this time carrying her backward into deep water. She repulsed me with her power, but I clung to one wrist, twisting it, forcing her head under. Though her ki stunned me, that impetus carried the motion through until I was able to recover somewhat, and now she had to fight the water covering her face. Sure enough, she directed her force at the water, not at me, and that was of no avail. The bubbles burst anxiously at the surface, and the chief, her father, strode angrily through the shallow brim toward us. But then I raised her head, smacked her jaw with my open hand, and dunked her again as she inhaled for a scream. Water flowed into her lungs.

-Back! I cried. -Back, or she dies!

And he stood back, for he did not want her dead.

When I had her semiconscious I propped her up and lifted her spread-legged onto my waiting spear of flesh. Thus I took her, in plain sight of all, in that brief period when she was too dazed by the water in her to use her power. Her very coughing and spluttering

sent powerful flexes through her torso that precipitated my fulfillment. When she recovered enough to throw me off-which

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she did with an impact that deadened my entire body-the deed had been done.

-Kill him! the chief cried in fury. Though I had done what he demanded, and mingled my seed with his, yet in the end he reacted as a father who has seen his daughter raped.

The warriors converged, but not rapidly; they showed their reluctance to violate their collective oath. The attitude became them, for integrity uplifts a fighting man.

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"And so I used my escape route," Fu Antos concluded to the geisha. "I sank under the water and swam rapidly downstream, concealed by the muddy water our struggles had made. I had to kill two more tribesmen to complete my retreat, but I escaped unscathed. Two hours later my grandfather's ninjas ambushed the clan, drove off the men, and captured the mad girl. From her I learned the ki. It was not a power subject to instruction; I approached her again and again, and gradually something in me developed the ability to oppose her force, and that was my own ki. Then I knew what it was.

"Later we sent her back to her father, pregnant with my seed. That enemy family was a branch of what is now known as the Mito clan. In penance for his violation of oath, the chief sent me a

lock of his hair and his list of spies. We never made formal peace, but there was no strife between us thereafter. Masami was delivered of a healthy son, heir to their lands and fortune."

Fu Antos' eyes went briefly out of focus, seeing ancient heroics.

"Alas, I did not learn the ultimate lesson: to suspect everybody, even my blood kin. By betraying me himself, my grandfather had sought to educate me in the proper ninja suspicion. Had I mastered that then, and anticipated the perfidy of beauty, I would have married the idiot girl! She at least had no wit to be disloyal. And so I was doomed, fated to be betrayed by my beautiful wife from another clan. Her of the silken tresses. Mitsuko."

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He touched the geisha, letting her feel the ki. "It took me five years to develop my own ki strongly enough to feign death, and centuries to achieve its full potential. But it was well worth it!"

"Let me go," the girl repeated.

"Now we finish my business," he said. "From the time of my wife's betrayal, I have been impotent with desirable women. Especially those who most resemble my wife and who therefore arouse in me the strongest conflicting passions. Until this moment! But now I have shrived myself, speaking openly the truth that I hardly let myself think before. Now the curse is off."

He sent his ki into his member, to stiffen it, and for the first time in three hundred years, that ki failed him. He remained impotent.

"Damn that traitress!" he cried, half in fury, half in agony.

"Am I doomed forever to embrace only ugly women?"

"Let me go!"

Furious, he stood over her. He swept up his katana sword, which he had smuggled in unseen, ninja style. "Slut, traitress, defiler of honor, lovely anus of a pig, abomination, wife-I'll let you go!" he screamed.

With a single stroke he cut her fair body in half.

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On March 24, 1860, Lord Ii was on his way to the palace of the shogun. He had just reached the Sakurada Gate in the heart of Edo, or Yedo, later to be known as Tokyo, the capital city of Japan.

Lord Ii was carried on a palanquin in state, as befitted his rank, surrounded by his retainers. The party halted at the bridge over the palace moat, for the retinue of the prince of Kyushu was already crossing. Meanwhile, the prince of Owai was approaching with his train along the road.

Lord Ii was not annoyed at this delay. He was a busy man who snatched his rest at such times, and he was glad to see the two princes, with whom he had business. He waited in the broad plaza

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formed by the conjunction of the street with the bridge, while light snow fell. Only the presence of a few idle peasants marred the tranquillity of the setting. It was not worth the effort of cleaning them out; like weeds, in their cheap oil-paper cloaks, they sprouted wherever royalty moved, hoping for handouts. He seldom

even noticed them.

Suddenly one of the riffraff flung himself across the line of march, right in front of the regent's palanquin. This was a gross affront, not to be tolerated for a moment. The officers of Lord Ii's household rushed forward, drawing their swords; they would make swift example of the oaf!

Abruptly the places they had vacated beside the palanquin were filled with armed men who seemed to have sprung from the earth-or from the ranks of the peasants, much the same thing.

Fifteen, eighteen, twenty men, swords raised-admitted by the careless interruption of the regent's defensive formation.

But the troops of Lord Ii outnumbered the intruders by more than two to one, and those of the two princes were converging on either side to lend their assistance. Though caught completely by surprise, and hampered by their poor position, they were welltrained samurais. Quickly they reversed direction and attacked.

Their swords reaped flesh with deadly efficiency. Many fell in the first few seconds, but very soon the tide was turned and the attackers driven off. Men fell into the moat, breaking the thin cover of ice, dyeing the water red with their blood. The palanquin was safe.

Then there was a cry: "Yaaaa! Mito!" A lone figure ran along the causeway, waving a gory trophy. It was the head of one of the regent's troops.

"That's Yonezuka!" someone cried, recognizing the fugitive.

"Head of the Mito clan! They're behind this outrage!"

"Lord Ii will have his head!" another cried. Five samurai detached

themselves from the dwindling fray and pursued Yonezuka.

Two of the Mito clan tried to stop them, but both were already gravely wounded, and it was hopeless. Instead of fleeing, the two knelt on the pavement and deliberately performed seppuku,

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the ritual disembowelment. The troops of the regent stood and watched, for so sacred was this act of suicide that no interruption was permitted-not even in the case of criminals like these.

Meanwhile, the five samurai gained on Yonezuka, who was also wounded.

A retainer opened the curtain to the regent's palanquin. "Sir, the criminals have been driven off. Is there anything you-" He stared, aghast. Then: "Lord Ii is dead!"

Indeed he was. The palanquin contained only his headless corpse. "The trophy . . ." someone cried in awe and horror, realizing the significance of Yonezuka's burden.

The fighting died away. Seven Mito clansmen lay in their blood, and a little distance away were the twin corpses of the suicides. A score of the regent's men also lay dead in the street or in the moat.

The samurai caught Yonezuka, dispatched him, and brought back the head he had flaunted. Then a further horror manifested: it was not the head of Lord Ii.

Two persons had been beheaded in that brief period of confusion.

The trophy Yonezuka had carried belonged to one of the

retainers, whose trunk they now discovered among the fallen. It had been a decoy, manufactured under their very noses, while another person escaped unnoticed with Lord Ii's head. Insult added to injury!

Who had devised this daring, complex, cunning plot and supervised its execution? Surely not Yonezuka; he lacked the imagination.

It was almost like one of the ninja tricks of old.

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Hiroshi lifted the shrunken trophy. "And that is the way it was, Jason Striker," he said to me. "This trophy has been preserved for over a century in the Black Castle, one of Fu Antos' most prized possessions. He spent many hours preserving it, curing it so that it would not deteriorate, using secret ancient methods to reduce its size to the present convenient ball without destroying the like-

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ness. Now he has given it to me for safekeeping, until he has made a place for it in the third Black Castle. Is it not a beauty?"

I stared at the grisly memento, now stuffed with diamonds-the head of Lord Ii. Not for the first time I wondered whether I really approved of Fu Antos. His ways and his conscience were far different from mine. Yet I was committed to help him reestablish himself and his remaining ninjas in a new, private Black Castle. Perhaps that was best. It might be another century before Fu Antos ventured once more into the contemporary world. Maybe it was best that East and West, ancient and modern, not meet.

Chapter 7:

MONK'S TREASURE

This time I had left the apartment unlocked. There was nothing left to steal, and I wanted Luis to enter and feel at home.

He was not there, and my note for him was untouched. I had another sinking feeling. Had I lost another diamond while searching for the first?

I ate a dismal solitary supper of cold beans from the can. Maybe Luis was late. I didn't know how he planned to get here; probably hitchhiking. That meant his rate of travel was unpredictable. All I could do was wait and hope.

My doorbell rang. If that was the nympho again . . . But it wasn't. It was a telegram. I read it over four times without comprehending it: WATCH THE MONK'S TREASURE STOP ISLE TO MIAMI KISS LEG.

It was the strangest telegram I had ever received. There was no signature, no address, just the ten enigmatic words. What did it mean?

I phoned Ilunga. The black karate mistress was actually a lot

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smarter than I was, and smart enough never to make an issue of that particular matter. She was taking college-level courses during her off-hours. I was coming to depend on her more and more.

"Can you get over here? I have two problems."

She didn't even conjecture whether my problem was how to

bed another girl or how to master the elementary breakfalls. She knew by my tone that the matter was serious, and she came. But she did eye me with a certain scorn as I met her at the door. "What happened-you bite yourself while shaving this morning?"

"I ran afoul of one hell of a tough customer," I said, thinking of the monster in the Brazilian premises we had raided. "I crippled him, but he-"

Then I realized where she was looking. I covered the most obvious hickey on my neck with one hand. Ilunga surely knew that wasn't from any encounter with a man! "Luis isn't here. That's one problem. And I got this telegram; that's the other." I handed it to her.

"Code," she said, examining it. "Really digging into you.

Monk's treasure could be your fiancée."

I felt deep pain. Lovely Chiyako, the girl I would have married.

Daughter of a Shoalin temple's kung fu sifu: monk's treasure indeed! But she was dead. As always, my fists clenched. Kan-Sen, her murderer-I hated him yet, however far beyond the grave he might be.

"Kiss leg," Ilunga said. "Kiss my foot? Kiss my ass? Someone's riding you!"

"I don't think so," I said. "If Luis doesn't show up-Do you think this could be related? A message from him?"

"No signature. Unless that last word-" She frowned. "What's his initials?"

"LG," I said. "Luis Guardia. He's from Cuba."

"How do you pronounce those initials?"

I shook my head, not getting her drift. "El Gee," I said.

"No. As a word."

"Lig. Leg. What's the-?" I paused. "Leg! You think so?"

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"He comes from Cuba-that's an island, or isle. He went to Miami. Isle to Miami, kiss Luis Guardia. It could relate."

"Yes it could!" I exclaimed. "Illunga, you're a wonder! But why would he send it like this?"

"So his enemies couldn't spot him. You know how that Cuban G-2 is! Only somebody who knew him could figure this message out."

"But he's coming here! Why would he change his mind and send this?"

"Because maybe the G-2 has your apartment staked out, waiting to nab him. Or he thinks it does. So he can't risk it. You'll have to get out and find him."

"But where?"

"Watch the Monk's treasure," she said. "Maybe it's a boat. You say he's got a shipment of arms; maybe that's where they are."

"It all seems highly theoretical," I said dubiously.

She shrugged. "Pure guesswork. Why don't you ignore it and start teaching judo classes again? Some of your students are forgetting what your face looks like."

I swung my fist at her face. She blocked it easily and countered with two knuckles to my solar plexus, brought up short a fraction of an inch so that there was no contact. I leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. "I'm going to Miami," I said.

She had known it all along. "Call in, between nymphos," she said. "I'm going to hire a decent judo teacher, meanwhile. Somebody's got to put business before pleasure."

"Maybe Luis will show up," I said. "If so, put him to work.

You won't find a better judoka."

"Watch your step, massa," she said.

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There were a number of dojos in Miami. Quite possibly one of my friends at one of them would know something of Luis. But I doubted it would be that easy, and my inquiry might just alert his

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enemies or the Cuban G-2 to my quest, complicating things. So I saved that for a last resort.

I took out the telegram, though I had it memorized, and read it again. WATCH THE MONK'S TREASURE STOP ISLE TO MIAMI KISS LEG. A hell of a slender clue! I was probably wasting my time, muffing things again. But if there were a boat called the Monk's Treasure . . .

I walked up and down the white-painted piers. I had spent much of the day checking marinas. This one was alongside a big park with lots of coconut trees. I had seen the police harassing hippies there on my way in.

The names on the assorted craft were myriad: Daisy, Fog Cutter, Queen Anne, Treasure Island. I started, but it was merely a near-miss. Still, it gave me hope. Maybe there really was such a ship, and I could find it, and my long shot would pay off, and all the tangled threads of this confusing adventure would fall into place. All I needed was to locate Luis, buy his weapons for Fu Antos, and retire to my dojo.

"What did you say?"

I looked about, startled. The one who had hailed me was a young girl, with very white skin and freckles on an Irish face. "I didn't say anything."

"Then why are you so happy?"

"I'm not happy!"

She tossed back her black hair and gave me a direct glance with blue eyes. I suppose there's no reason why a black-haired girl shouldn't have blue eyes, but it startled me. "That's what I meant.

Why the big scowl?"

I had to smile. So this teen-age flirt was teasing me! Actually I seem to have a certain fatal appeal for girls on the youngish side, a problem that has never alarmed me unduly. "You can make me happy by telling me where to find the Monk's Treasure."

"I don't know any monks, but I'd love to search for treasure."

"It's a boat," I said.

She made a moue. "You're not much for dialogue, you know that?"

"I'm serious. I have to find that boat"

I turned to continue on my way, a trifle regretfully, for the girl's approach had hinted of better things there for the taking, like sweet fruit on a tree. I'm not immune to that sort of suggestion; in fact, I'm rather susceptible.

But she spotted my gi, coiled and tied by my black belt. I had left the diamonds in their grisly head with Ilunga to fence, but brought my gis in order to mix in at a dojo more naturally. "You're in judo!" she exclaimed. "Or karate."

"Both," I admitted.

"And you're good at it, too," she said enthusiastically. I nodded modestly, happy for the compliment but needing to continue my search. There were a great many boats remaining to be checked.

"My boyfriend was in judo. Not Pete; my real boyfriend. He was a brown belt. What are you?"

So Pete was her current boyfriend. Who the hell was Pete?

"Black belt," I said.

"I know that," she responded, wrinkling her button nose.

"What Dan?"

So she did know a little bit about judo! "Godan."

"Fifth degree! Really?"

"Really," I said, enjoying her awe. I had given the Japanese name, and she had understood it without hesitation. I like that type.

"What are you doing way out here?"

This was getting repetitive, however. "I was looking for a boat."

"Aren't we all!" She glanced at her watch. "I wish Pete would hurry up. He's always late, and it's almost time."

"Going on a cruise?" I inquired, suppressing my unwarranted disappointment. After all, Pete was her boyfriend, and I was just a man passing through. "What's the name of the boat?"

"Just a spin. Pete has this friend he met who's rich, and he invited us out on his yacht for the afternoon. We're supposed to be waiting here at one sharp, and it's almost time. That bastard-if he stood me up-

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"Well, best of luck," I said, finally forcing myself to get on with my business. Suppose the Monk's Treasure were just at the next pier, and I missed it because I was dallying with a girl who liked judo? And Luis died. No! Don't even think it!

I walked on down the pier, reading more names.

Stormrunner . . . Flosweet . . . Julie J . . . Too bad I hadn't learned the name of the boat!" I k girl was waiting for, but I'd keep an eye out for it.

I might have been smarter to look in a registry of local boats, but I was afraid that it would give away my mission. Someone might be just waiting for me to make that inquiry, and thus discover where Luis was hiding and who was coming to help him. I'm no expert at this sort of intrigue, but caution seemed warranted.

A fancy yacht came in. I watched it, trying to make out the

name painted on its side. Something . . . on . . . something. It could be the one! Was the first letter M, as in Monk?

Suddenly the young girl I had chatted with was running along the pier, waving and calling. Her short skirt blew up attractively as she moved. I waited for her, uncertain of her motive, or of mine.

Hell, just two days ago I'd been had by a nympho.

She came up breathlessly. Her exertion had worked open two buttons of her blouse, so that her breasts were exposed. They were unsupported, completely free of encumbrance. I have heard many objections to the braless fashion (most by women), but I have no personal antipathy to it other than taste. That is, pendulous middleaged women should wear bras; firm, pert teen-agers can do nicely without. I admit a small bosom seems to work best on its own; a more substantial superstructure does tend to sag. All of which is to say that I liked what I saw, in this case, though I have often seen larger.

"Pete's not here, and that's the boat!" she gasped, her chest heaving. One advantage of the male's greater height is his ability to inspect such a situation from the best angle. "I can't go aboard alone! You know-"

"Tough break," I said sympathetically, wondering whether I

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should mention the buttons or let her discover them for herself in due course. Strange that an illicit view is so much more intriguing than complete exposure would be. I'm no gentleman about such

things; when the view is there, I look.

"But I've never been on a yacht before! My only chance-" She paused prettily. "Would you come with me? Be my escort?"

"But I'm a stranger to you!"

"No judoka's a stranger to me!" she said earnestly. "Oh, come on, please! They won't know the difference! And maybe someone aboard will know about that boat you're looking for." Her blue eyes became big and soulful. "Please?"

This was nonsensical, but I am the world's worst sucker for a plea by a pretty girl, especially with her blouse open.

It's the American blood in me: I really am charged up by apple pie, ice cream, and girls. And my search didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Who could tell what might develop?

"All right."

"Oh, goody!" She hauled me along by the hand, running to make the rendezvous with the yacht. "I'm Gloria."

"I'm amazed," I muttered, only half-punning, suffering myself to be towed along. We got there just as the yacht did.

It was not the Monk's Treasure. It was the Connie. And the skipper did not seem pleased to see me. He was about forty-five, a handsome, fit, blond, tanned American sportsman with long wavy hair. Evidently an ex-football player running to fat, but so far he was merely beefy, strong, with a beer gut, and developing jowls and a slightly red nose.

If he were to go on a suitable diet and exercise program now, he would soon be a very impressive figure for his age; otherwise, not even his

yacht would lure the girls aboard much longer.

But Gloria made it plain that she was not about to board alone. "Pete couldn't make it," she explained blithely, "so I brought-"

"Jason," I supplied. "Jason Striker."

The skipper glowered. "Well, get aboard! We haven't got all day!"

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All day for what? I wondered cynically.

We boarded. Gloria went up the gangplank first. I saw the way the man looked at her as she passed him. I knew he was seeing into her open blouse, as I had, and that similar masculine thoughts were crowding the communications lines between brain and crotch.

Suddenly I had a suspicion: Pete had not forgotten his date, he had been detained. This man had wanted Gloria aboard alone.

My presence interfered.

It was a beautiful craft, about thirty feet long with tight double cabins. Too bad it wasn't the Monk's Treasure.

We went out on Biscayne Bay, alongside Key Biscayne, past the long causeway to the key with its small sand beaches filled with bathing facilities. We rounded the tip of land, passed pinefilled shores and a lighthouse.

"That lighthouse was attacked by Seminole Indians around 1850," Gloria said. "I read about it. They lit a huge fire at its base, driftwood. Two men were trapped inside. The top of the lighthouse had an iron floor. It got so hot that one man jumped to his

death. The other stayed, and was rescued, but he suffered such burns on his legs that he couldn't walk again. Isn't that something?"

"Something," I muttered, noting with guilty disappointment that she had now done up her buttons.

There were a couple of crewmen aboard who kept to themselves.

And the skipper. And Gloria. And me. That was all. A pretty small party. Yes, a setup for undisturbed romance in a shuttered cabin, provided the female lead was willing-or helpless. Just as well I was aboard, though this really was none of my business. I seemed to have a genius for getting diverted from my mission.

But as we moved out into the open sea, the skipper came to terms with the situation. "I admit it-I had a notion," he said to me privately in the larger cabin, while Gloria stood on the deck letting the sea spray invigorate her. "She has a way about her. No force-I never use that. Just wine and dine and gifts and a ride on this boat-they usually come around. I'm used to indulging my

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yens." He patted his gut a trifle self-consciously, indicating that good food and drink were among the indulgences. "Sorry I was gruff. Nothing personal. You know how it is. She obviously isn't interested, so that's it. Have a nice cruise. We'll loop around, do some fishing, be back in port before nightfall."

He had a certain charm, when he turned it on. I believed his statement that he generally had his way without force. "She's nothing

to me," I said with a tinge of regret. "Pete was held up, so I'm just along to see that whatever she does is voluntary. If she takes an interest in you . . ."

He sucked in his cheeks and pursed his lips. "What's your angle, then?"

"I'm looking for a boat. The Monk's Treasure. That's all." All he needed to know, at any rate.

"All?" He lifted an eyebrow expressively. "You'd have done better checking the piers."

"I was." I shrugged. "If you have any lists, records-"

"Sorry, no. No stack of registries here. Nautical charts, operating instructions-"

"Thanks, no."

"Got a marine band radio. Maybe if you called the coast guard. Here, I'll show you how to operate the set, and you can have some beer and-"

"No beer. But the set intrigues me. Is it okay to call in when there's no emergency?"

Gloria came in. "Hey, Jason-do some judo with me!"

At the moment this pleased neither the skipper nor me. "I was about to learn how to use the radio. Maybe the boat I want is known to the coast guard."

"I'll help you call!" she said enthusiastically.

The skipper made a little gesture of resignation with one hand.

He had his gestures down pat. "Oblige the girl. Show her judo."

He meant that if her eagerness to help me stemmed from her reluctance

to be with him, he would not push it.

Meanwhile, I wasn't quite sure about letting the coast guard

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in on my search. So I changed into my gi, and Gloria put on baggy slacks and a heavy sweatshirt. We spread plastic-covered mattresses from the bunks on the deck, in lieu of mats.

The skipper watched. Despite his wealth, he evidently suffered from boredom, and one form of entertainment was as good as another. Probably this was typical of the spoiled sons of inherited wealth. I had no way of knowing, never having been wealthy myself.

We spread a tarpaulin over the mats, and our miniature dojo, or exercise hall, was ready. I bowed before I stepped onto the mat, as is the custom, and Gloria did likewise. Then we bowed to each other.

"What is this—a formal dance?" the skipper asked, chuckling.

"Judo courtesy," I explained without rancor. "Judo, like all martial arts, can be dangerous, so we don't treat it lightly. We bow to show our respect, much as a private salutes an officer in the army. We regard attitude as very important, and politeness is essential."

"Even to the damned mat?"

"We respect the mat that prevents us from breaking our bones on the floor."

He shut up, and I returned to Gloria. "You know the ukemi?"

I asked her.

"Bobby showed me," she said, performing a creditable backward breakfall, slapping the mat with both hands as she landed.

From this, I gathered that Bobby was her former boyfriend who had known judo. The brown belt.

"All right, let's warm up," I said. "Right-side breakfall, yoko ukemi. Hit it!" And we went down together, slapping the mat resoundingly.

"Why the bit with the noise?" the skipper asked.

"It's not for the sound," I said. "We strike the mat just before the body hits, to take up some of the shock. That makes the fall easier to take. Fewer injuries."

We ran through several assorted falls. "Now," I said, "let's do a throw. Here is the ippon seoi nage-the one-arm shoulder throw.

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Start facing each other, right hand on your partner's left lapel." I grabbed a handful of her sweatshirt above the left breast, since she had no lapel. "Left hand on his sleeve. Now turn to the left, switch your right arm to his right armpit, catch his arm, and haul him over your back for the throw." I threw her, taking care to set her down gently.

Gloria was overjoyed. "That's what Bobby always did!" Then she sobered, evidently remembering her separation from him. What had happened to him?

"Now you throw me," I said. The skipper chuckled, thinking this was impossible, as I was substantially larger than she. But I

talked her through the motions, and when she heaved on my arm I went over and landed resoundingly on the mat.

"Hey, that's something!" the skipper said, genuinely impressed.

"Can anybody do it?"

"Certainly," I said. "Take off your shoes and I'll show you."

He removed his shoes, cleaned the bric-a-brac out of his pockets, and stepped onto the mat. "Oops!" he said, and stepped back off. He bowed. Then he stepped on again and bowed to me.

He was catching on.

I tried to have him throw me, as Gloria had. But he was completely new to judo, and it made a big difference. What is simple to the person with a little experience is hopelessly complex to the newcomer, for there are many seemingly minor things to take into account, such as proper balance. He just couldn't get it right. Rather than have him work up a negative attitude, I switched to a simpler technique.

"Try o soto gari, the major outer reaping," I said. "It works like this: you take hold of your opponent in the natural position, step forward to his side with your left foot, pulling his shoulder up against yours. See, he's half-unbalanced already." I had him leaning slightly back, and I knew he was aware I could put him down easily. A throw is most impressive when you feel its authority; he'd be eager to learn it.

"Now you lift your right leg high behind him, swing it back

and catch his right knee from the back while you shove him backward.

It's a glorified trip, like pushing him over a log. He has to fall." And I put him down firmly, hanging on so that he did not land hard.

Then I talked him through it while he put me down. Of course, his technique was clumsy, but I obliged with an impressive fall, slapping the mat.

"It really works!" he said, almost as pleased as Gloria. "I thought all that stuff was fake!"

"It's real," I said. "But of course there are counters. You could not throw me if I didn't cooperate."

"But I could throw someone who didn't know it?"

"If you did it correctly, yes. But don't go trying it on all your friends. If you do it to someone who doesn't know how to take a fall, on a hard floor, you'll put him in the hospital." That, of course, was the theory of the judo throw: in a street-fight situation, a person thrown with force and control on his back would be unlikely to continue hostilities with any real enthusiasm. Similarly, someone held in an armlock or strangle would be disinclined to offer further resistance. Thus contest matches were decided in favor of the person who made such a throw or obtained such a hold, or showed his advantage in some other fashion.

"What are we waiting for! Get on with the lesson!"

That was not the ideal attitude, but actually the proper attitude can be one of the hardest aspects of judo to master, and many physically competent players fail to advance because of imperfections

in attitude. The skipper had found a new interest, however transitory. Well, I believe in judo, karate, or any martial art as entertainment; they are far better than dope or gambling. If he exchanged his dissipated life for the discipline of judo, he would be a better man in every way.

So I drilled them both in the ippon seoi nage and the o soto gari, keeping it simple. The mat was so bouncy that it was practically impossible for them to hurt themselves, so long as they followed instructions. I kept a close eye on it anyway.

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Theoretically judo is the "gentle" or "yielding" way, and no student should get hurt; but imperfectly applied techniques are dangerous.

One of the crewmen appeared in the door. "Yes?" the skipper inquired, looking up from the mat, where Gloria had just thrown him, both of them enjoying it.

"All of you move over to one side," the man said.

Then I saw he was holding a gun.

"Hey, what is this?" the skipper demanded.

"We're hijacking your boat," the man said. He was a thin, college-boy type, no more than twenty, nervous but determined.

"We don't want to kill anybody, so just take it easy and the boat's all you'll lose."

"Do as he says," I muttered. "Only a fool goes against a gun."

"Hey, I thought you knew how to handle such things!" the skipper said. "What good is a martial art if you just surrender?"

"It may sound cowardly to you, but it is common sense," I said. "Foolish heroics against a gun can get you needlessly killed."

Gloria turned on me a gaze of incredulous contempt. "With three of us and one of him-

"Never make resistance to a gun unless you have no choice," I said.

"Listen to the man," the crewman said. "He's right!" Gloria exchanged glances with the skipper. It was obvious my stature had just taken a dive.

We lined up against the wall. "I'm paying you good money!" the skipper said indignantly to the crewman. "What's the matter with you?"

"Maybe I'm making a break for Havana, find a better life there," the man said.

"They put hijackers to work in the cane fields," I said. "You're a fool."

"I'd be a worse fool to work all my life for peanuts," he snorted.

"The dope we move in two, three trips could net us a million dollars. No one will check this pleasure craft. When they start to
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catch on, we'll scuttle her and sign on another. I expect to retire richer than you are in a couple. of years."

So it was dope, not escape. Unless that was another lie. Not that it made much difference to us.

"Scuttle her!" the skipper cried in horror. "The Connie is worth a hundred and seventy thousand dollars, and I'm still making payments on her!"

"Shut up," the hijacker said. "You'll be put adrift in a lifeboat."

"We'll die!" Gloria cried.

He eyed her. "Maybe you'll stay aboard, cutes. Come here."

She approached him hesitantly. I made ready to move, fast, if he hurt her. But his gun was still dangerous.

"Get that sweatshirt off-see what you look like," he said, reaching for it.

Gloria grabbed his arm and spun into the ippon seoi nage. It was the throw I had just taught her.

She did not perform it well, but she caught him completely by surprise. The gun fired and he stumbled to the side, not actually falling. But that was all the leeway I needed. I leaped across the cabin and caught him with an atemi blow to the side of the neck. I hit the nerve-center complex astride the carotid arteries with my bunched fist. The blow inhibited his respiratory reflexes, and he fell down as if poleaxed. Many people, even judokas, do not know that judo utilizes blows too, and atemi waza. These are so dangerous that they are taught only at black-belt level. They are similar to but superior to the karate blows.

"That's enough!"

It was the other crewman, also with a gun. I saw at once that he was an entirely different type, and not merely physically. He

was short and stocky, with a very wide, strong neck and big arms-
the build of a wrestler, a weight lifter.

"Your friend's unconscious," I said. "His respiratory reflexes
have been stunned by the nerve blow I used. He will die unless I
perform katsu-"

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The gun swung on me. "Get away from him!" the man snapped.

"You can't bluff me!"

I moved away, still protesting. "It's no bluff! He has to be
shocked into breathing again, now."

"You'll be shocked into not breathing, by a bullet, if you touch
him," he said. "You only want a hostage."

But the first crewman was obviously in a bad way. His accomplice
jogged him with one foot. "Come on, Bruce, snap out of it!"

But the unconscious man only shuddered. Then his eyes
opened. It was not recovery; it was death.

"You bastards!" the gunman cried. "Now you'll walk the plank,
if I don't shoot you first!" He aimed at me.

Then the skipper made his move. He jumped for the gun. It
was a well-timed effort, but the hijacker was cat-quick. The weapon
spun around and fired. The skipper stumbled to the floor, wounded
in the thigh.

The gunman stepped back. "Now you can try your treatment-
on him," he said to me, allowing himself a flickering, humorless
grin. "Get him out on deck. Next one who tries it gets it in the

chest."

I knelt beside the skipper. I peeled back his trouser leg. It was a nasty wound through the great muscle of the thigh, but clean; the bullet had passed right through, missing both bone and artery. The wound was bleeding slowly from both ends.

"You're damn lucky," I told him. "Small-caliber, high-velocity bullet-I know it hurts like hell, but you'll survive. He's not bluffing; he had time to shoot you in the gut, but he aimed for the leg instead. I told you not to resist a gun!"

The skipper was ashen-faced. "You told me, all right."

"You bastard!" Gloria flared at me. "He did it to stop you from getting shot!" She knelt beside the skipper. "Move over-I'll tend to it."

I moved, slowly standing. The gunman's eyes were on Gloria, whose loose sweatshirt was now hanging open at the neck as she leaned over, affording the familiar view of her bosom. Some girls

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just can't seem to avoid displaying their assets; no doubt it takes years of practice until it becomes automatic and unconscious. It was a godsend now.

I gave the kiai yell with all my power and launched myself into a forward roll. My head and shoulders went down, my feet up, as I flipped over toward my antagonist.

The gun went off again, and I felt the searing passage of the bullet across my back. Not serious, I knew; a couple inches lower

would have finished me, for it would have caught my spinal nerve.

He had aimed for the chest, as promised, and hadn't reacted quickly enough to my unexpectedly low attack. I flung my feet out, and they struck something, hard.

I was incredibly lucky, for the second time in as many seconds.

I had caught his arm with one heel and knocked the gun loose. That was what I had tried to do, but I had rated my chances for success at about five-to-one against. The only reason I had initiated my action was that I was now certain he meant to kill us. He merely preferred to make it look like an accidental drowning, just in case there should ever be an investigation. I had hoped to entangle him before he could fire again, and fight for the gun.

As it was, I rolled to my feet, coming up fast in front of him.

He was trying to swing his fist at me. I caught his shirt in two hands, hauled him close to me, then spun around and thrust out my leg in the tai otoshi body-drop throw.

He should have stumbled over my leg and fallen to the deck.

But the man just stood there, his stomach hard as a rock. He was tough, and he had had experience. I could not throw him.

A failed throw is an invitation to disaster, and so it was in this case. His arms snaked upward under my armpits and behind my head in a wrestler's full-nelson. He applied pressure, shoving my head forward, my chin down into my chest, until it seemed my neck must break. Which, of course, is the general idea of a nelson.

I tried to break the grip by lifting my arms and lowering them fast while dropping to one knee. But his arms were too strong. I

resisted with all my strength, but it was not enough. My head was

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lowered more and more against my chest, and I knew that my neck was going to be broken. The pain was awful, and I could feel the creaking of the vertebrae in my neck.

I went for another atemi waza blow. I raised my right foot, then brought my heel down as hard as I could on the top of his right foot near the base of the big toe. This attack is called sokuchu, to the metatarsal bone. This gives a nervous shock that is potentially fatal.

But he was wearing sneakers, so the effect was only partial.

Still, he cried out in anguish, loosening his hold on me and falling to the deck. I was free, and it would take only a moment to finish him off.

"Murderers!" a high-pitched female voice cried.

I looked up, and there was another woman. She must have been a stowaway. She stood just in front of the open hatch to the engine room—a disheveled, thin, blue-eyed blonde. I was reminded of the girl member of the Bastard Bones. She held in one hand a ball, or fruit.

Fruit? No—it was a grenade!

"I'll get you!" she screamed, lifting her arm high in a womanfashion throw.

There was a shot. The skipper had picked up one of the guns

and fired at her. The girl collapsed and fell backward into the hatch.

"God, I shot her . . ." the skipper said, appalled.

Then there was a tremendous explosion below. The grenade had detonated. Almost immediately flames shot up, as gasoline spread and burned.

"We've got to get out of here!" the skipper cried. "Before the main tank goes!"

I leaned down, caught him under the arms, and dragged him out onto the deck. "You get the lifeboat down!" I yelled to Gloria.

"I'm going back for the man!"

"You're crazy!" the skipper screamed. "No time-"

"I've got to try!" I said, turning.

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Then I was stumbling over the rail. As I fell into the water, I realized that Gloria had shoved me. Then she put her arm around the skipper, supporting him as well as she could, and they both jumped. After the splash, we all moved away from the boat, and the gas tank blew.

Burning debris showered down around us. The yacht was done for, already sinking, her hull ripped apart. Gloria had saved my life, for I would have been in that explosion if she had not pushed me.

We were lucky, again. We were alive, and all three of us could swim. Land was not far off. Our chance for survival seemed good.

Better than for those aboard the burning, sinking Connie.

Then the sharks came. Well, one shark-but that was much more than I liked. It circled us curiously. "Keep on swimming!" I cried. "Not all sharks are maneaters. We can make it."

But the skipper panicked. The shark brushed against his wounded leg, attracted by the blood. The skipper started screaming and thrashing, and the fish kept cruising in diminishing circles.

Suddenly the fin veered off and came at me. I flexed legs and arms together in one powerful thrust that lifted the top third of my body clear of the water, and punched downward with my right fist on the top of its head where it broke the surface. My aim was good; my blow scored, and it had all my strength behind it.

Ouch! It felt like hitting a board set with sandpaper. My fist was badly scraped. Sharkskin is tough, as though little teeth are set all over its body.

The shark shot away. I don't think it was hurt, just surprised.

Despite their reputation, sharks are not eager to do battle on an even basis. They close in cautiously, and retreat if there seems to be danger. So a good bash on the snout can discourage even a large specimen; he doesn't want more of the same. It's better if you have a sharp rod, of course, and even then nothing is certain. Sharks are like people: some are tougher than others.

I was no longer optimistic about our chances for survival; in

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fact, I was plain scared. But I kept that to myself, and I intended

to fight it out.

Gloria screamed as the fin came at her. I had sent the shark away from me, only to bother her! I stroked toward her, but her scream had already made it veer off again. Very cautious fish. "Stay close to me!" I gasped. "Splash a lot!"

Then the skipper screamed. "My leg!"

We moved toward him, but already I saw blood on the water.

Not a little-a lot. The shark went mad. There was a frenzied thrashing.

I dived under and saw the shark worrying at the skipper's leg.

The predator had bitten an enormous chunk out of it. I swam under the shark's belly and struck it with my spear hand, the fingers stiff and together. But the water impeded my movement, and I succeeded only in annoying the creature. It flicked its tail and sent me tumbling through the froth.

The blow almost knocked me unconscious. My whole side felt numb. Now much more than my fist was scraped.

By the time I regained my orientation, it was too late for the skipper. The shark had dragged him under.

I gestured before Gloria's frightened face, pointing toward land.

At this point there was nothing we could do but save ourselves.

We swam, side by side. The shark was intent on the carnage behind, giving us some respite. But Gloria could not keep the pace. I had to slow to keep her from falling behind, and slow again. She was panting and choking, obviously in trouble. But at any time the shark would complete its grisly repast and seek new

prey-us.

"Hang on to me!" I cried.

Gratefully she came up to me, and I realized one source of trouble. She still wore the heavy sweatshirt. Waterlogged, it was hampering her movements and dragging in the water, draining her strength. "Get it off!" I cried. "Strip!"

To set the example, I stripped myself. My own gis weren't any asset either. Then I helped pull off her sweatshirt and slacks. Na-

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ked, we were both better off. Then she clasped her arms around my neck from behind, and I moved ahead with the breast stroke, frog-kick combination-slower than the crawl, but powerful. Breast stroke: no pun intended, but when she slid off my back to one side or the other, my shoulder did stroke one of her breasts. I am never too busy to notice such things.

"Shark!" she cried.

Sure enough, another fin had spotted us. This shark was a monster-a good fourteen feet. It circled twice, then came directly in. It didn't have any doubts about its ability to handle the situation. And why should it?

"Hang on!" I cried. I curled myself into a ball, feet toward the monster, bracing my shoulders against Gloria.

When the huge jaws were about to close, I let fly with what amounted to a drop kick. Both my feet smashed into the shark's nose just above the terrible teeth. The impact was terrific; Gloria

and I shot away, propelled by the rebound.

We didn't see the shark after that. Apparently surprise had paid off again. After a moment we resumed swimming toward the island. Soon my feet touched sand, and I knew we were there. Gloria was exhausted, and I couldn't blame her. I had shucked everything but my waterproof watch, which I had forgotten to remove when we started the judo practice, and it showed we had been in the water more than an hour. It hardly seemed that long, yet at the same time it seemed much longer. No doubt the psychiatrists can explain that phenomenon; I can't. I was just glad to be out of that water.

I half-dragged her out of the sea and across the warm beach. She was laughing deliriously, but did not seem to be hurt. Relief, I hoped. The cold, tension, and exertion-she had only a fraction the muscle I did, and had really suffered. I tended to forget how fragile women were. But I wouldn't change them, not for the world. It was the usual tropical atoll, except it wasn't technically an atoll, as there was no coral. Sandy beach, clean blue sea, palm

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trees. I set her down in the shade, scraping away palm fronds and incidental debris. "You saved me!" she gasped.

"And lost the skipper," I said sourly. "He was a decent fellow, after all."

She looked around. "Maybe we'll die too. We're on an island, aren't we?"

"We must be. Rest a while. I'll look around. Maybe there's a village or something."

"No," she cried in alarm. "Don't leave me!" She clung to my arm.

"But, Gloria, we can't just stay here."

"Yes we can, for a little while. I don't want the headhunters to get me."

"Headhunters!" I laughed.

"Please?"

Again that plea. I became aware we were naked. She was a good-looking girl, and I didn't want to take advantage of her.

"I want to thank you," she said, pulling me down beside her.

"I never could have made it myself."

"No thanks necessary," I said gruffly. I have been told that complete nakedness is much less sexy than clothing. Maybe so; it depends on the woman. Gloria had a sort of innocent appeal about her that put inevitable notions in my brain. I knew I should get on with my island exploration before those notions became physically evident, embarrassing us both.

She moved around and kissed me. "I'm not out of my head, Jason, if that's what you're worried about. I'm cold and tired, but you're a judoka and it's what I want. Really."

Still, it didn't seem right. "Your boyfriend, the brown belt- what happened to him?"

"We were going to be married," she said. "He-" She broke

off. "I always liked the judo." And she kissed me again.

She was too young for me, and it wasn't just a matter of age. I would not have wanted to be seen with her on the streets. But in this situation it was difficult to resist temptation. I kissed her back.

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Then she pulled away a little. "No, no . . ."

I had encountered that sort of response before. My lips moved down to her neck. "Don't do that," she said, wriggling but hardly drawing away.

Then on to her breasts, that had preoccupied me so continuously.

"It tickles!" she said. "Stop."

I looked up. "I thought you said this was what you wanted."

She looked down, partly in assumed modesty, partly to see the state of my readiness, which perhaps alarmed her. "But I knew you wouldn't do it!"

I began to appreciate how things had been with her boyfriend.

All come-on and turn-off. He must have gotten disgusted and thrown her over. "Okay, let's go look for civilization." I was frankly a bit put out; I don't like on-off sex play.

She sighed and got up. We walked along the beach. It didn't take long to ascertain that this was a small uninhabited island. We really were stranded. For the second time this week I found myself in one of the dream situations of the American imagination: first in bed with a nympho, now marooned with a lovely nude girl. Ah, well.

"What if no one comes here?" she asked worriedly. "Isn't this

what they call the Devil's Triangle?"

The Devil's Triangle-a region of the Caribbean sea notorious for mysterious disappearances of a vast number of ships over the years. I didn't like the notion. "We must be somewhere near Bimini," I said. "Not that far from Miami. Bound to be ships passing. We'll hail one." I hoped. "Meanwhile, we can set up a signal-big SOS drawn in the sand. Maybe we can form it with coconuts, so it can be seen from the air."

"Maybe we can drink coconut milk," she said.

I had had wilderness-survival courses when training with the Green Berets in Panama, and I had already noted edible plants on the island. "We can do that, yes. We can also dig out clams and catch crabs. There may be sour orange trees, and papayas. We won't starve. We can last for several days, and probably much longer,

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if there's fresh water, and I think there is. We may have to dig for it, though, or catch rainwater."

"That's good." She did not seem unduly alarmed. Her mind was concerned with immediacies; next week was too far away to worry about. Which is part of what I mean by saying she was too young for me.

So we gathered debris and made our SOS on the sand. When we were finished, she settled down under another palm tree.

I settled beside her. "We should try to make some clothing.

Palm-frond skirts or something."

She giggled. "You'd look cute in a skirt."

"Some very prominent martial artists wear skirts," I said, thinking of Hiroshi-which in turn reminded me how far I was from solving the mystery of Luis' disappearance or obtaining the weapons for Fu Antos. I had muffed this chore about as thoroughly as Fu Antos' worst enemy could have.

And that brought an unpleasantly stunning notion to my consciousness.

I had blundered the Fu Antos mission throughout.

Was it because I distrusted Fu Antos' purpose, and wanted to fail?

"That sounds like a painter!" Gloria said.

"What?" I had completely lost track of what we had been talking about.

"Martial artist. A man painting a picture of a battlefield."

I grimaced. "There's more than one kind of artist."

"You're kind of stuffy, when you put your mind to it," she remarked, smiling.

I smiled too, relaxing. "That's not true. Stuffiness comes naturally to me. I never have to work at it."

"Were you really looking for a boat?"

I was getting accustomed to her jumps of subject. "I really was." Or was I? I had surely taken the least effective way to locate that boat. Damn it, I would have to decide: either I was with Fu Antos and really trying, or I should go home and quit pretending.

I told her about the telegram. There didn't seem to be any harm in the information now.

She laughed musically. "You nut-that monk's treasure doesn't have to be a boat. It could be a monastery!"

"Are there many monasteries in Miami?" I inquired dryly.

"Sure. One, anyway. Someone's been building one. Rebuilding, I should say; they shipped it over from Europe, stone by stone, and put it together here, just the same way it was. Actually, that was done years ago by some rich eccentric; then it was abandoned. Went up for taxes, I guess. Now they're fixing it up again. Anybody can be a monk now, if he has the money."

"Monks don't have money," I said. "They take a vow of poverty."

"All the same, you have to pay to get in. Something like a thousand dollars a month. Talk about treasure-the proprietor must really be raking it in."

Monk's treasure . . . Maybe she had a point. If Luis were hiding in a place like that-perfect concealment. "You're a doll," I said, kissing her again. Suddenly my decision was made: I would follow up Fu Antos' mission with all my power-once I got off this island.

She turned right toward me. "Are we going to start that again?"

"No, of course not!" I said, nettled, for I had indeed been about to warm up to her, partly, in gratitude for the decision she had unwittingly helped me make, and partly because-well, she was a pretty girl, nude, and what the hell else was there to do on this damned island? Count mosquitoes?

"Why the hell do you listen to me?" she flared.

So it was that way! I caught her by both shoulders and kissed her again. This time she responded warmly. We rolled on the sand, working into the conclusive embrace, and I discovered she was a virgin.

"For God's sake!" she yelled as I paused. "I kept my mouth shut, didn't I?"

So I went ahead, interpreting her signals as well as I could.

Body language was everything; her words were just for the record, in case anyone should ever accuse her of being too eager.

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She squirmed, whether in eagerness or pain I could not tell.

Though she was virginal, the barrier was not formidable; a technicality, as it were. Still, I went carefully, trying not to hurt her.

"Is it all in?" she cried. "Is it all in?"

What a question! "Half-in," I muttered. "Three-quarters." As though I were announcing a depth gauge. Did she think a bell would ring when penetration was complete? I suffered a momentary mental picture of a slot machine, ready for the, payoff when the symbols fell into place.

"Huge!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe I have the whole thing!"

There are limits. I would have chastised her for her pun-if pun it was-but the urge overmastered me. I stopped calling signals and thrust the remaining distance, heedless of the discomfort this might cause her. She had the whole thing now.

And in the midst of my climax, she started crying. But at the same time, she clung to me, not letting me withdraw.

"Bobby-I keep remembering Bobby!" she cried. "We always got up to the point, but he wouldn't finish it. And then he died of Hodgkin's disease."

Now she told me! In the heat and sweat of my ebbing climax, I felt disgusted. Yesterday, or whenever it was-half a lifetime ago!- I had cuckolded a living man; today a dead one.

"I wanted it from a judoka," she said. "To remember Bobby by."

That was one way of looking at it. I finally disengaged, not awfully proud of myself.

"You lost yours too," she said. "She was young, like me?"

How do women always know these things? Are there secret signals embedded in the technique of my lovemaking, there for all females to interpret? Chiyako, dead at the hands of Kan-Sen. It had been a year, but the wound had not healed. It would never heal. I felt tears in my own eyes.

"That's all right," Gloria said, cradling my head on her small breast. She certainly knew how to make the most of that bosom!

"We're even."

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I submitted to her comforting. Was there no end to her little foibles?

Then I saw the ship. A fast military cutter, coast-guard-type.

Not American, I judged, but this was no time to be choosy.

We both jumped up and waved frantically, yelling. It was anticlimactic, in more ways than one. They saw us and came right in. It turned out to be a small police launch on a routine trip from Bimini to the other islands of the region. Some airplane had spotted our SOS and notified the authorities, so the launch had swung by to investigate.

They gave us clothing, made out a report, and dropped us off at Bimini. "I guess I won't see you again," Gloria said sadly as we waited for American transport back to Miami. "But thanks, Jason. I can let Bobby go, now, maybe."

"Thanks to you!" I said warmly. "You may have given me the hint about the monk's treasure!" A hell of a long way around, but worth it all-especially if this new interpretation were correct.

Chapter 8:

DEMON

I entered the dojo, looking for the sensei, the instructor. I wasn't really familiar with the Miami scene, but I knew several of the judo masters of the area. I felt that a dojo would be the best place to obtain good advice and help-such as information about the nature of this monastery, and whether a refugee Cuban would be likely to go there. And of course I was at home in a dojo anywhere in the world.

No one paid attention to me, so I approached the nearest black belt I saw. He was a shodan, or first degree black belt-the minimum

master grade-I judged. He looked about forty, of medium height, a solid 190 pounds or so. He seemed to be of Italian descent, with a big Italian nose and wavy black hair. "Excuse me, I'd like to talk to-"

"Move on, move on-we have a class coming up!" he said roughly. "Why haven't you changed yet?"

This was not exactly dojo courtesy as I understood it. "I lost my gis in the ocean," I said. "I only wanted to ask-"

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"All right!" he snapped. "Use the spare set in the locker room. Now, don't bother me again!"

I was having trouble getting through to him. Of course, I had come in at a bad time, just before a class, but that was also when the black belts showed up. One reason I wanted to talk with a black belt was that I had lost my money and identification in the hijacking episode, and needed to get to someone who would recognize me and lend me enough money to continue my quest. Oid y0

I could have phoned Ilunga, collect, and she would have bailed me out, but I would never have lived down the I-told-you-so sneer on her face. I am a long way from achieving that exalted state where personal pride is secondary to common sense.

Irritated, I went to the locker room in the back and found the spare gis. But the belt was white.

I came out with the belt draped over my shoulder. In judo, black is beautiful; it signifies the master grades, or Dan. White is

rank amateur.

The class was just completing its warm-up exercises. "I need a black belt," I told the instructor. It was not that I wanted to work out with the class; it was my way of getting his attention so that I could get on with my business.

He rolled his eyes expressively ceilingward. "First night, and he wants a black belt! You've got a lot to learn!"

Not half as much to learn as he had! My temper was taking a beating, and the smarting of the bullet graze I had suffered aboard the Connie did not help. "Listen, sensei," I said with sarcastic emphasis, "I am a black belt. I only came to-

He whirled on me. "You listen, mac! I don't care what you think you have from some crackpot splinter group that calls itself judo. Maybe you paid two grand and they gave you a black belt. But this is Kodokan, real judo. You claim you have a black belt, you prove it!"

Now I knew what he was thinking of. Theoretically, there are many schools of judo, as there are of karate or any martial art. But to the serious player there is only one-Kodokan, the school

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founded by Jigoro Kano, originator of judo, in the 1880's. Some supposed schools give out black belts for money instead of prowess; never the Kodokan. There is also the problem of players claiming high rank they haven't actually earned. So he was right, but also wrong, for he had not bothered to ascertain that I wasn't

Kodokan. He had just assumed it.

"All right!" I snapped back. "Want me to run the line?"

The ultimate check of a person's proficiency was always on the mat.

He smiled grimly. "Sure-you do that. Let's see what you're really made of." He called the class to attention. "This visitor wants to run the line. Don't keep him waiting."

A score of Latin faces grinned back. This was an advanced class; no white belts, only a couple of yellow belts, and half a dozen brown belts. There were even three black belts at the end of the line.

Running the line can be tough. You start with the easiest, and go on to the next as soon as you defeat each one. No break, no rest-and you come to the toughest when you're worn out. It is a real test of the runner's skill and stamina. It takes clear superiority to get all the way through, because every single student is out to nail you, and any mistake can wipe you out.

The idea of a white belt seriously running the line was preposterous.

He would not last more than one or two matches. They were really setting me up for a comedown-they thought.

But the fact is, I am a superior judoka. I have run the line with all black belts, for my fifth degree is as far beyond the first degree as First Dan is above an orange belt. And this arrogant dojo needed a lesson in manners.

I started in with the first yellow. I simply hauled him out of

the line and put him back with an o soto gari leg throw, the same one I had shown the skipper. It's a good technique at any level. The second yellow skittered to the side to avoid a similar indignity, perhaps thinking it was the only throw I knew, and I caught him with the okuri ashi barai foot sweep. The next was orange: o 365 uchi gari, straight back, sweeping his foot from the inside so that he almost fell on his butt. He was surprised. Another orange: tai otoshi, the body drop, that had been unsuccessful against the wrestler hijacking the Connie. Less than a minute had passed, and four were down with four leg techniques, and I was just warming up. So it went, on up the line. I never repeated a technique. Very soon they knew they were dealing with a master, for I set down the green and blue belts almost as readily as before. On the brown belts, too canny for the elementary throws, I used sutemi, or sacrifices. That's a misnomer, for the judoka never voluntarily sacrifices his balance; it simply means that I took them to the mat in controlled fashion by throwing myself down. One I caught with the kami basani, or crab pincers. I jumped high in the air, one leg across his waist and the other behind his legs, my body sideways to him. He looked amazed as he went down; he had probably never encountered this throw before, as it is seldom performed. Another I took with one of my favorites, the ukiwaza, or floating throw, so-called because your opponent seems to float over you without touching. Then the black belts. The first tried a sutemi on me. It was the

tomoe nage, or circle throw, in which you try to haul your opponent over you as you roll back. It's a good technique, but I was ready for it. I merely squatted down, resisting the leg he put in my gut with all the hara power of my stomach. I flipped his arms aside and was on him in the kesa gatame, or scarf hold-down. My right arm was around his neck, while my left held his right arm captive. He could not break it within thirty seconds, so he was finished.

The second tried another sutemi, the soto makikomi, or wraparound throw. It is an excellent technique in which you wrap your opponent around you, then throw yourself to the mat, carrying him along. But if you do not get the point, the drawback is that he is behind you, ready to apply a new technique. And so it was in this case: I retained my footing as he went down, and I slid my arms around his neck, one going deep and grabbing his collar, the

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other snaking up behind his head. I applied the kata hajime onewing strangle, and he capitulated. He would have been unconscious very shortly if he had not yielded.

The third tried a straight defensive posture, shoulders forward, feet braced back. This can be very tough to overcome. I bent, pulled him forward, grabbed one leg with my arm, and picked him up in the kata guruma, or shoulder whirl. He struggled and managed to turn aside as he went down, making the throw imperfect, so I

applied an ude gatame as he tried to push me away. I caught his outstretched arm alongside my face while I put pressure with both hands against his elbow, shoving it against my chest. He had to tap out, yielding.

I had completed the line in just over five minutes. Now they knew who I was; I saw the recognition in the faces of the black belts. But two more had shown up during the action. One was a white belt, a short man about five feet five inches, but big around. He weighed about two hundred pounds, had a big belly, and arms like tree trunks. His disheveled blond hair was flecked with white. He had big green staring eyes with a disconcerting glare. His face was square, and he wore a short blond goatee and moustache. A gold tooth showed when he opened his mouth. Well, you see all types in judo.

The other man was in street clothes, a huge black. Apparently he was just along to watch the fun; I gave him no more than a passing glance. Which, as I learned, was a mistake.

"You missed one," the white belt said, standing forward. "Don't leave out Loco."

Loco? The name meant nothing to me. I have enough trouble keeping track of the second-and third-degree black belts, let alone the myriad white belts. So I moved out to meet him, intending to put him down gently. A beginner with his evident strength would tend to bull through on muscle alone, not appreciating the finer nuances of position and balance which are the essence of judo. I went into a soft harai goshi hip sweep, pushing his right leg out

from under him as I brought him over my right hip.

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But his foot did not sweep properly. Bent half over, he came forward and picked me up in a savage sukui nage scoop throw, one hand across my waist, the other under my legs. He lifted me high and threw me backward against the wall. He was amazingly strong.

I protected my head with my arms, pushing off from the wall as I fell. That was no white belt! The bastard had used my own unintentional ruse against me, concealing his true level. I was in for a real fight this time.

Loco came at me, leaping into the air to land on me feet-first.

I reacted without thought; rolling aside, I let him land on the mat, then I kicked his legs out from under.

Real fight? Literally! This wasn't judo practice-it was mayhem!

But why? I had to defend myself, but I had no idea why I was being attacked in this manner. As far as I knew, I had never run afoul of this man before.

We rolled on the floor. The man tried a hadaka jime naked choke on me from behind, but I profited from the bygone instruction of the very man I sought, Luis Guardia. I arched my body backward toward him, easing the pressure. At the same time, I tried an illegal yubi waza finger lock against one hand. If he played rough, so could I. There's a hell of a lot more to judo than is ever seen in the formal contests. He had to let go or suffer some broken fingers.

We stood, and now it came to blows. He swung with a vicious knife-hand strike to my face, *shuto gammen-uchi*, which I blocked with the edge of my own left hand to his forearm. I countered with a terrible punch to the pit of his stomach. It was an inverted fist low thrust, *uraken shita-uchi*, snapping my fist slightly at the moment of contact for more force.

I almost broke my hand. His stomach was iron-hard. He must have practiced for years, hitting it with everything imaginable, until his muscles became so strong they could take almost anything. My hand felt numb and swollen, as it had when I hit the big shark.

His leg shot out, catching my ankle in a powerful combina-

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tion foot-sweep and kick. His foot, too, was like iron. I fell to the floor; my ankle felt broken. I rolled out of reach of that terrible weapon.

I caught his leg, pushing upward as I leaped to my feet. It was a version of the *kuchiki-taoshi* throw, the dead-tree drop. I lifted his leg high and shoved him back, trying to make him fall, but all I succeeded in doing was to push him into a corner. This man's whole body was conditioned.

He braced against the wall and shoved me back and down. I rolled again, expecting him to kick me, but this time he stood back and let me regain my feet. Then he knocked my legs out again. But as I fell, I caught one of his ankles: it is always a mistake

to try the same technique twice in succession, unless you are sure your opponent doesn't expect it. I used him as a crutch to regain my own balance, shoving him into the corner again. He couldn't right himself; I had control. For the moment.

I had to subdue him, before he subdued me. This was no running-the-line randori, and no friendly dojo rivalry. There was something ugly behind it, and I had the feeling, now, that it involved Luis.

I had no intention of disappearing the way Luis had. I had come to find him, and if this man knew anything, he would talk.

When I got through with him.

Loco tried a series of strikes at my face. I dodged them. Then he made a numbing shuto blow to my forearm, the arm holding his leg. I was taking a lot of punishment.

Time to give him his own medicine. I brought my knee up, but I didn't go for the crotch. I twisted my hips and made a terrible hiza-geri strike to his abdomen—a blow that would have ruptured a normal man's intestines, possibly killing him from shock.

It had no apparent effect. I kned him again, and a third time.

On the fourth blow his knees began to give, and on the fifth he buckled, losing consciousness.

"That's some man," I said, turning away. I wasn't being facetious; the guy had been damn tough, but he had also, in his fash-

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ion, been fair. There had been opportunities for really dirty stuff. I

knew he knew how, but he hadn't tried it.

"Saaiiii!" The other man, the one in civvies, gave an earsplitting kiai yell and took to the air with a vicious two-footed kick at my head. His hard-soled shoes made the threat all the more effective. I twisted away, and he missed. These kicks can be devastating when they score, but you can see them coming. Undismayed, he landed on his feet, whirled, and tried a powerful straight kick. But I aided his leg, pushing it upward with my hand, while I stepped in and swept his supporting foot in a ko uchi gari small inside clip, sweeping his supporting foot so that he fell.

He put his hand inside his shirt. A knife came out.

"No, Eugenio!" Loco cried, sitting up.

But the blade of the knife was already moving purposefully toward me. I kicked it out of his hand as he jabbed, and it clattered against the wall. This was one of those cases when resistance had to be made to a weapon. I would have been dead if I had waited for him, for he obviously meant to kill me.

I don't like attempts on my life. I caught his wrist, pulled his arm around, and applied an ude garami arm wrap as I bore him to the mat. My left hand held his left wrist, while my right passed under his bent arm and joined my own left wrist. By lifting and putting pressure on his elbow and shoulder joints, I had him in pain and at my mercy.

"Why were you trying to kill me?" I demanded, pressing his elbow. His arm was strong, but I had all the leverage; I could snap his joint out, and he knew it.

Even so, he resisted for a moment. I gave him a surge of force to show I meant it, and suddenly he slapped the mat with his foot in surrender. I let him go, but remained on guard; this man lacked the nicety of discipline of the other, and I didn't trust him.

"Because you are a Fidelista," he said. "Here to betray our cause."

"Me?" I said, amazed. "I have no interest in Cuban politics!"

Loco stood up, listening closely but not interfering. "You were

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in Cuba!" Eugenio said. "You talked with Fidel himself for over an hour. We know!"

"Just how do you know that?" I asked.

"We have witnesses!"

"The only witnesses were Fidel's own guards." He was silent, so I continued. "Look, I know Fidel Castro. I didn't talk to him; he talked to me. I was his captive a few months ago. That doesn't mean I'm his agent-any more than it does for any of you who left Cuba. I also know Luis Guardia; in fact, he's the one I'm looking for now."

"We know," Eugenio cried. "To betray him!"

"To help him!" I cried back. "He's my friend. If you know him, if you know where he is, ask him! He'll tell you. I came down here in answer to a telegram-"

"You lie!" Eugenio said.

But Loco wasn't so sure. "I did send Striker a telegram, Eugenio.

You know he's telling the truth about that. We knew he'd show up here sooner or later; that was the idea."

I stared at Loco. "You sent the telegram? I thought it was Luis!"

"You were meant to," Eugenio said. "You'd never have shown your face here if you knew the reckoning awaiting you!"

I turned to him. "Why do you call me liar and coward when you know I'm not?"

"Luis deserted Cuba!" he said. "You want to kill him! We had to stop you!"

"By summoning me here?" I shook my head. "Seems to me you were trying to do the killing."

Loco considered. "I was sure, but now I am not. His story stands up better than yours, Eugenio. It seems to me I have listened too much to one person."

"But all those betrayals!" Eugenio cried. "Someone had to-"

Loco looked at him with cool calculation. "Yes. Someone. But Striker was hardly in a position to do all that. He can't mix with us; he doesn't know our ways. His cause is not ours. He was far away. And Luis trusted him. Did Luis trust you?"

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Eugenio looked away, and something like fear showed on his face. "I am your own kind! Why should I-?"

Loco took a step toward him. I was amazed at Loco's recovery from the beating I had just given him. "Why indeed? It does not make sense, if you are one of us. We wanted to get the truth from

Striker. But you tried to kill him. It doesn't add up-unless you don't want the truth known. You called him liar, as though you were trying to put the guilt on him without even thinking. As though that is really why you want him here: to assume the guilt, dead. Your motive showed through; you made a slip. That doesn't happen to those with nothing to hide."

"No!" Eugenio cried, backing off. "I can explain-"

"Where is Luis?" Loco barked.

And Eugenio, seeing he could not hide any longer, said, "In the monastery."

Loco showed amazement. "He is there? It's not just the story we made up?"

Interesting, I thought: Loco had thought he was misleading me with the telegram, but it had been the truth after all. Wheels within wheels!

Loco turned to me. "My apologies, Señor Striker. I was misled."

"Accepted!" I said. "Let's go get Luis!"

He raised a hand in caution. "He may be prisoner. We must learn more first, or our very approach will kill him. We must make plans."

"All right," I said. "But there's still a lot I don't understand."

"I sent the telegram," Loco said. "Luis thought the G-2 was after him, to destroy the arms shipment he had aboard the Monk's Treasure. He thought there was a spy among us, so he didn't trust us. Not enough to-"

"You mean there is a ship called the Monk's Treasure?"

"Not registered as such. He called it that as a code name, and he scuttled it after he buried the weapons in a secluded place.

Where, that is his secret. The G-2 wants to catch him or betray

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the weapons to the American police, so they will be lost to us.

Their agents are everywhere, and the American government is really on the same side; we can hardly trust anyone. Luis said he was going to hide with a friend."

"I was that friend," I said. "He phoned me-

"We knew. Then he disappeared. Your pardon; we drew a conclusion."

So I saw. Had I been a spy, I could have betrayed Luis the moment I knew his location. But of course I wasn't, and I hadn't- and I hadn't even known where he was.

"Eugenio said we should protect Luis; if anyone came asking for him, we should-well, nothing too violent, just enough to discourage inquiries." He made a gesture. "Nothing personal, señor! We were not sure."

"I understand," I said. What a tangled web of deceit had been woven. Now it all seemed hopelessly contradictory, but that was in retrospect; it had probably seemed authentic as long as I was under suspicion. At least this solved the riddle of why Loco had fought me. "But Luis never told me where he was, and he never arrived at my place. That's why I came here. I was afraid something had happened to him. And I didn't really understand that

telegram; I thought it was from him."

"You were meant to. Eugenio found out about his call to you;

I curse myself for an idiot that I didn't think to question how.

Only a clever spy has such resources! He said you had been in Cuba, talked with Fidel, that Fidel had actually given you a boat to return on, you and your black mistress. He said-

"Uh-oh," I said. "That much is true. I did meet Castro, as I said before, and he did let me have a boat. I was in Cuba for the world judo meet, and he wanted some help in stopping gun and drug running, because it was interfering with his relations with the USA."

"Exactly!" Loco agreed. "They work together now!"

"I'm against drugs and gun running, too. So we cooperated.

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But that was all. Luis is my friend; I want him to teach judo at my dojo."

"And you have no interest in his weapons?"

Oops! "I do want the weapons, too, but I mean to buy them from him, for another party. I can't tell you who, but it's not American or Cuban."

"See?" Eugenio cried. "He has secrets too!"

Loco pondered. I realized my case had lost credibility, but I did not feel free to tell these people about Fu Antos and the ninjas.

"I believe you," Loco said to me at last. "Now." He shook his head. "When Eugenio actually tried to kill you, I knew there was

something he hadn't told me. He is clever; he used the truth, but not the whole truth. I think he wanted to kill you and put the blame on you."

"Blame for Luis' disappearance?"

"For all the betrayals we have suffered. Someone has exposed some of our best people to the G-2, and they have disappeared. Like Luis. Now I think we know who that traitor is-at last." He turned to Eugenio.

The big black backed away. "You have no proof!"

"You knew where Luis was, but you did not tell me! You knew Señor Striker was innocent but how guilty he might look. He was ideal for the patsy, to remove suspicion from you."

"It was a mistake! I thought-"

"We know what you thought! Now you will pray we find Luis alive and well at the monastery."

"He is! He is! I don't know in what room for sure, but he's there. Most likely in the power room. We wanted him to tell where the arms were sunk, but he refused to talk to anyone but Striker."

"So you had me send Striker a cryptic telegram-so the G-2 would not understand it, you said. But of course the G-2 already knew!" Loco took another step forward. "You played me for a patsy, me cojiste de comemierda."

I didn't know what that meant, but I was sure it was strong language.

"It was the only way!" Eugenio cried desperately.

Loco turned away, disgusted. "I think you are our traitor, but

I have no real proof yet, and I will not act again on mere suspicion.

But word will get around." He looked at the black belts and students.

They looked back, smiling grimly. "Yes, word will get around.

Not everyone is as finicky as I am. Those who lost their friends . . ."

Now Eugenio looked distinctly nervous. I did not envy him

his position, despite his effort to frame me. He was tough, but so

were a number of the exiles, and some had serious grievances, as

certain other disappearances and assassinations had demonstrated.

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The monastery was a huge stone edifice resembling a medieval

castle in certain respects, but it was actually only half a castle. It

was an ancient Spanish monastery that an eccentric millionaire,

who had made his fortune in Cuban sugar in 1910, had brought

stone by stone to his secluded estate. It was part of an elaborate

system of gardens and artifacts. He had also built extensive wine

cellars underneath, and added to the original structure. There was

a huge central patio with many smaller walled vegetable and fruit

gardens, genuine catacombs, halls full of trophies, and a big chapel.

All were surrounded by a high stone wall. Medieval tapestries hung

inside, and the furniture was of massive carved black ebony.

The millionaire had died, and his sons had squandered his

fortune. The state of Florida won possession of the monastery by

default on the taxes. Now a deal had been made, and the recent

kung fu craze was making the monastery pay again.

"We wish to tour," I said to the monk at the front gate. "There may be something we want here." Such as a captive black-belt judoka.

He was used to these requests. There was considerable tourist interest in this project. We paid five dollars apiece and were led through the somber halls and chambers by a silent monk.

It was impressive. Everything was dense, almost black stone.

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Rows of lighted candles lined the passages. Statues of the Buddha were everywhere, seeming out of place, but of course this was supposed to be a Chinese kung fu monastery now, not a European Catholic one. Thus Oriental artifacts replaced the crucifixes.

Where the chapel altar had been, there was now a huge golden statue of Buddha, with a number of worshipers before it, chanting Buddhist prayers. On an outer patio, other worshipers were dancing, whirling. Anything went, it seemed, so long as the customers had money.

The monks wore saffron robes, and yellow ones, while the ranking ones were in blue and golden kimonos with embroidered dragons and Chinese motifs. The heads of the men were shaven.

It reminded me strongly of the real monastery I had stayed at in Cambodia years ago, where I had learned something of the philosophy of weapons and the art of the nunchaku. But all those genuine monks were dead now, and I shied away from the memory.

It tied in with my lost fiancée, and with her murderer, Kan-Sen,

and I could not afford to get off on that awful train of thought again.

But at the same time, this monastery was phony. The medieval monks, of whatever hemisphere, had hand-carried water in buckets attached to shoulder yokes, from a spring below the building. Here they had hot and cold running water piped into every residential chamber. The originals had used tallow lamps for illumination; now they had electric lights wherever the candles were not on show. True monks had eaten hard bread baked in great stone ovens heated by wood fires; now they had "Monk's Bread" delivered every morning by truck. Television sets were mounted in the walls, and the laundry room had automatic washing machines. It was really a huge hotel, with most of the modern comforts thereof.

True, all inhabitants were required to wear monk's h of=Even the paying tourists, like us. This had the incidental effect of preventing us from bringing in any concealed weapons or tools. But the habit was hardly haircloth, though I understood that was avail-

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able on demand for masochists; it was silken, extremely comfortable in the air-conditioning. And the supposedly harsh, deprived life of the monks was alleviated by the maid service; no one had to clean up his own room. The maids I saw were exceedingly comely, too.

In short, it was one big fake. There was no celibacy here, no hardship, no renunciation of the world, no dedication of body and spirit to God. It was just another moneymaking scheme. Successful, by the look of it. But I could not respect it.

But our real purpose was to discover, if we could, where Luis Guardia was, and to rescue him. I studied every contour, analyzing the layout for secret rooms and passages. I peered into every monkish face. If Luis were here, he might be drugged, insensible of his whereabouts, subjected to brainwashing techniques . . .

I saw a stairwell leading down from an interior patio. Two burly monks stood guard. This alerted me: why should any portion of the monastery be off limits to visitors, without any posted notice? "I'd like to see your catacombs," I said to the guide. "Such things fascinate me."

"Sorry, they are closed for renovations," he said.

I caught Loco's eye. The power room must be down there.

There were just the five of us in the chamber-him, me, the guide, and the two guards. "Oh, I'm sure it will be all right," I said, walking to the steps the way a spoiled tourist might. Loco followed me.

The guards closed in immediately. They were hiding something, all right! "It is not permitted," one said, one hand reaching into his robe. He was a leather-faced thug, no paying customer by the look of him. It was surely a gun he had in there.

Loco made as if to go away, but as he turned he delivered a backward kick with the heel of his foot to the pit of the guard's

stomach. At the same time, I used the keiko, or chicken-beak hand, on the other. My fingers and thumb were pressed tightly together to form a point, the back of my hand turned up. That beak hit the man in the hollow of his throat where it joins the neck. He should
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have been rendered unconscious instantly, but just to be sure, I followed up with a short blow to the abdomen.

Loco had already jumped across the floor and knocked out the guide—a painless termination of consciousness, since the man was probably an innocent employee. Quickly we stacked the three men out of sight around a turn of the stair and moved swiftly and silently on down. Now time was of the essence, before they caught on to what we were up to.

There was no renovation going on. The catacombs were dark and cool, the walls moist; mildew covered the crevices. We had to feel our way along the wall in places, because the light was so bad. Fortunately, it wasn't difficult to locate the power room; we oriented on it by the humming sound. Alert for more guards but knowing we had to complete our mission swiftly, we zeroed in on what we hoped was Luis' prison.

A modern door closed it off, with a heavy bar across it. Loco lifted the bar clear, and I kicked open the door, ready for anything. But inside it was dark and silent.

I stepped in cautiously. Then I saw the glint of a moving metal chain. I threw myself to the floor, rolling aside before the weapon

could score. Then I flipped up to grapple with the ambusher.

Suddenly a strong arm was around my neck, choking me. I tried to twist out of the hold, but I was in the grip of an expert. I couldn't even yell a warning to Loco.

Then the hold relaxed. "You Americans are such amateurs!" a voice said in my ear. "When will you ever master self-defense?" "Luis!" I exclaimed joyfully.

He chuckled. "I thought for a moment you two were coming to do away with me in secret, and I was not ready to go. Fortunately I recognized your style. Hello, Loco."

He had recognized my style-bumbling American. "Let's get out of here!" I said, amazed at how easy it had been.

"I fear I cannot, Señor," Luis said. "I am chained."

Loco took the chain in his hand. It extended from a tight metal anklet on Luis' leg to an iron ring set in the wall. It was long

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enough so that he could walk about or lie on his bunk, but it was strong steel.

Loco tried to break it but could not. I tried, invoking my ki.

That power came, suffusing me with extraordinary strength, but to no avail. Only in cheap fiction can a man actually break a sturdy steel binding; the metal is beyond mortal power, unless you have the proper tools or leverage. We had not brought any equipment, knowing it would give away our mission.

"All together," Luis suggested. "The chain itself is too sturdy;

I have tested its merit many times. But the wall is old. . . ."

We took hold, braced ourselves, and hauled together. Still no luck, no matter how we strained. Whatever company had made that chain had had good quality control; no weak link.

"We must jerk it hard," Loco said. "Wrap it around me, then use me as a lever."

"You'll crush your guts!" I protested.

"Not my guts!" he said with a certain grim pride. And I remembered how phenomenally conditioned his body was.

We looped it about his waist, leaving plenty of slack on Luis' end. Then we lifted Loco so that his feet were braced against the wall on either side of the ring.

"Hit it!" he cried. He shoved his feet forward hard in a kind of drop kick, while Luis and I slammed into his shoulders on either side, adding to his thrust away from the wall.

The shock was hellish. All three of us crashed to the floor, tangled up in the chain. But the chain was free, pulled out from its mooring at last.

The chain? The block to which it was attached had popped right out of the wall!

Had the noise alerted the monastery? We hoped not. The power room was noisy anyway because of the steady hum of the generators; it seemed silent after a few seconds because the mind tuned the hum out, but it still would help cover our activity. Also, the room was well-removed from the main residential section.

Luis picked up his block and chain, and we moved out, care-

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fully barring the door behind us. I didn't like making him carry that substantial load, for he limped from years-old leg injuries; but no one else could do it, really.

We passed the three pseudo-monks we had knocked out. One was stirring, so Loco kicked him gently in the temple, anesthetizing him for another period. We removed his yellow robe and put it on Luis, concealing the chain and stone. Then we marched on, like tourists continuing the tour.

I felt nervous. This was too easy. Surely the monastery had a better security system than this. Unless they didn't want to alert the paying residents to the shady doings below.

We passed the main dojo, curtained off from the hall. A class was in session. I heard the instructor: "I teach my own system of wu shu or kung fu."

I froze. That voice-impossible!

I turned at right angles and plowed through the curtains.

"Wait!" Loco whispered compellingly, but he was too late. I already stood contemplating the class. I had forgotten my mission for Fu Antos, my need to save Luis. My attention was riveted on the class.

It was the biggest kwoon I had ever seen. The former central dining room of the monastery had been adapted for this purpose, the tables removed and huge permanent mats installed. Martialarts accouterments adorned the walls—costumes, weapons, and

even shields.

There were about a hundred students dressed in black and white kimonos, and ten teachers in more elaborate bright red and blue ones. They wore soft kung fu slippers. At one end of the great hall, on a raised dais, sitting on a kind of throne and wearing a golden kimono, was the head instructor. He had a Chinese moustache, and he looked older and fatter than when I had seen him last, but there was no doubt in my mind.

"Join me-or this girl dies!" He drew forth a knife and brought it to Chiyako's throat. Bound as she was, she could not resist him. I knew he would do it. I had to give in.

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"Never!" Chiyako cried.

Slowly he brought Chiyako to him, and slowly he forced the blade toward her throat. "Then she dies." And carefully he slit her throat.

Kan-Sen-the slayer of my love. It was impossible, for I had killed him. Yet here he sat.

Loco came through the door and put his hand on my arm.

"We must get out of here before they recognize us!" he whispered urgently.

"That's Kan-Sen!" I said.

Luis came up. "Of course it is. He runs the monastery. He was trying to make me tell where I had hidden the arms. Do you know

him?"

"But he's dead! I killed him."

I could feel Loco and Luis exchanging glances behind me. They were wondering if I had gone crazy.

I wondered too.

My horror turned to rage. I charged Kan-Sen. But he was ready for me. He was high on kill-13; his reflexes were faster than mine. We hovered above Chiyako's body, weaving back and forth, but the advantage was his.

Then his foot landed in the pool of blood that had gushed from Chiyako's throat. His arm came down in an automatic effort to regain balance. I augmented that motion with a shove-and as we fell, his knife was caught between us, the blade pointed inward.

My weight landed on him, shoving the knife down. I could not see the action, but he gave a sharp cry and went limp.

Suddenly I realized: I had not actually verified his death! The knife had been there, and he had cried out, but that was not the same as a mortal wound.

Fool that I was, I had not made sure. And so he had tricked me, feigning death, and escaped.

That would be corrected!

"Kan-Sen!" I roared. There was no mistaking my fury and in-

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tent.

The figure on the dais turned to me, startled. Apparently he did not recognize me. "Stop the intruders!" he shouted. "They

want to defile the sacred temple!"

Immediately the students and instructors swung about, orienting on us. I did not care about them. Kan-Sen was running true to form, organizing a supposed kung fu hierarchy. He had done that with the Kill-13 demons, from whose cult I had released Ilunga. Now he seemed to be operating without benefit of the drug; not surprising, since I had destroyed the major supplies of it. I wondered how he had gotten off it; normally withdrawal was fatal. But these were only fleeting thoughts.

I plunged ahead, intent on Kan-Sen. This time, for sure, he would die at my hands. Chiyako would be avenged.

Loco and Luis had no choice but to fall in behind me, protecting my back and flank. They did not comprehend my motive, but they stood by me.

Luis, with his weak knee and chain, was at a seeming disadvantage. But as the students converged, he disproved this with a vengeance. He was a fifth-degree black belt in judo, and he well knew how to fight.

He brought out his chain and started whirling it around over his head, the heavy block of stone swinging ponderously but with devastating effect. It crashed into anyone who came near. Heads were cracked, arms broken, ribs crushed. They tried to catch the slow-moving chain, but the stone cracked open as it bounced on the floor at the edge of the mat, and suddenly the chain was free and light. Luis whirled it faster and faster, wreaking havoc.

But one of the blue-garbed teachers was down but still conscious.

As Luis stepped over him, the man hooked his foot and kicked his bad knee. Luis dropped, almost passing out from the pain. But still he fought, kicking with his one good leg at anyone who approached, crawling after me, despite everything intent on protecting my flank as long as he was able.

But there were simply too many opponents, and soon Luis

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disappeared under a football-style pileup of bodies.

Loco, meanwhile, was putting on one hell of a fight. He was a bull, and every time he struck, someone fell. He kicked, jabbed with fists and elbows, and even used his head like a bucking ram. From time to time he used a judo throw. Once he caught one of the students by one leg and one arm and whirled him around like a club, opening the way, then threw him to crash against the crowd.

Another man jumped on Loco's back. Loco threw himself into a hard rear fall, crushing the man underneath him. Then he used both feet to kick another man who was jumping on top of him. He sent the man flying, then bounced to his feet again.

Once two men made the mistake of grabbing Loco, one on each hand. Loco pivoted on his left foot, twisting his body, and caught one opponent in the left armpit with a right roundhouse kick. Then, with the same leg, he aimed a side kick at the other's solar plexus.

Loco was taking lots of punishment, but the blood lust was

upon him, a kind of berserk fury, so that he did not mind the blows that rained on him. He took two or three strikes for every one he delivered, but such was his fury that while he merely shrugged off even the hardest hits, his opponents went down injured or unconscious. Because these were kung fu students, they preferred to strike rather than to grapple, and this was a major weakness, especially against such a man. But when they realized that he was virtually invulnerable to ordinary strikes, they tried to overwhelm him with massed action.

Still he fought, holding them off in a circle. But no man can maintain such a pace indefinitely, and Loco had had a bruising encounter with me and a shock to his body when we used him to haul out Luis' chain. His strikes grew wilder, his throws less controlled. Finally he stood there panting, no longer attacking, just waiting like a tiger caged within a circle. He was so tired he was almost out on his feet, but who steps into the range of a tiger, even a tired one, while that tiger keeps his feet?

They ringed him, afraid of him. Now and then one of them

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would dart at him, making a daring sally, and he would dispatch that idiot with a quick chop or kick or throw.

Occasionally he would charge the ring, enlarging it for a while.

But he had been nullified, for he could not break out.

Meanwhile, I was on my way to Kan-Sen, heedless of all else.

I think he recognized me now, for he was off his throne. I have no

memory of how many men I tossed aside; my reactions were automatic, like swatting mosquitoes. I know I lifted one blue instructor in a mighty te guruma, grabbing him by one leg with my other arm around his stomach and hurling him into the man in front.

Another I took with a hane goshi hip throw that I converted to makikomi, going down in a wraparound sacrifice but landing on top of him, hard, so that I crushed in his rib cage. It wasn't that I bore him any personal malice; it was that he wouldn't let go, and I refused to be constrained even for a moment.

At one point three men surrounded me. I lashed forward with my head and squashed a nose, then sideways and broke a jaw, then backward to crush a face. Three blows, using my head as a weapon, and perhaps the ki imbued me, for I never felt the impact, while all three men went down.

The one I remember clearly was competent: a blue-clad teacher who made an impressive jump-kick at me. I sidestepped it. He landed cleanly, then started the whirlwind hand movements of the Chinese kung fu combat. I knew better than to step into that pattern. The others were standing back, letting the expert put on his show, demonstrating how to foil a barbarian. It would be an expression of contempt for their instructor if any of them piled into me now. So I waited calmly, out of reach, watching for an opening. I don't hold any grade in kung fu, but I have been exposed to it, and much of its technique overlaps that of karate.

I realized that my blue opponent's defense was flawed. His hands were too high, at times leaving him open. This would not

have been perceptible to the average opponent. Also, he expected me to come to him, which meant I didn't have to worry about his potential charge. Too much defense can be a man's undoing.

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I figured the pattern, timed my move precisely, and made it with untelegraphed speed. I made a right roundhouse kick to the left side of his neck, felling him in that fraction of a second he was vulnerable.

Then the others piled on me, but I had little concern for them.

I kicked them in the armpit, stomach, and chest, downing them like so many tenpins. I jumped onto the dais, laying about me, and suddenly I was kicked hard in the back. The blow sent me careening into two men in front, who clobbered me with blows about the head and shoulders before I righted myself. I threw them down, but three more were on me immediately, and I could not turn to see who had landed the telling blow on me. I swept my arms forward, bringing two men down, but the third entangled my legs, and I ended up in the pile with them.

I struggled to extricate myself from the tangle. I had an inherent advantage here, because this is a form of grappling, and much of judo consists of grappling. I punched one in the chest, butted another in the groin, and made working room for myself. But as I lifted my head, ready to try for a joint technique or strangle, I felt cold steel around my neck.

My hands went up, but it was the noose of a manriki gusari, a twelve-inch chain weighted at the ends. Bugged down as I was, unable to maneuver, with my antagonist tightening the noose from the rear, I was helpless. I made one valiant effort, throwing my head forward, trying to jerk the ends out of his hands, but only succeeded in tightening it.

I began to black out. Strangulation looks and sounds awful, and many people oppose execution by hanging as cruel and unusual punishment, but actually it is one of the less painful ways to go. It can even be pleasant, for your fading awareness conjures visions. After the initial discomfort-and discomfort was what it was, rather than pain-I felt a great lassitude, a pleasurable sinking. I saw the face of Chiyako, my lovely fiancée. "Come to me . . ." my lost one called, and I went to rejoin her.

Then an ear-splitting kiai yell cut through my contentment, a

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hot knife through butter. Suddenly the pressure was off. I took in a rasping lungful of air as the chain unwound.

I tried to stand, but could not. I fell to my knees. If the going had been blissful, the returning was agonizing.

Arms caught me, lifting me to my feet. A hated face loomed before me, smiling. Then I knew that I was not going to be allowed to expire peacefully; my mortal enemy wanted me alive-for a time.

"Hotheaded fool," Kan-Sen said. "You and I have no quarrel. I tried to call out to you, but you gave me no chance to explain. I

would dearly like to boil you in oil, but I cannot. I must help you, for we are on the same side now."

"Why lie to me?" I demanded. "We shall be enemies as long as either lives!"

"Hate, yes. Enemies, no. I killed your woman, you destroyed my empire. But now I am Fu Antos' right-hand man."

"Fu Antos!" How could he know of that?

"It is for him I need the weapons. I serve him; he freed me from my demon addiction and turned my eyeballs white again. I am as loyal to him as I was to the drug. He tells me I must work with you, so I obey."

Then I perceived hell. I hated Kan-Sen with unrelenting passion. I remembered his leering face as he slid the knife across the fair throat of my beloved and let her blood gush out. Ever since that time I had dreamed of new ways to slaughter him, if only he were not dead already. Now he was alive, after all.

But what he said had to be true, for nothing else would have compelled him to spare me. And his eyeballs were white, instead of red from the Kill-13 addiction. Only ki could do that, and only ki of the power Fu Antos possessed. I knew, for I had wrestled with that addiction myself, and brought Ilunga out of it after a terrific struggle. Kan-Sen had been no short-term addict, but the master of the demon cult.

The demon and I were expected to work together now. What

sane entity would seriously believe that I would ever tolerate such an abomination?

"Fu Antos, you are Satan!" I whispered, meaning it.

Kan-Sen nodded agreement.

Epilogue:

NINJA'S MINIONS

Fu Antos smiled as he read the note. It was in Chinese symbols, so similar to the Japanese writing that he had no trouble with it. He returned the homing pigeon to its hutch.

The message was from Kan-Sen. The demon had made contact with Jason Striker and located a superlative cache of modern barbarian weapons. Not merely rifles and ammunition, but portable antitank launchers and missiles, red-eye antiplane missiles, and similar artifacts. Arrangements were being made to transport these across the sea and up the Amazon River to the ninja enclave hidden in the jungle.

This would enable him to defend his campsite from any likely attack. As his other far-flung minions performed, gaining him necessary supplies, he would construct the third Black Castle. From it he would manage his crusade against the physical and philosophical poisoning of his world.

Too bad he had not been able to prevent that decay by killing Lord Li. He had severely underestimated the decadent trend. Now

he knew that complete isolation was not practical, and that no single assassination could be depended on to reverse the tide of history. He had to be more aware of the world, and work toward its improvement.

Gradually, inevitably, the ideal would be restored-bushido, the samurai warrior code of medieval Japan. All over the world!

Glossary

aikido [ai-KEE-doh] A martial art, strictly defensive in philosophy and application, specializing in avoidance of brute force.

It is noted for its application of the inner power of the mind, or ki. Aikido is extremely effective for self-defense, utilizing wrist and arm locks, not strikes or bone-crushing techniques.

atemi-waza Judo striking techniques, special blows taught only to black belts. Deadly.

bo A wooden staff used as a weapon.

budo [BOO-doh] The proper spirit of martial art.

bushido [BOO-shee-DOH] The way of the samurai or warrior in Japan; roughly equivalent to European chivalry.

daimyo A feudal lord.

dan A master grade in judo, karate, aikido, and other martial arts, usually indicated by a black belt. The highest grade achieved is Tenth Dan, or judan; there are no living judans today. Jason Striker is a fifth-degree black belt, or godan; Roberto Fuentes, coauthor of this novel, is a second-degree black belt, or nidan.

dojo [Doh-joh] The exercise hall in judo, karate, and aikido. The

equivalent term in kung fu is kwoon.

gi [GEE, hard G as in Good] Short for judogi, the judo costume.

hara-kiri Literally, "belly-slitting"; formal suicide, or seppuku, accomplished by disembowelment with a short sword. An honorable way to die, but most uncomfortable. The hara, or belly,

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was considered to be the seat of the soul, the ultimate source of strength.

ippon [ee-PONE] One point in a match, sufficient to win. In judo an ippon is scored by a clean throw, a thirty-second holddown, an armlock, choke, or strangle.

ippon seoi nage The one-arm back-carry throw in judo. Essentially, you haul your opponent's arm over your shoulder and heave him over you so that he lands on his back.

jodo [JOH-doh] The art of fighting with sticks or short staffs.

judo [JOO-doh] Literally, the "gentle way." A leading unarmed martial art, consisting primarily of throws, holds, and chokes but also employing atemi striking techniques and locks against the joints. It is distinguished from most other martial arts by its worldwide standardization: a first-degree black belt must meet the same criteria of proficiency and attitude in America, Japan, or Timbuktu. Jason Striker's primary proficiency is in judo.

jujitsu An ancient martial art, the forerunner of judo. Also spelled jiu jitsu or ju jitsu. It faded in Japan when the feudal system

ended there.

karate [kah-RAH-teh] Literally, "empty hand." A leading martial art consisting primarily of striking with the hands or feet or other parts of the body, so as to subdue opposition. Since direct application of its techniques can be dangerous, some karatekas specialize in breaking boards or bricks with strikes of their bare hands. Such strikes against the head or body of an opponent are often fatal.

ki [KEE] A special inner force or power, possessed by every person but developed by few, associated primarily with the martial art of aikido. Stories of ki, such as those represented in this novel, are exaggerated, but there is no question that this remarkable force exists.

kiai [kee-AI] A battle cry, used to add strength to a technique while dismaying the enemy. Ear-splitting.

kyoketsu-shogi A ninja two-bladed knife attached to a rope made of

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woman's hair with a ring at the other end.

kuji-kiri The ninja's hypnotic movement of the fingers.

kung fu The Western term for the family of Chinese martial arts consisting primarily of strikes with the feet, fists, or fingers. It is said to be the oldest of all martial arts, the forerunner of karate. Recent TV coverage has exaggerated the scope of kung fu, and motion pictures and fiction have made it into virtual fantasy, but at the root it is a formidable fighting art.

kusarigama A weapon consisting of a chain with a sickle on one end and an iron ball on the other.

kwoon The exercise hall in kung fu, equivalent to the dojo.

kyu A lesser or student grade in judo, indicated by belts of assorted colors: white, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, or brown. Piers Anthony, coauthor of this novel, is a green belt, yonkyu, a middle grade.

manriki-kusari A weighted chain used as a weapon.

maitta A cry of surrender: "I give up!"

ninja A practitioner of ninjitsu (or ninjutsu); an expert spy or espionage agent. Ninjitsu incorporated the medieval bushido warrior code as well as every form of martial art known. Fu Antos, master of ninjas, is fictional (derived from FUenteS and ANTHONy, coauthors); but the ninjas were real, and they performed astonishing feats.

nunchaku [nin-CHA-koo] A weapon consisting of two clubs strung together, sometimes three. Now becoming popular in America, but illegal in many states.

o-soto-gari The "big outside clip" in judo, in which you catch your opponent's leg behind yours and throw him back and down. Easy for the beginner to learn, yet effective.

randori [rahn-DOH-reel Free practice in judo, like a mock match, in which the players strike to overcome each other without taking it too seriously or counting points.

ronin A masterless samurai warrior.

sake [SAH-keh] Japanese rice wine, very potent.

samurai [SAH-moo-rai] The Japanese warrior, or warrior class.

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Equivalent to the European knight.

saya-ate Striking the scabbard of a samurai with your own; a deadly offense, often atoned for by blood.

seppuku Ritual suicide; hara-kiri.

shogun Hereditary commander-in-chief of the Japanese army; the true seat of power for some centuries.

shuriken Small starlike throwing weapons used by ninja.

tonki Small throwing knives or needles used by ninja.

ukemi [oo-KEM-ee] Breakfalls. It is important to be able to take a fall without getting hurt, so this is practiced.