

*Sometimes the
Dragon Wins*



William Walling

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“Let China sleep. When she
wakes, the world will tremble.”

Remark attributed to
Napoleon Bonaparte

Prologue

Lightfooted under mild lunar gravity, a practical nurse bustled into the solarium carrying the *pièce de résistance* of gifts, a parcel wrapped in silver foil tied with a scarlet ribbon. Not sure if the patient was awake or dozing, she diffidently approached his powered rollabout chair.

“Mr. Cateel . . . ?”

The patient did not stir. Basking in the sunlamp’s artificial radiance clad in a backless gray hospital gown, he had let his lap blanket slip to the floor.

At their first encounter in the ward, the nurse had been startled to hear her halting query in pidgin Tagalog answered in flawless Mandarin. Not knowing what to make of the tall, singularly self-possessed gentleman whose head was swathed in bandages, she decided he had lingered in the solarium longer than was beneficial, but felt it not her place to advise a return to his private room. “Mr. Cateel,” she repeated more firmly, “a package for you.”

The patient’s mummy-wrapped head turned slowly.

“I don’t . . .” faltered the nurse. “It’s, heavy . . . candy, perhaps. Security took the usual precautions, judged it harmless. I thought you might like to —”

“Leave it with me,” he said testily.

Miffed at his brusque manner after she had sacrificed minutes of her forenoon break to deliver the fancy package, the nurse handed it over, turned on her heel and left the solarium with gliding, disenchanted steps, the soles of her white *Uwabaki* slippers squeaking on the tiles.

There was no accompanying card, nor was one necessary; a very short list of gifters knew where he’d been sent to recuperate. Caesescu the younger seemed the likeliest, or perhaps General Yee, and possibly even Chairman Li Qin himself. Dismissing the latter guess as farfetched, he slipped a thumbnail under a fold of silver foil, peeled it back. Wrapping and ribbon fluttered to the floor in lunar slow motion. Having neither seen, spoken nor heard a word of English for many months, and had to shift mental gears. Regarding the hardbound volume askance, a soft chuckle issued from deep in his throat. The book’s blood-red dust jacket was emblazoned with a stylized version of the U.N. Intelligence Agency’s helm-and-mace logo, and the title embossed in golden letters:

A Furtive Career

Sir Carlton S. Daniel

He turned the book over, read a short puff describing the author’s “meteoric” rise from anonymous Cambridge don to UNIA director, and eventual knighthood. A flat photograph captured Sir Carlton half-turned toward the camera, posing beside the lichen-encrusted stone

wall at his estate near the Cornish town of Tevistock. The very model of a tweedy country squire, he was pictured bending to pet an intimidated Welsh terrier. Cateel noted with bemused skepticism Daniel's incongruous, droop-lidded pout of infinite sincerity that looked sharply at odds with his vacuous gaze, suggesting the onset of senility.

He opened the volume at a ribbon someone had inserted, and began skimming the text.

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. . . and whether bogus or genuine, declassified documents identify the asset as **Rodolfo Taruc Cateel**. Apparently falsifying his age upon enlisting in U.N. Aerospace Forces from poverty-stricken Mindanao, he had seen lunar combat with the 33rd High Rangers during infamous scuffles which, despite moderate casualties on either side, failed to prevent the Peoples Republic of China from industrializing lunar sites in and around the crater Aristarchus, as well as mining rilles in the Prinz region.

Concluding his tour of duty, he opted for honorable discharge when his unit rotated to Sinus Iridum for rest and recreation. He briefly enrolled in a California college, where he proved to be an indifferent student, but nevertheless excelled in the martial arts disciplines, and as an adept came to the attention of an associate professor of linguistics who happened to be in our employ. Casually recruited and rigorously trained, Cateel subsequently engaged in a number of exacting field assignments which must unfortunately remain unsung.

The author came into personal contact with this exceptional asset during a period of severe trial and tribulation for the West. Having observed from afar the decade-long construction of an enormous geosynchronous satellite orbiting above northwestern Kalimantan, the Indonesian portion of Borneo, conjecture regarding its purpose and location became rife in the international intelligence community. Satellite surveillance soon unearthed a collateral mystery: a massive construction project of some kind adjacent to the summit of a volcanic mountain peak in Kalimantan dubbed *Gebergte Beturan* by long-departed Dutch settlers. Rearing a statute mile above the upland rain forest, it was judged no coincidence that the dormant volcano locals knew as *Gunung Beturan* straddled the equator at precisely the huge orbiting satellite's "substellar" point. Shortly Chinese shuttles began resupplying major on-orbit operations of some kind, which of course threw light on the inferred purpose of such a major endeavour.

The notion of achieving facile, economical access to and from low earth orbit via a "space elevator" linking a point precisely on the equator and a satellite orbiting in dynamic equilibrium had been bruited about in the technical literature for a century and more. Western experts voiced misgivings, citing the "monumental" engineering obstacles, and "insurmountable" instability problems" et cetera, to be overcome if such a leviathan construction were to be effectively maintained in situ. Yet the PCR proved these caveats basically inaccurate.

Despite our history of mutual, uneasy enmity, credit must be accorded to the "liberated" pseudo-Marxist society dwelling on the far side of our beleaguered planet. The revamped Artsutanov Satellite looms above Kalimantan today, a pair of tremendous, disc-shaped structures induced to counter-rotate in order to "null" what is said to be the "gyroscopic moment" induced by orbiting in consonance with earthspin which would

otherwise cause the massive structure to drift toward one of the poles. The open secret of PRC success turned out to be an ultra-lightweight nanotechnology material producible only on-orbit under microgravity, namely carbon-based “nanotubes” exhibiting phenomenal tensile strength, the product used to fabricate a set of thirty-six-thousand-kilometer-long “miracle” tethers anchored in a “receptacle” pit excavated deep within Mt. Beturan’s bowels, which linked the enormous satellite and the ground.

Witnessing completion of this monumental project, the civilized world thrust aside geopolitics momentarily, and lauded with thunderous applause PRC’s extraordinary technological feat, yet in certain quarters regarding it with no small amount of envy mixed with apprehension. When operations began, passenger capsules and freight modules began traversing the quadrate tether system in week-long journeys up to and down from the Artsutanov satellite, as well as to and from the “inertial spacecraft launch and retrieval complex” situated at the secondary tether set’s starward terminus. A veritable sea of high-efficiency solar energy receptors arrayed to co-orbit with the satellite shunted bountiful gigawattage to the surface, transforming a hitherto lightly populated region of Kalimantan into one of the world’s most power-wealthy communities.

Far too much ink has been spilt concerning the PRC’s brilliant “Great Leap Upward” blatantly trumpeted as the technological marvel of the third millennium which endowed the capitalistic Communist autocracy with a truly staggering advantage in the exploitation of near-Earth and cislunar space. Envy and apprehension aside, in speaking of the world’s ancient and modern Seven Wonders Artsutanov looms as a monumental triumph of innovative technology, and indisputably puts in the shade trifles such as Egypt’s pyramids, or Lagrangian space habitation macrostructures like Xanadu.

Here in the West, however, the obverse of this bright, shiny Chinese coin soon began corroding, and took on a much more somber hue. The successful deployment of China’s modern day “Jacob’s Ladder” into the sky created a turnabout “loss of face” that proved severely jarring in the West. It would be pointless to dwell on the machinations, recriminations, inquiries, table-pounding debates and vituperous denunciations leading to Rodolfo Cateel’s mission assignment. Western noses, already painfully out of joint, were bent further when the PRC’s ruling clique issued a stern caveat, vowing that any attempt to interfere with Artsutanov operations would be met with massive retaliation. This gratuitous threat sharply nettled certain dignitaries responsible for the conduct of national affairs. in the West. Having always abhorred blackmail and blackmailers, the author confesses to numbering himself among the most sharply nettled.

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Muffled laughter issued from beneath the patient’s bandages, turning scattered heads in the solarium. If aware of the curious stares directed his way, Cateel gave no sign.

* * *

An obscure Soviet-era scientist, Yuri Artsutanov, had elaborated upon “fanciful speculations” about a similar enterprise touched upon in the works of Russia’s legendary innovator and teacher, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, by publishing an advanced space elevator schema in *Komsomol’skaya Pravda*. If noticed at all in the West, the article was laughingly dismissed, as were other theoretical explorations of the radical concept by Soviet

visionaries, including an even less known scientist named Polyakov. During the latter phases of elevator construction, a veritable parade of UNIA assets, in addition to those dispatched by other intel organizations, attempted to penetrate the Artsutanov Satellite. Few returned, and of those who did none had learned anything of lasting significance. Field assets of Asian heritage were seldom used during our own clandestine “games” with the PRC, and the select few who did were prone to dual, triple and on occasion quadruple allegiances, and never failed to demonstrate a consistent reluctance to part with freedom or their lives in exchange for vital information.

Derogatory to their ethnic strain as it may sound, Filipinos have earned a reputation in some quarters as “the world’s greatest thieves.” When Rodolfo Cateel was first proposed as the best asset to undertake the job of penetrating Artsutanov, the author believed him rather a dubious choice. On the eve of his penultimate briefing, however, our thinking changed, not so much because of the man himself — muscular and lean, tall for a Filipino, and possessed of remarkable physical presence — but rather due to the acquisition of a trump card involving his personal affairs. As for the asset himself, he and his eventual fate remain enigmatic.

A childish cartoon found crumpled in a wastebasket at the Tokyo safe house where UNIA Asian Section assets were often sequestered prior to field assignments, presumably drawn by Cateel on the eve of his paradrop into Kalimantan, depicted a scaly, fire-breathing monster squatting on its haunches, contentedly picking its dragon’s teeth with a medieval lance, while all about were strewn segments of the knight’s shining armour. Scrawled in Spanish cursive, the caption read,

A veces gana el dragón.

In light of what later transpired, this may be pertinent . . .

* * *

Cateel’s reading was cut short by an officious orderly who approached quietly, switched off the sunlamp and announced with an air of challenge, “Therapy now.”

The orderly drew back in alarm when the patient, dark eyes burning through slits in the layers of bandage, informed him in staccato Mandarin of an indecent act he could perform with his therapy, introducing into the indictment scurrilous flaws attributable to the young man’s antecedents, contemporaries, and prospective progeny.

The orderly fled in search of reinforcements. Without bothering to retrieve the fallen blanket, Cateel laid the gift book in his lap, energized the chair and rolled out of the solarium, guiding it to a slideramp at the corridor’s far end. Riding upward two levels, he found the medicenter’s small observation rotunda unoccupied.

Brooding in a silence broken only by the faint susurrations of air issuing from life support louvers, he gazed across the sere, desiccated field of rubble flooring the walled plain of Mare Crisium, now bathed in earthlit refulgence. Fascinated by the stark desolation, especially the mystical, enchanting way earthlight delicately silvered the gray-scale wasteland pocked with boulders and craterlets, etching inky, sharply defined shadows. Above the distant ringwall’s serrated rim, the three-quarter “marble” of Earth hung suspended like a blue-and-silver Christmas tree bauble. A typhoon’s snowy whorl marred the Indian Ocean’s cobalt sheen.

Slumped in the rollabout chair, he studied the lunarscape with unseeing eyes, reflecting on places and faces from the past, recalling victories won, defeats endured. Idly fingering the gifted book's gaudy red dust jacket, he briefly reviewed the kaleidoscope of personalities and events leading up to the Artsutanov mission, and the sour note upon which it had begun.

He neither acknowledged their presence, nor protested, when the orderly and a hulking companion ran him to ground and escorted him back to his temporary prison, a characterless, antiseptic private hospital room.

ONE

For an Asian hooker, the Thai woman struck Cateel as all but senile — late-twenties, he judged, and inclining toward plumpness. Watching her dress by not looking directly at her, he speculated about how and why she had eluded Bangkok's thriving sex industry. When she was ready to leave, he made a point of holding the door for her. His reward was a smile as plastic and devoid of warmth as had been her seismic performance during the act of passion.

Walking off the decrepit Empire Docks at sundown, he could not have imagined compromising his cover by inviting a woman, or for that matter anyone, into his squalid hotel room. It had been a spur of the moment impulse, and act born of protracted loneliness, sired by acute biological insistence.

Instead of traipsing down the hall to the third-rate hotel's communal showers, he ran tepid, rust-flecked water into a chipped porcelain basin, gave himself a sponge bath and then sat on the lumpy, narrow cot masquerading as a bed, letting Singapore's sultry night air dry him. The room's other Kafkaesque furnishings consisted of a frayed wicker chair with wobbly legs, a battered mahogany night stand, and an ancient holovision tank that offered fuzzy 3D images in odd psychedelic colors. He switched on the holo out of boredom, surfed the overabundance of satellite channels until coming across a news anchor babbling in Chinese.

Fluent in Mandarin, though much less so in Cantonese, he also spoke Tagalog, Spanish, English, and had a smattering of Japanese. The commentator soberly announced the death toll in Mumbai's latest wave of food riots, adding that dozens more had been injured.

What else is new? he thought. After further haphazard surfing, he learned that with but a single dissenting vote the U.N. Department of Environment & Population's nine-member Triage Committee had downgraded the status of Chad. Emergency grain shipments to the stricken nation had ceased, and U.N. Peacekeeping Forces had interdicted a large segment of the people, effectively sentencing them to extinction. The commentator droned on, condemning the duplicity of calling triage "population control," twice referring to it as "genocide, and vehemently decried U.N. insensitivity to the abysmal human condition prevalent in Chad and elsewhere.

The same idle question occurred to him: *What else is new?* Crossing his arms over his muscular chest, he drowsily kneaded shoulder muscles sore from another day of dawn-to-dusk drudgery. He reached for the remote controller, preparing to snap off the erratically functioning holovision tank, just as someone off-camera handed the newscaster a note.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the energized anchor said hurriedly, "in a bulletin just in from Beijing, the official Xinhua News Agency reports a precedent-shattering trade conference is scheduled to be held in space. Delegates from respective Pan-Asian governments, and from

portions of the Pacific Rim, will be hosted by China in an extended conference aboard the Artsutanov Satellite to discuss and hopefully resolve economic disparities allegedly created by the PRC's accused 'dumping' of drastically underpriced hard goods on world marketplaces. The delegates are to be flown to Kalimantan and lofted to orbit from the space elevator's Mount Beturan ground station."

His mien serious, the newscaster continued, calling it a huge understatement to say this announcement came as a surprise, since up to now every attribute and detail of space elevator operations had been cloaked in closely guarded secrecy. A break with established policy of this magnitude, he insisted, could not help but capture the attention of the entire global business community, which in recent years had suffered from drastic and dramatic economic woes . . ."

And that, thought Cateel, definitely was new.

Heavy-lidded, his thoughts turned inward. He clicked off the holotank, tugged the beaded string dangling from light fixture pendant from the mottled ceiling, and sank back against the pillow. Sunrise would bring another day of sweat and toil when some nameless freighter tied-up wharfside and prepared to offload. Dawn would bring a reprise of today, yesterday, far too many yesterdays. The only other thing tomorrow would bring was a freshet of anxiety over whether the target would risk putting in an appearance.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, he thought sourly, but never today . . . !

* * *

Hiding in plain sight among the group of day laborers awaiting a work call, Cateel hunkered in the lee of a run-down warehouse, one of many lining the old Empire Docks, where only aging rust-buckets and tramp steamers any longer tied up. He hoped this would finally be *the* day, and if so speculated about how long the target might risk exposure. The last report from a Macau informant had "inferred" that someone or something aboard a Singapore-bound coastwise freighter had been judged worthy of Wladislaw Caesescu's personal attention. Cut off by necessity from direct contact with that source, UNIA's chief of station had tried but failed to learn of a reason for the delay, a fact sorely displeasing Cateel; it forced him to endure an added week or more of dock-walloping labor to maintain his cover.

All that was needed to kick off the strike would be Caesescu's appearance. Set up this neatly, pinned between harbor and the row of warehouses, it would be child's play to eliminate the aged septuagenarian spymaster. That, however, was absolutely the last thing UNIA desired. London had made a very strong point of insisting that the old man be taken alive and unharmed so that his brain could be picked synapse by synapse, neuron by neuron. A perpetual thorn in the agency's side, in recent years Caesescu had worked exclusively for the Chinese, although to him loyalty was beyond doubt a pluperfectly intangible commodity. A believer in equal opportunity employment, he remained loyal to whoever he agreed to serve, invariably the highest of high-bidders. After his mind had been emptied, the legendary espionage icon would most likely be traded to Beijing in exchange for two or more UNIA stray lambs.

Ensuring Caesescu's survival was more than a nuisance factor, however. It trebled or quadrupled the coming strike's difficulty, making success a dicey, touch-and-go proposition.

Exchanging friendly badinage in pidgin Tamil with the Sri Lankan stevedore hunkered next to him, he bummed an illegal Turkish cigarette, and stiffened while lighting it, jolted by a surge of adrenaline at sight of an electric jitney pulling up farther down the deserted wharf.

Thinking one or more of Caesescu's associates might have arrived to meet the target, he prayed that the slow-paced days of sweat and frustration were ending at last. The rehearsed scenario had automatically played over and over in his mind. Here in the tropics, a wide-brimmed straw Panama would no doubt be covering the renowned espionage genius' shaven pate. He would of course be accompanied by the usual bodyguards, yet that shouldn't hinder the operation, or alter the outcome. Any hired safekeepers would be taken out quickly, efficiently.

His sense of anticipation mounted while studying the parked runabout, abruptly faltered and turned into a pang of disappointment when a familiar figure emerged from the vehicle. Even at that distance, his control officer, Patel, was easy to recognize. Cateel tried to imagine why the senior Pakistani asset would dare to compromise the operation by making contact here on the wharf, certainly not to alert him, not when his hand-picked team was poised to move, nerves at hair-trigger, weapons locked and loaded. Looking straight ahead, he allowed peripheral vision to track the bearded gentleman casually saunter along the wharf's fender. Patel halted between a pair of docked vessels directly across from the warehouse, rested one hand on a bollard and stared out to sea.

Cateel rose, dropped the cigarette in a puddle and shuffled through the warm, persistent drizzle to a point within earshot of Patel. Standing at the fender, he unzipped his soiled dungarees and urinated into Keppel Harbor.

Far across the roadstead, looming through the light morning rain, the nebulous whalebacks of Pulau Brani and Pulau Blakang Mati Islands formed semi-protective ramparts against occasional high seas pounding onshore from the Singapore Strait. The low, gray silhouette of a supertanker rode through the chop beyond the harbor, escorted by a rakish frigate guarding it against increasingly frequent energy piracy. Laden with perhaps a million metric tonnes of liquified coal or natural gas, the tanker was bound for the fortified energy storage complex on Pulau Bukum Island.

Cateel waited, annoyed at the way his control officer's silence persisted. If the balloon was about to go up, Patel would have rushed to meet Singapore's psychotically humorless chief of station waiting in the nearby Singapore Docks & Harbour Board offices on the upper floor of a glass-and-steel highrise rearing in the direction of the Main Wharf, where modern cargo-container vessels loaded and offloaded.

Standing at the wharf's fender like a gawking tourist scanning the seagirt horizon, Patel's head didn't turn when in a stage whisper he said, "Library, now,"

"What do you —?"

"No questions. Go!" was the other's whispered command.

"That's insane!"

"On your way! Comes from the top."

Before Cateel could offer a further objection, Patel wheeled and with leisurely grace strolled back toward the jitney.

The urge to kill seething inside him, Cateel trudged back, passed between warehouses. *The idiots!* he thought. More than one head would roll over this craziness. Or maybe not. Lacking some inarguable reason, a seasoned pro like Patel would never compromise his point man. Not now, *never* with the operation's clock ticking, and maybe about to strike midnight. Had

some hitherto unknown reason to abort come to light? Or had the big brains in London gotten cold feet? Either possibility seemed unlikely, and yet . . .

Torn between a strong urge to ignore the directive, yet knowing he had no choice but to comply, he realized questioning the motive would be futile. In issuing the commandment, his control officer had taken an inordinate risk by messaging him on the wharf, so something of paramount importance must have caused the operation to be scrubbed, but even so . . .

Long, unhappy strides carried him away from the wharf.

* * *

Singapore's National Museum and Library occupied a prominent niche in Stamford Road, not far from Raffles Place. A midweek change in the designated trysting spot was also moderately troubling; a specific confessional in St. Andrews Anglican Cathedral had been the current week's designated site, not the library.

Feigning moderate drunkenness, he raised his arm and whistled up a cruising electric jitney. The Sikh cabbie dropped him off on a side street three blocks short of his objective. Force of habit made him think about adopting the normal precaution of choosing a circuitous route, then doubling back through alleys and side streets. If he'd grown a tail, he decided, he was angry enough over the abort to cut it off.

His dungarees blue-spotted from the incessant drizzle, hands callused, the cuticles around his fingernails cracked day after day of wrenching physical labor, he realized how out of place he looked climbing the library steps, and lowered his gaze as if in self-conscious humility. Pushing his way inside, he soon learned the chief of station was not in the highrise near the Main Wharf. Seated at a table in the main reading room, he seemed to be idly leafing through a quarto-sized pictorial volume highlighting Singapore's checkered history. He did not look up when Cateel paused, selected a volume at random from the shelf, and drew out a chair diagonally across the long mahogany table. The chief of station yawned, politely covered his mouth with the back of one hand, and in a low, barely audible voice said, "You're recalled."

"Why?"

"Never mind," insisted the other. "Comes straight from The Man."

The portly middle-aged gentleman casually checked his wrist chronometer, closed his book and left it on the table to wander among the stacks, stopping now and then to inspect titles. Not once during their brief encounter had he lifted his eyes, looked directly at Cateel.

Stewing impotently over the casual, unbelievable order that at one stroke wiped out almost a month of difficult, potentially dangerous work, Rudy sat quietly to let his blood pressure subside during the prescribed ten minute interval between departures. He quit the library in a black, despondent frame of mind, and walked the twenty-odd blocks to the sleazy hotel room to rid himself of excess nervous energy.

Using a straight razor — an heirloom gifted by his grandfather — he shaved a five-day growth of stubble, donned a navy blue silk shirt, a neutral gray, wrinkle-proof tropical weave suit, then quickly tossed other oddments of clothing and personal effects into a cheap plastic overnighter, all the luggage he ever carried on a field assignment, and searched every corner of the dreary room, assuring himself nothing would be overlooked. Leaving the door ajar, he ignored the cranky elevator, descended the dilapidated rear fire stairs and hailed a cruising electric taxi.

Fifty minutes later he checked in at the Pacific Basin Airlines counter in the terminal of Singapore's Paya Lebar Airport. The short-haul airline was wholly owned by UNIA; neither a reservation nor ticket were needed.

* * *

"Do you have him?" asked Dr. Giovanni "John" Pastoria.

Vetted by Nipponese intelligence agency to assume the identity of former industrial tycoon Hideko Matsuda, the impeccably clad gentleman exuded dignity. He bent to more closely examine the holographic and digital photos on the teakwood desk in Pastoria's office, then straightened and tapped his temple meaningfully. "I have him here."

A curt nod. "Good. The director's overdue. Let's get these pics back in Cateel's folder."

"May I take a flat photograph with me?"

"Sorry, Mr. Matsuda. You'll carry only what will be strapped around you at the airport in Pontianak."

The purported ex-business magnate's eyes narrowed, but his stolid expression remained unchanged. "Packing explosives on one's person is not a healthy exercise."

"Gelignite's totally safe," assured the UNIA technical consultant. "Without a detonator, you can safely play catch with plastique, mold it, do whatever you wish with it."

"I'm aware of that," assured the hastily recruited senior intelligence asset. "Inadvertent detonation is no concern, but the Chinese rarely indulge in compassion. Should things go awry, a detonator could be inserted, nature allowed to take its course."

Pastoria hid his discomfiture behind a bold statement. "A sublime reason for not allowing things to go wrong."

"This man," said the other, indicating a photograph of sober, unsmiling Cateel, "looks too young and inexperienced for such a complex assignment."

"Pictures can be deceptive. I've dealt with him before several exacting assignments. He's accomplished, versatile, very fit. Guessing his age is next to impossible."

"Never," remarked the faux Matsuda, "have I encountered a trustworthy Filipino."

For some reason miffed by the remark, Dr. Pastoria spent a moment extolling Cateel's ability. Cataloging a pair of key assignments, he worked hard to sound convincing.

"By agreeing to place one's life in the balance," said the other, "it seems only proper to question all facets of the proposed endeavor. To me, the individual you glibly call praiseworthy is a cipher, an unknown quantity. His presence aboard the satellite, should he accomplish the miracle of living to reach it, can do no less than compound the hazards, which already strike me as more than sufficient. Adding another is not to my liking."

Irrked at finding himself on the defensive, Pastoria qualified his rationale, insisting things had come together far too quickly. "Shortly after the announcement, we sat down and brainstormed the mission scenario during one sleepless, sixteen-hour session. The discussion went round and round, back and forth, for and against participating until finally everyone figuratively scratched his head, threw in the towel —"

"The towel . . . ?" Matsuda's brow wrinkled.

"Sorry, a figure of speech. We had, uh . . . more or less given up on inventing some practical method of inserting our man and the explosives aboard Artsutanov. The session had

begun breaking up when Howard Baste, our field operations director, learned from a . . . Well, a contact that you'd been selected to represent Nippon at the trade conference."

The gentleman posing as Hideko Matsuda blinked, solemnly digested the disclosure.

"Director Daniel himself," added Pastoria, "made a snap decision at long range to greenlight Baste's proposal. He here expressly to brief you in person, and plans to sit in on Cateel's ultimate briefing." Pastoria eyed the other keenly. "Mr. Matsuda, let me clarify something. Our man has to be told your cover name in order to make contact, but absolutely nothing else, including your appearance. That way, it would be impossible for him to compromise you or your role even if he wanted to, and he has the best imaginable reason for *not* wanting to do that. I'll vouch for his competence personally if it's of any comfort."

The picture of stoic self-restraint, Katsugi Miura, the Nipponese asset's actual name, silently reflected on the previous evening's intense briefing in Kobe. Ichiro Tomono and his minions at the Ministry of Justice, overjoyed to learn of UNIA's intention to supply the explosives gratis, had engaged in a heated discussion, and eventually settled on a radical course of action. During the ride to the helipad, and jetcopter flight to Tokyo, Tomono had finished counseling his star asset by telling him little effort would be required to play the part of a once wealthy captain of industry. "As Nippon's official delegate, Katsugi, you'll remain aloof, above mundane considerations until deciding which of the proposed scenarios is most practical, in other words precisely as the authentic gentleman in question would have done."

Miura's eyes, the color and texture of obsidian marbles, glistened with banked fires of satisfaction. Nodding curtly, as if Dr. Pastoria had settled all of his reservations and doubts with regard to the prospective operation. Lifting the flat photographs and holographs one at a time, he glanced incuriously at each in turn, passed it to the UNIA technical consultant.

Hearing a stir in the corridor, Pastoria jammed the sheaf of photos into Cateel's bulging folder and dropped into its niche the secure file. He punched in the fireproof cabinet's cipher combination, and turned to open the office door.

The fruity baritone of UNIA's chief executive sounded overloud from the hall. ". . . a beastly traffic muddle it is, forever will be. Tokyo-Yokohama enjoys the most hellish balls-up of motor cars, buses and lorries in the civilized world. It might well be called Gridlock City."

* * *

Cheeks and generous nose rouged by the brisk wintry weather outdoors, Carlton Daniel loomed in the doorway. "Ah, there you are, John." Doffing his tailored cashmere topcoat and woolen scarf, he handed the garments to Pastoria, waxed his hands to warm them. "Apologies for the delay. The speeches dragged on interminably, and the drive here which should've taken only minutes kept us snarled another half-hour." While grumbling, Daniel had been appraising the broad-shouldered, dapper gentleman standing beside Pastoria.

Dipping his head deferentially, the supposed former tycoon announced himself as Hideko Matsuda. "To meet you is a genuine pleasure, Mr. Director."

"The pleasure is entirely mine, I assure you," said Daniel. "You have proven yourself a most reclusive gentleman, Mr. . . . uh, forgive me. With all this dashing about your cover name has eluded me."

"Ishikawa," informed the other. "Masahiro Ishikawa."

“Of course, of course. If we’re to keep everything in tune, I suppose it only proper to address you in that manner. Having you represent our interests during the coming affair, as well as those of Japan, is a stroke of fortune almost too good to be true. Here, shall we sit down and be comfortable? I’m certain John has filled you in on the essentials of what is in store. You no doubt have a number of questions I shall be happy to answer.”

Puzzling over the need for a cover name, Miura could see no reason to equivocate. He said, “No questions, Mr. Director.”

“Really . . . ?” Daniel’s smile came quickly, then he sobered. “I’m sure you were informed how precipitately this unheard of opportunity presented itself. Frankly, it overwhelmed us popping up out of the blue so to speak. And when your government opted to have a truly distinguished gentleman of your prominence represent Nipponese interests it was, well, I’m sure it could be called the purest form of serendipity.”

Mr. Miura-Matsuda-Ishikawa nodded gravely.

“In point of fact we were dumbfounded,” added the director in the nature of a confession, “to learn of the PRC’s decision to hold the conference in space. What with the lamentably depressed world economy created by their blasted space elevator system, I daresay it was an astute public relations ploy by China, yet in a deeper sense inviting multinational delegates to visit their heavenly sanctum sanctorum does smack of injecting painkiller prior to extracting one’s last remaining molar. I realize your employment on our behalf is by default secondary. First and foremost, no doubt, will be fulfilling an obligation to further Japan’s national interest.”

When the other made as if to voice a disclaimer, Daniel waved his hands airily. “Tut, we shan’t waste time quibbling about peripheral matters. After all, one’s loyalties lodge where they must. Think of your service on our behalf as supplementary, rather like a job of moonlighting.”

Perplexed by the reference, Miura-Matsuda-Ishikawa nevertheless forced an appreciative smile. “Moonlighting, yes indeed, Mr. Director. Nippon’s once favorable economy and balance of trade began withering shortly after the Chinese put their devil’s device on line, and we now suffer as much or more than any other nation. Let me assure you of one thing, sir. Our leadership fully endorses your mission, and my activity on your behalf.”

“Capital!” Daniel’s synthetic smile flashed briefly. “May I ask which agencies or government officials in Japan have been made aware of our . . . arrangement?”

“No one other than the Prime Minister himself, Mr. Tomono who as you know guides our nation’s intelligence service, and a pair of his closest advisers.”

“How intelligent and sensible,” observed Daniel, “to convince the Prime Minister of how vital the need to make possible our mission by the simple errand we are asking of you, especially since severe repercussions would ensue were the Chinese to ever suspect Japan’s complicity.”

“Assuredly, sir,” confirmed Miura-Matsuda-Ishikawa, thinking it the most understated remark he had ever heard from an official.

“Alright, enough for now,” said Daniel. “No point chewing more than we’ve bitten off, yet in a larger sense your task is straightforward, with an altruistic rationale. Any hiatus, however brief in Artsutanov operations will aid in staving off the economic ruin now darkening Japan’s horizon along with our own and that of too many others. It’s impossible,” concluded the director on a note of utter sincerity, “to overstress the vital nature of what we are asking of you, sir. We are counting on you to do your part, and you shan’t disappoint us, I’m certain.”

The distinguished Nipponese gentleman's head dip demonstrated a degree of respect for Daniel he did not feel.

* * *

When he and Pastoria were alone, the director's ebullient manner segued into one of solemn introspection. "Listen, John," he said in a tone lacking conviction, "I firmly believe the wild and woolly scheme you and Howard hatched enjoys a modest chance of success."

"Then you believe only the PM and Tomono's people at the Ministry know Matsuda's been recruited to, uh . . . ?" Pastoria let the worrisome inference dangle unfinished.

Daniel frowned. "Leaks are always possible, and in a case of such serious nature the repercussions could become devastating. Worse, any Chinese retaliatory measures would of course land here on Asian Section's turf. But why do you ask? Has any hint of a leak surfaced?"

"No, not to my knowledge," said Pastoria. "It's just that one aspect of the operation bothers me greatly. This whole affair came together so terribly fast it's, well, ended up a patchwork. We've had no chance to carefully integrate and verify certain crucial side issues."

"Such as?"

"Despite his credentials, or perhaps because of who he is, I can't put aside a suspicion that the former self-important gentleman might back out at the first sign of difficulty."

"A suspicion I share," said Daniel. "On the other hand, two factors weigh heavily in favor of using him. The venal sin of greed seldom deserts any individual once accustomed to authentic wealth. Howard seduced his services remotely by dangling an extremely pricey offer under Tomono's nose, and Matsuda's parsimonious nature made him take the bait. I racked my brain, but couldn't think of any reason why he should fail to fulfill a simple obligation, especially when the allotted sums would be forfeited if he did." The director pursed his lips. "A trite if inescapable secondary consideration also looms, John. The worthy Nipponese gentleman is all we have."

Pastoria sighed. "A true and accurate statement, Carl."

"Oh, in the final analysis I do believe he'll deliver the goods," said Daniel, more or less to convince himself. "Otherwise, I would never have considered vetting the operation. Yes, I think we can take Matsuda's effort for granted. It's getting *our* man aboard Artsutanov that salts the operation with an inordinate degree of uncertainty."

* * *

Daniel fell silent, his mood again pensive. Pastoria noticed the nervous tic that began jumping beneath his left eye, and decided to change the subject. "How did the embassy dinner go? Any success with the Bolivian ambassador?"

Daniel uttered a snort of indignation. "Learning to read my mind altogether too well, aren't you, Pastoria? Truthfully, our discussion was brief and unsuccessful. Apparently our last resorts involve dealing with the insufferable Ecuadorans and Bolivians, rot them!" He pounded a chubby fist on Pastoria's desk. "The comic opera 'governments' down there switch players with maddening regularity. The pompous ass you've wine and dined, coseyed up to and cultivated vanishes overnight, and sitting in his stead is a swarthy, never-before-seen nincompoop. If last fall's negotiations hadn't fallen apart, excavation would be underway in Ecuador. As matters stand, we've naught to show for our labors except reams of useless blueprints, a semi-completed pilot tether swimming about in vacuum, and a hope — a rash, forlorn hope, it seems — that either

Ecuador or Bolivia will at last recognize the light bearing down on them from the tunnel's far end, and grant the U.N. access to a suitable site."

Pastoria rubbed his jaw. "There must be some kind of lever, some pry . . ."

"Should such exist," said Daniel, an edge to his voice, "I'd dearly love to stumble across the fulcrum's hiding place. Were one to deliberate the issue at length, neither Ecuador nor Bolivia harbor the most convenient sites in which to undertake major constructions."

"Neither did Kalimantan," declared the former physics professor, earning a dark look from his superior. "The PRC," he hastened to add, "managed to build successfully in an equatorial upland rain forest. I don't see what bars us from doing likewise."

"Confound it! Point taken, but not conceded. You've ignored the distinct advantage enjoyed by the Chinese."

"An advantage . . .?"

"A *distinct* advantage," emphasized the director. "Mount Beturan straddles the equator in reasonable proximity to a major waterway, the Kapuas River. Downstream, far to the west next to the delta is the port city of Pontianak. China made excellent use of seaway and river to transport personnel, materiel and heavy equipments all the way upriver to Sintang, a scant seventy miles from the elevator's *pied-à-terre*. A magnetic levitation bullet train and superhighway now link Pontianak, Sintang and the Artsutanov ground station."

"I know, but the —"

"The obverse of that shiny coin," pursued Daniel, "at least where we are concerned, is that the Bolivian highlands are in the absolute geographical center of nowhere, nor does the site feature a convenient mile-high mountain peak."

"And, Ecuador . . .?" Pastoria could not help sounding tentative, as if fearful of the response. "I take it prospective use of Mt. Cayambe is gone."

Thoroughly exasperated, Daniel massaged his thinning hairline. "Yes, that is so. Ecuador keeps fending off all overtures with word that the enticing six-thousand-meter volcanic peak rises too near Quito for comfort, and refuse to listen to reason on that count."

"Then . . . Brazil is all we have left."

"Fauggh-h-h! Upper Amazonia is neither accessible, nor environmentally and politically acceptable. The backbiting politicians in Brazilia offer even more formidable obstacles than those in Ecuador. No, our main chance — what may be our *sole* remaining Western Hemisphere chance — is Bolivia. I've had chats with our American cousins about the possibility of forwarding certain shadow operations of mutual benefit, but those devious gentlemen show their true Yankee colors by refusing to stick out their necks — a touchy political thing what with congressional oversight watchdogs breathing down those selfsame necks."

"And Africa . . .?"

Daniel lifted his hands, a spastic gesture indicating helplessness. "The incredible checkerboard of Balkanized political quagmires and sinkholes in equatorial Africa makes dealing with the South American buffoons seem a jolly stroll in the park." He lapsed into moody silence again, then abruptly perked up. "I take it your protégé has been thoroughly prepared."

"Cateel . . . ? Yes, he's asleep upstairs. Howard and I debriefed him. He came in angry and bitterly disappointed over being torn away from the Singapore op."

“Um, I daresay.” Thinking aloud, Daniel asked if Pastoria thought the Singapore operation could have been salvaged if Cateel had stayed on to finish the job.

Pastoria was not interested in speculating. “Our move to scoop up Caesescu turned rancid at the very start. Howard’s convinced the wily bastard set a fool’s trap for us, and slipped away in a motor launch. During the brief scuffle, a veteran asset named Patel was wounded.”

“Unfortunate.” Sounding disinterested, Daniel added, “In light of the Artsutanov affair, Singapore can be written off as a minor failure — a lesson learned. I undertook this junket for a single purpose: to have a heart-to-heart chat with our asset before dispatching him. Weeks will pass before he and Matsuda rendezvous aboard the satellite. I fear we’ve laid on a superlatively arduous mission assignment. Has he been adequately briefed?”

“Yes, if only in broad strokes,” informed Pastoria. “Howard and I purposely kept the details vague. The damned scenario gets revised daily, on occasion hourly. What’s worse, a good deal of it depends on Cateel’s extemporaneous ingenuity. Once formally finalized, we thought you might want to go over the fine points with him yourself.”

“Good, John. I shall. Don’t imagine he’s all that keen about the undertaking. Has he shown a substantial degree of reluctance to accept the mission?”

“Not a lot, but with Rudy you never know. He’s more than just difficult to read, It’s all but impossible to tell what goes on behind that mahogany mask of his.”

“Which after all is a prominent reason you promoted him as the premiere candidate for this critical op. From what you’ve also told me, however, he may be too intelligent to go through with his, er, impossible mission without a good deal of prodding. I contemplated the overall situation at length, slept on in London, then again in flight, and arrived at a reluctant conclusion. A form of encouragement is in order, John. Call it a performance guarantee. Considering the immediacy, unique nature and haste with which everything was thrown together, I believe it mandatory to take out an iron-clad assurance policy on our man.”

Sounding apprehensive, Pastoria said, “Not sure that would . . . I severe doubt whether any form of coercion will work with Cateel.”

“Yes, it does seem a wise course,” said Daniel, thinking out loud. “I skimmed his computer file, then went back and reread it more thoroughly. You were quite right to nominate him for this very difficult assignment. On paper, he comes across as a staunch, dependable survivor type. Yet in view of our lamentable history of disappointment at Artsutanov, throwing him into that particular lion’s den might discourage the legendary Reinhard Gehlen.”

“Who?” asked the much younger man.

“Er, no matter.”

“What have you in mind?” asked Pastoria warily.

The director explained.

“Jesus, Carl!” Visibly shaken, Pastoria said, “We’ve never mixed in anything *that* raw with one of our *own*.”

“Never,” conceded his superior, “until now. Extraordinary endeavors now and then demand extraordinary measures. Much as you admire this asset’s capabilities and dedication, I consider it essential for him to find way to go in. He simply *has* to go in, John! I’m leery of having him decide otherwise somewhere along the line. By no means does the Artsutanov venture resemble a run-of-the-mill field assignment.”

“No, not in any way. I’d call it more of a —”

“Please arrange matters accordingly,” instructed Daniel, cutting the other short.

“I do wish you’d reconsider,” pleaded Pastoria. “I know Cateel. He isn’t the type of individual willing to put up with —”

“My decision is firm. Howard knows which of our California people are most reliable. You and he will sketch out a scenario, and coordinate with Augustus.”

“But, Carl! How can you —?”

“Enough!” Daniel turned a deaf ear, lifted his topcoat and scarf from the coat rack, and instructed in a not-to-be-argued tone of voice, “Sit down with Howard. Put your heads together. First thing in the morning I want to review a précis of what’s been devised, how it will be taken care of quickly, neatly. Inform Augustus only minimal surveillance is authorized before his people move. We clear on that, John?”

Swallowing any further objections, Pastoria said, “Understood.”

“Splendid!” enthused Daniel with renewed bonhomie. “Up to joining me for a nightcap?”

“Love. . . to,” faltered the UNIA technical consultant.

TWO

Urgent calls in by the chief of staff brought several Cabinet members and the directors of both NSA and CIA scurrying to the White House.

In the Oval Office, The President, a pragmatic Nebraskan not known for cordial dealings with subordinates of any stripe, looked haggard, as if he hadn’t slept well. Sitting stiffly erect at the massive desk constructed from the timbers of a British frigate, *HMS Resolute*, in the era of sail, he nodded wordlessly to the new arrivals, and motioned for them to be seated. Wasting no words, he addressed the Secretary of State. “James, this so-called ‘trade conference’ the Chinese neglected to invite us to attend, what are we doing about it?”

SecState returned a blank look. “What would you have us do about it, Mr President?”

The former academic’s penchant for barbed witticisms was something The President found irritating, although normally not to the point of outweighing the other’s towering intelligence. On this morning, however, The Man was not his normal self. “Answer another of my questions with a question,” he said tartly, “and I’ll see you back in Boston exercising your professorial talents.”

Taken aback, SecState grimaced uncomfortably. “Your pardon, Mr. President; I thought you were speaking rhetorically. I can think of no conceivable move on our part that might affect, interrupt or stall the upcoming trade conference. As always, Chairman Li Qin’s Chinese Box is tightly closed, locked, and hermetically sealed. By comparison, it makes the Iron Curtain our predecessors dealt with seem flimsy as a worn tennis net.”

His expression dyspeptic, The President swung to face the Secretary of Commerce. “Mrs. Clayton, for over a century one administration after another has bent over backward to accord the CPR Most Favored Nation status. In repayment, Chairman Li Qin has demonstrated China’s undying gratitude by driving a stake through the economic heart of ours and nearly every other nation on God’s once green, climatologically afflicted Earth. Has your office received any

overtures — any tiny *hint* of an overture — suggesting a sit-down with the Chinese to perhaps discuss a halfway sensible solution?”

“I’m sorry to say not one word, Mr. President.”

“Ah, hah! Of course not.” The President cut a jaundiced glance at the CIA Director. “Gerald, Don’t suppose your people have invented a means of getting someone aboard their sky-riding Golden Goose to learn what new brand of financial disaster our Asian friends are cooking up.”

The director, a thoughtful, quiet-spoken retired admiral, looked stricken. “We couldn’t shoehorn an uninvited guest aboard Artsutanov, Mr. President, nor lacking an invitation could anyone else from the West. Many have tried as hard, or harder than we have, if that’s any consolation.”

The President’s bleak expression was a testament to the absence of a consoling factor. “Did either your people at CIA, or yours at NSA, Louis, or Defense Intelligence, or *any* other intel house record any meaningful intercepts during the night?”

“Not according to my morning report, Mr President,” informed NSA. “I’ll pulse Fort Meade again from here if you wish, but no. Nothing at all pertinent, I’m sure.”

The President leaned forward, hands flat-pressed on the desk. “That won’t be necessary, Louis. I simply had to have a direct, last minute answer before . . .” He pursed his lips. “Mrs Clayton, gentlemen, thank you for coming on such short notice.”

The officials filed out in solemn procession, trailed by SecState and CIA, who overheard The President pick up the internal phone and tell his chief of staff to cancel all morning appointments. “Get me Defense, then have Bart convene the Joint Chiefs. No, no; not here. Say I’ll be at the Pentagon in about two hours . . .”

State and CIA exchanged concerned glances as the door in the curved wall of the Oval Office closed behind them.

* * *

Magdalena Saunders thanked the teenage box boy who had helped her stow the groceries. Closing the sleek gray vehicle’s rear hatch, she stepped around to the driver’s side and stifled a giggle. Four-year-old Little Rudy had of course ignored her instruction to climb into the kiddie chair. Sitting in the passenger’s seat, he struggled to couple the safety belt over his small waist.

She reached in, patted the safety chair buckled into the rear seat. “Jump back here like a good boy.”

“No.”

“What did I just hear?” demanded his mother, pretending acute shock.

The boy’s sidelong look bubbled mischief. He tested her patience constantly, every day in every way, constantly reminding Maggie of her older brother — Uncle “Woody” to the youngster, who hadn’t seen his namesake since the previous year’s whirlwind passage through Greater Los Angeles. On his next visit, Big Rudy would be amazed at the transformation from placid toddler to spirited, independent-minded youngster. Her bright, interesting son was a handful, and showed promise of shortly becoming a triple handful.

At twenty-eight, after a half-decade of marriage and one child, Magdalena Saunders was still as petite and lovely as she’d been during her modeling career. A delicately featured, light-skinned Filipina, she swung out of the market parking lot, switched off manual control and

allowed the vehicle to automatically insert itself into a gap in the stream of westbound, constant-speed traffic on Santa Monica Boulevard. She punched the code of her Brentwood destination into the GPS keyboard and, controlled by proximity radar backscatter, the vehicle changed lanes on its own, locked itself electronically to the induction strip running beneath the pavement; the internal fuel-cells shut down as it began drawing power and guidance from the roadway.

Lifting her hand from the joystick, Maggie turned up the stereo permanently tuned to her favorite satellite station, and sank back against the cushioned headrest. The soothing strains of Bruch's First Violin Concerto filled the vehicle. She glanced back at the boy. Little Rudy had missed his afternoon nap; his head lolled gently each time the vehicle automatically stopped at a streetlight, and smoothly started again, picking its way through traffic.

Ten minutes later an obnoxiously pitched series of soft beeps alerted her to resume manual control. Swinging into her driveway, she paid no attention to the pale green runabout that had tagged along two cars behind her gray hatchback. She punched the automatic garage door opener, parked and switched off power.

The green runabout pulled to a curbside halt a half-block away.

When she unbuckled him from the kiddie seat, Little Rudy complained of being hungry.

"You're always hungry." She opened the rear hatch, lifted out a pair of shopping bags. "Let's hurry and wash up. Daddy'll be home soon."

Twenty minutes later Arthur Saunders used his coded key-card at the front door, paused in the tiled entry, setting his briefcase on the sideboard, and doffed his suit jacket, passing it to the hall closet autovalet. "Your hero's home, people," he called.

"Daddy!" The boy scampered to meet his father.

"*Holá, Rodolfo.*" Saunders seized his son under the arms. "*¿Que paso?*"

"Talk right," urged Little Rudy.

Saunders laughed, set the boy down and pecked his wife's cheek. "Messy, messy day, Mag. Counsel for the plaintiff requested another delay. Hizzoner climbed the dullard's frame like King Kong on a rampage. What's for dinner?"

The door chime interrupted Magdalena's response.

"Wonder who can that be?" Her husband stepped back to the entry.

"Mr. Arthur Saunders?" Standing legs apart, holding a note pad as if consulting it, the uniformed police officer wore yellow-tinted shooter's glasses. A large, unmarked white delivery van was parked halfway up the drive.

"I'm Saunders. Something wrong?"

"We aren't sure, Mr Saunders. There's been a . . . We'd very much like to see if you can identify someone in the van." The officer noticed Little Rudy peeping between his father's legs. "Not a real pleasant sight. Best to keep the youngster indoors."

Puzzled, Art said, "Sure, okay."

Little Rudy tried to follow his father, but Maggie held him back. Curious about the lack of an LAPD logo or any other marking on the large electric van, she watched from the doorway as Art and the cop disappeared one by one through the bulky vehicle's slid-open side door.

Seconds later the officer walked back to the entry accompanied by two men in tan coveralls. Perplexed, Magdalena stepped aside, letting the strangers march confidently inside.

His voice low, the policeman said, "Go out to the van and get in, Mrs. Saunders."

“I’ll do nothing of the sort. Where’s my husband?”

“No questions. Smile and look happy. Now go!”

About to frame an indignant reply, Maggie reacted with a choking sound to the gloved hand clamped over her wriggling son’s mouth, the serrated blade of a commando knife pressed against the nape of his neck.

Her mind short-circuited, went numb. An inane thought struck her: *It has to do with Art’s case*. Her frightened gaze locked on the boy, she made up her mind to go along with whatever demands the “cop” made. A frozen-faced rictus turning her exotic features into a frightened Kabuki mask, she approached the van with short, precise steps, trailed by the “cop” who cradled her whimpering son in his arms. Before clambering into the van, she gasped at sight of her prone, unconscious husband, and was pushed roughly into a rear seat. She clutched the sobbing boy when the “cop” shoved him in her lap. The men in overalls lifted Art out of the van and unceremoniously deposited him behind a boxwood hedge bordering the driveway.

The van’s door slid closed with a grinding, mechanical *cah-lunk!* of finality. “Take off!” ordered the “cop.” Settling himself half-turned in the passenger’s seat to keep an eye on Maggie and the youngster, his yellow-tinted shooters glasses lent him a sinister aspect.

* * *

“Up’n at ‘em, Soldier! Rise ‘n shine!”

Cateel woke from a light doze, and stirred at sight of The Keeper’s bearlike figure looming beside the bed. Above a stubbled jaw and flattened nose, the huge man’s piggish eyes glistened with malicious intensity.

Blinking at the late afternoon glare spilling through the safe house’s drawn third-floor curtains, Rudy sat up slowly. He yawned, stretched languorously, knowing the display of indolence would exceed The Keeper’s low threshold of annoyance. A brutish nuisance, he was like a domestic animal retained solely due to his bulk, his slavish obedience to orders, and an inborn abrasive nature. It was an open secret that Asian Section’s leading lights encouraged the hulking man’s talent for bringing out the worst in people; it tended to pinpoint those assets too emotionally unsettled to be sent into the field.

“The door,” remarked Cateel in a monotone. “You didn’t knock.”

“C’mon, no sass, Boy! Your lazy time’s over ‘n done with.” The other’s practiced squint was intended to be intimidating. “Boss wants t’see you, and he wants t’see you *now*. ”

Lithely rolling off the bed, Rudy gained his feet in a fluid movement that caused The Keeper to retreat a step, and sized up the leering giant. Sensing how easy it would be to fell him, he decided the prize didn’t warrant that level of energy expenditure. It would be like dashing to swat a distant, buzzing fly.

“Shall we go see,” mimicked Rudy, “why the boss wants t’see me.” Stepping neatly around The Keeper, he left the bedroom with long strides, glided along the hallway and loped downstairs two risers at a time, easily outdistancing the lumbering specimen sent to escort him.

Unaccustomed to being kept waiting in the converted ground floor bedroom-office, the UNIA director was fractiously tapping a mechanical pencil of gold-washed chrome on the teakwood desk. Seated in straight-backed chairs, restively ill at ease due to Daniel’s presence, Dr. Pastoria and Asian Field Ops Manager Howard Baste greeted Cateel’s appearance in heavy-lidded silence.

“Do sit down.” Daniel bobbed his pendulous dewlap toward a hot seat opposite the desk.

An unhappy genie, The Keeper stormed inside. Closing the reinforced steel door, he planted his massive back against the pastel shoji screen in front of the ground floor window. Folding hairy forearms the size of tree limbs across his sagging gut, he glared redly at Cateel.

“Cateel, I am informing you,” said the director without preamble, “that the mission has received formal sanction. You have a firm ‘go’ for tomorrow night. Dr. Pastoria tells me you’ve been briefed with regard to the essentials.”

“I have one major question,” said Rudy in a monotone.

Daniel spread his palms expansively. “Then let’s air it? It’s why we’re here.”

“I’ve pored over the material John gave me to study.” Rudy glanced at Pastoria, with whom he’d had a moderately congenial working relationship. “While informative, the data strikes me as . . . superficial. Why are we so determined to inactivate the elevator system? Wouldn’t it be wiser, safer in the long run, to ignore Artsutanov, and concentrate on duplicating China’s system somewhere in the West?”

“Philosophy . . . ?” Sounding distantly vexed, Daniel said, “Frankly, I’d anticipated a much more down-to-earth question.”

“Electing sabotage is . . . It seems confusing.”

“Not sabotage,” denied Daniel, flicking his splayed fingers in a spastic gesture of annoyance, as if brushing off the remark. “What you suggest is a given, else we’re willing to cede cislunar space en toto to the Chinese autocracy. Your assignment is designed to result in a delaying action, what one might call an unpalatable yet necessary stopgap solution that will purchase time for more far-reaching plans to ripen.”

Planting his elbows on the desk, the director regarded Cateel sternly beneath beetling brows. “I had given no thought to opening that can of worms at this juncture, but since you’ve done I suppose we must deal with it.” He explained the serious dilemma facing all “free world” powers, compounded by a monumental disadvantage, the shortage of acceptable Western Hemisphere sites, exacerbated by the endless political unrest in South American equatorial régimes, where most if not all officials tended to look with disfavor on any U.N. enterprise as some variety of dastardly *yanqui* plot. “Negotiations,” he concluded, have dragged on forever and I’m sorry to say, fruitlessly — a notable lack of progress which is intolerable with Artsutanov operating as it is.”

“But if my mission succeeds, mightn’t the Chinese decide to —”

“*When* it succeeds,” corrected Daniel harshly.

“What of the PRC’s advertised military reprisal upon . . . concluding my assignment?”

Daniel frowned. “Really, Cateel! This has become a rather Byzantine briefing session. You are in no position to question policy; it falls within the purview of my . . . our superiors. I’ve no intention of denigrating the hazards involved in performing your assigned task, and yet . . .”

The director paused to clear his throat. Lowering his voice to a more conciliatory register, he described the manner in which China’s master stroke had all but demolished global economic parity, and was starting to administer the coup de grâce by mining lunar mineral wealth in and around the Aristarchus enclave, and flooding the globe with “cut-rate” products of lunar and orbital manufacture.

“How could it be otherwise,” Daniel asked himself in conclusion, “with the cost of orbit-to-ground transportation effectively a pittance, thus allowing China’s goods to be dispatched to the global marketplace at totally uncompetitive prices . . . ?”

* * *

As during a previous brief interview — *audience would be the more proper term*, thought Cateel — he once again found himself the member of a captive audience, unable to pose the questions he had been prepared to ask. The director, who dealt on occasion with plenipotentiaries and sometimes chiefs of state, liked nothing better than the mellifluous sound of his own voice. Falling into his lecture mode, he stated and restated the mission’s imperative nature, iterating and reiterating how vital it would be to cultivate and sustain a “positive attitude” when penetrating the elevator system’s ground station. Having forsaken use of the term “courage,” he made it clear that every iota of competence, ingenuity and coolness an experienced asset could muster would be taxed, not to mention grand measures of resourcefulness and physical stamina. Yet wasn’t that why a thoroughly proven, experienced field asset had been selected to accomplish the extremely difficult task. Success, the director insisted, would mean staying on one’s toes, seizing whatever opportunity presented itself, then capitalizing on the opening to the fullest extent possible.

Noting the restlessness of Pastoria and Ops Chief Howard Baste as his rambling pep talk dragged on, Daniel broke off and shot a disgruntled glance at the pair. “Er, Howard,” he said peevishly, “perhaps you’ll be good enough to highlight the updated mission scenario.”

“Certainly.” Baste rose and touched a button on the remote controller. A holographic relief map jelled in the larger of two tanks depicting prominent terrain features, settlements and newborn industrial centers dotting the western portion of Borneo. “A major last minute revision calls for sneaking you in by the back door, Rudy. The intruder plane’s a Mute Snoopy. It features a matte black airframe, is about as noisy as a hummingbird in flight, with all-weather capability, and features advanced Stealth technology, infrared terrain-following guidance, and waypoint navigation via the new GPS system.

Baste touched the controller. Sweeping the tip of a collapsible metal pointer across a digitized satellite image of the low country, he explained that Kalimantan’s river valleys averaged two hundred inches of annual rainfall, and promised an ideal weather window in the offing. Heavy cloud cover and monsoon squalls were forecast for the area on the following night.

He paused, waiting for Cateel to comment. When not even a change of expression was evident he pointed to an offshore area of the South China Sea. “Snoopy gets air-carried to about here, where it separates from the mother jet, and tiptoes in just above the waves, going feet-dry on a deserted stretch of Sarawak coast between Tanjong Kidurong and Tanjong Payong, here and . . . here, then brushes the treetops in the radar shadow of the Dulit Range, crosses the Usun Apau and Linau Balui plateaus along the region’s mountainous spine, and pops over the Hose Mountains into Kalimantan, where it downslopes into the upper Kapuas Valley and follows the headwaters of the river to a point about . . . here, west of Putissabau.

“There you exercise an option,” informed Baste. “If in the pilot’s judgment surface conditions permit, Snoopy does a semi-hover, dumps you and your inflatable dinghy into the river. If the air’s too rough, and it might be, he climbs to a reasonable altitude and lets you use the chute. Okay so far?”

Cateel bobbed his chin a few millimeters. “Why the change to a water approach?”

“We traded-off alternatives,” Baste told him. “Too many unpredictables and hazards get in the way of a paradrop over the rain forest. Despite a population buildup in the western area, forty percent plus of eastern Kalimantan was partly cleared of Tempah and other settlements by China to interdict the elevator build, so mostly it’s virgin jungle, a super-rugged terrain for hoofing it. We opted to let the river take you within a stone’s throw of a more populated district before starting the hike inland. This route cuts down the exposure risk by halving your chances of running into one of China’s roving land, water and air patrols. What you have to avoid at all cost is staying on the river too long. Don’t let the current carry you into the new industrialized district between Sintang and the delta, where an influx of workers there zoomed the population.”

Baste jabbed his pointer at the map. “And be extra-cautious crossing this road. Skywatch Satellite surveillance reports look-sees that record hardly any traffic, but it’s patrolled from the air. Also, keep a sharp lookout for video cameras and motion detectors in the trees and brush.”

* * *

Cateel had spoken hardly at all since the field ops chief began his lecture. “The route you’ve penciled in,” he remarked, “is through an overgrown tropical jungle.”

“Not your average walk in the park,” admitted Baste. After cutting a nervous glance at Daniel, he advised Cateel to let the river carry him past Bunut, Selimbau and Semitau in rain and darkness, and arrive near Silat by dawn. It would be critical to leave the river and sink the inflatable dinghy near a confluence he indicated with the pointer, where a tributary of the Kapuas wound down from the high country, and begin his upcountry trek parallel to the stream.

“Go southeastwardly,” concluded Baste, “through this broad valley between Longguntur and Nangamau, then head due east at the base of the Madi Plateau, about . . . here. Your best bet will be to skirt the mountain to its eastern slopes, dodging around any habitated places that might be left. Orbital surveillance shows the region east of the ground station to be lightly populated now, except for a few remaining tourist hostels and a plantation or two.”

Howard Baste punched the remote controller. The map dissolved, giving way to the grainy, multiply enhanced and enlarged satellite photo UNIA experts had pored over exhaustively. Using the pointer, he said, “The Beturan peak’s just under one minute of south latitude from the equator, and the ground station’s on the northern slope, smack on the equator. Your objectives, the emigrant holding compounds are here and here, in clearings uphill from the staging, warehouse and administrative areas. Few precautions seem to’ve been taken to keep people inside; we’ve assumed the cyclone fencing and watchtowers are there to keep nosy strangers out. You’ll need to devise an entrance gimmick once you get a first-hand look at the layout.”

Rudy waited. All three superiors were regarding him expectantly. Not wanting to disappoint them, he asked the distance from the river to the Madi Plateau.

“Oh, roughly eighty clicks. Give yourself a few days.”

“In a rain forest? I’d guess a week or ten days.”

“Yeah, uh . . . on that order,” said Baste, conceding nothing.

“Who am I likely to meet on the stroll?”

“Hopefully no one. Oh, maybe a roaming Dayak, Kenyah or whoever, plus wildlife.”

“Arriving in-country by air and river,” said Rudy, “looks straightforward, but after a trek to the site the scenario gets very, very thin very, very fast, then disappears altogether. Ignoring

accidental encounters, let's say I somehow manage to infiltrate one of the emigrant holding compounds, somehow convince those in charge I'm an emigrant who belongs, and ride the elevator up to the satellite. What then? Something that's constantly bugged me all through these briefings is —"

"The nitty-gritty," interjected the director, grudging a thin smile. "The nuts and bolts of your assignment, eh?"

"Exactly."

Staring steadfastly at Cateel, his eyes hooded, Daniel made a pretense of pondering his response. "The enormity of the task we've set before you no doubt strikes you as practically insurmountable. Frankly, your reaction is understandable. All we're asking you to do is joust with the Red Chinese dragon in its lair, beard the monster on its own turf so to speak. Yet in essence, if viewed objectively, this assignment is not that different from any other. Oh, an order of magnitude more demanding, granted. You must think of Artsutanov as a mission of deliberate opportunism, and your role as step-by-step perseverance and dedication."

His tone sharper than he had intended, Rudy said, "I'm being directed me to . . . slay this dragon without the benefit of a mount, shield, lance, or armor."

"No, not so!" Daniel denied vehemently. "Never to slay, merely to wound, or cripple if you should find that a more expedient avenue. You, sir, will enter this tourney accoutered in the armor of your prior experience, shielded by your training, mounted on the steed of your subtlety, your ability to recognize and react dexterously to any and all threats, all the while amply armed with the sharp lance of your resourcefulness."

"Thank you, sir. That does relieve my anxiety."

"No impertinence, if you please." Daniel's baritone remained unruffled, though a burr of irritation was evident in his clipped enunciation. "You have no mandate to destroy Artsutanov, merely to inhibit operations, hopefully suspend them long enough for the Chinese tyrants to come to their collective senses and cease burying everyone economically. Then they may even be willing to negotiate the employment of fair trade practices. John has already briefed you on the most feasible targets of opportunity, but it will hardly waste our precious time if he covers the ground again."

Refusing to meet Cateel's frosty, deer-in-the-headlights stare, the former academic took his cue. "Either approach, of course, depends upon first getting you aboard the satellite . . ."

Cateel stifled a groan over the prospect of hearing a fourth or fifth rehash of the tenuous, minimal knowledge thus far gathered pertaining to his designated target in the sky, the ultra-secretive "Chinese Box," as UNIA cynics had labeled the Artsutanov Satellite.

* * *

"Precisely at the corners of a five-meter square," Pastoria began, "four deceptively slim tethers soar skyward in stable tension, bridging the astronomical gap of air and vacuum bridging equatorial Mt. Beturan from the immense, counter-rotating Artsutanov satellite orbiting just beyond the point of geosynchronous equilibrium." He explained how a mild overbalance of centrifugal force exerted on the satellite, versus centripetal force exerted on the Mt. Beturan anchorage, ensured taut tethers by virtue of the mild "tug" constantly monitored by a multitude of strain gauges and tensiometers. Uniform stresses on the anchoring structure in the extinct volcano's bowels were therefore equal to the small net difference between these diametrically

opposed forces. An equivalent mild overbalance of forces also occurred in the Artsutanov anchorage linking the enormous satellite and the counterbalancing out-orbit inertial spacecraft launch and retrieval complex.

Intense research into advanced microgravity nanotechnology processes had earned China's scientific and engineering teams the vital key to the actual construction of the elevator system, namely the on-orbit ability to manufacture composite, continuous-filament-linked "nanotube lattices" sustaining a ratio of mass-density — "weight" — to ultimate tensile strength in the gigapascal range, besting that of drawn steel piano wire by orders of magnitude. Straddling the westerly tether pair, ascending passenger and freight capsules were propelled skyward, guided and uniformly powered by microwave energy beamed from the ground, plus "follower rollers" supplying electrical energy installed at either end of each capsule. The reverse, a braking effect allowed capsules riding the easterly tether pair to descend in a controlled fall as, kilometer by kilometer, they succumbed to the planet's gravitational force.

Upward or downward, capsules and freight modules were borne along the tether system at an exact, unvarying sixty-meters-per-second, thirty-six-hundred-meters-per-minute, two-hundred-and-sixteen-kilometers-per-hour, hence one full week was required for transit up to or earthward from the satellite. An identical number of ascending and descending passenger capsules and freight modules rode the system at all times to ensure uniform loading, their respective masses controlled to the nearest few grams. The space elevator's gargantuan total mass therefore remained constant within a fraction of one percent, the exceptions being temporarily additive or reductive masses when a spacecraft docked or departed from the inertial launch and retrieval complex.

As well as powering the capsules in traverse, energy derived from a vast array of solar collector panels co-orbiting with Artsutanov energized onboard capsule life support equipment, waste-cycling units, commissary appliances, and other utilities. An exposed lightning arrestor strip captured and stored the accumulated electrical potential invariably building up as the elevator system rotated in the equatorial plane, cutting lines of force in the global magnetic field.

Using the remote controller, Pastoria switched the holographic scene to a schematic representation of Artsutanov's inferred internal layout and electrical system. "The primary mission objective, he related, "will be damaging the power distribution center, where the titanic megawattage from co-orbiting solar energy panels is presumably channeled and regulated. Once aboard Artsutanov, gelignite in hand, he admitted, Cateel would by default become his own master. Only fragmentary data relating to the power system had ever sifted back to the West, and that — sketchy at best — had been obtained at an exorbitant cost in careers and more than a few lives. The electrical distribution center's physical location, internal layout, and modus operandi could therefore only be inferred.

The secondary, if less accessible goal would be the outlying radioactive waste disposal center. Smaller yet equally massive shielded carriers rode the elevator system to its starward terminus on a quadrate of tethers, a much shorter span tying Artsutanov to the inertial launch ring of habitats, automated radioactive material-handling installations, and spacecraft docking facilities installed on what Chinese press releases referred to as, "counterbalancing masses" that endlessly circled the planet under negative gee, where "down" was a starward direction.

From this high kinetic energy position during specific launch windows, cannisters filled with heretofore unsafely stored, depleted isotope fuel from obsolete fission reactors were released under inertial impetus and boosted into slow trajectories terminating in the Sun. In addition to plutonium, the most lethal substance known, all manner of radioactive and toxic wastes were thus safely discarded at relatively low expense. The solar crucible took little notice of these deadly bullets, injected them without a hiccup.

Unfortunately, warned Pastoria, getting free of the group with whom he happened to be billeted for travel might pose the knottiest problem Cateel could face. Emigrants bound for the lunar mines and factories were often held at the ground station, or sequestered aboard the Artsutanov Satellite for an indeterminate period, depending on the volume of tightly scheduled outbound and inbound traffic. If nothing else, the physicist intimated, an enforced wait on-orbit might afford Cateel a chance to gather as much information as possible about his objective.

Rudy cracked his knuckles. Had he felt less frustrated with Pastoria's reprised recital of what he himself believed a "mission impossible," he felt that he might have dozed off.

THREE

UNIA's technical consultant concluded his summation on a false note, and forced himself to turn and look directly at Cateel. "More to the point, Rudy," he said, "an extended stay aboard Artsutanov could be a blessing in disguise. It would afford you the opportunity to develop a concrete plan of some sort."

Erect in the straight-backed chair, subjected to Director Daniel's punishing scrutiny or not, Cateel could not hold back his ascerbic intonation: "A 'concrete plan' *of some sort?*"

"Sorry, a poor choice of words," admitted the chagrinned former physics professor. "No one's suggesting it will be a snap. What I'd hoped to put across was if you see your way clear —"

"A *snap!*" Cateel tossed his head angrily. "I've been told handfuls of competent, experienced people were sent into Kalimantan from one country or another, and all but a very few have yet to come out. Is there some secret reason to believe I can do better?"

"There is indeed!" The director sounded petulant. "It is no secret, however. You can do better because you *must* do better."

Willpower alone permitted Cateel to swallow the sharp retort on his tongue.

Dr. Pastoria intervened. "The preferred tactic will be to create a power distribution hiatus, but if that proves impractical, or in your judgment an outright impossibility, the fallback solution has to be radioactive contamination of the spacecraft inertial launch complex. I'm certain those are your two best chances. A power outage will unfortunately be simpler to repair, yet much easier to effect. If the launch complex is your only shot, however . . ." He broke off uncertainly.

For a half-dozen heartbeats the only sound in the converted bedroom-office was The Keeper's stertorous mouth-breathing. His oversized hands clasped behind his back, the abusive, abnormally large man leaned forward, pinning Cateel in his watchdog's aggressive squint.

Director Daniel broke the uncomfortable silence. "John, neglected to restate one salient feature of your assignment, Cateel. No matter which of those options you choose, UNIA's connection with the affair must never come to light. We could face exceedingly dangerous repercussions in the event you were to be caught and . . . well, interrogated."

His exasperation mounting steadily, Rudy asked, "What do I face, sir?"

His exopthalmic gaze scathing, Daniel responded tersely, "You, sir, face the most formidable challenge ever presented to any asset. You face the exhilaration and satisfaction certain to follow on the heels of an excruciatingly difficult task accomplished discreetly and expeditiously. You, sir, face the silent albeit accolades of the world's free peoples, and the heartfelt congratulations of these gentlemen and I myself."

"That certainly will be something to cherish, sir."

Daniel's underlip curled at being spoken to in such a cavalier manner. He seethed quietly, but did not respond.

"Do you, does *anyone* here," demanded Rudy, "honestly believe what I'm being asked to do is remotely feasible?"

"Not merely *feasible*," declared Daniel archly. "Essential!"

"Against odds like *these*?"

Once again forced to sublimate his pique, no easy thing to endure, the director said, "There is absolutely no question that your assignment entails an inordinate degree of personal risk. Answer me truthfully, please. Are you fearful of what might happen to you?"

"Only a fool would feel otherwise, sir."

"Good! I'm delighted to hear it. I've always been exceptionally leery of anyone who waffles about the basics, and truly admire candor. Forthright statements are inevitably conducive to forthright dealings, don't you think?"

Cateel drew a deep breath. "Enough fencing, Mr. Daniel. Suicide doesn't appeal to me. The payoff on the mission assignment you've "penciled in" is a one-way ticket to nowhere. When I was a child, my wise old grandmother liked to say, 'We make plans, and God laughs.' Sorry, I'm afraid you'll have to find someone else to do your dirty work."

Daniel did not react visibly. "Under the circumstances," he drawled, "I myself am afraid such a refusal is terribly unwise."

"Under the circumstances, Mr. Daniel, I make no claim to wisdom, only in some circles what's known as good judgment."

"Your abrupt change of heart is immensely disturbing."

"You mentioned admiring candor, sir."

"You're adamant about this?"

"Very much so."

Daniel smacked his lips. "Then you leave us no choice but to serve up an authentic slice of candor with which you most definitely will not find favor. Due to the life-and-death criticality of your assignment, and the potentially lethal consequences in the event you are, as I also made mention detained and interrogated, we've chosen to take into protective custody your nearest of kin, a sister in Greater Los Angeles, if memory serves, and her only youngster."

A sudden red haze obscuring his vision, Rudy surged halfway out of the chair. The Keeper lurched forward a long step, preparing to intercept him.

His heart pounding, breathing deeply, Cateel forced himself to relax. Slumping back in the chair, he thought, *Pretty little Magdalena*, and conjured a fleet vision of his sister and young namesake, neither of whom he'd seen in more than a year. He asked woodenly what the director intended to do with his sister and the boy.

“Do . . . ?” Meeting the pale fire in Cateel’s eyes, Daniel flinched slightly. “Why nothing the least bit harmful, I assure you. Really, must we go into the seamy details?”

Rapidly losing the ability to hold himself in check, Rudy gritted his teeth, and in a flat, uninflected tone of voice demanded to learn UNIA’s policy regarding hostages.

“Hostages . . . ? Nonsense, Cateel!” The director chuckled drily, thinking to lighten the electric tension filling the safe house’s converted bedroom. “It’s foolish of you to think ill of us. No malice is involved, merely forethought. I mean that most sincerely. Nor was the option exercised only for your benefit; it’s also meant to ensure the safety and well being of your sister and her child, who will remain in safekeeping until you report back or, in the unlikely event of, er . . . some form of disaster. In short, we’ve taken out an assurance policy on your silence, so to speak. The usual termination medication will be supplied.”

Too choked with feral rage to speak, Rudy breathed in silent gasps.

“Try and consider if you will,” added Daniel in a feeble attempt to soothe Cateel’s naked outrage, “what wonderful use General Yee’s counterintel thugs might make of your next of kin if the Artsutanov affair were to turn rancid. I’m certain your loved ones would be taken and held by them, but in a far less sympathetic manner. The safety of your sister and her son constitute two irresistible levers with which to pry loose your cooperation. I want you to think of what has already taken place as, just that: an assurance policy for which we’ll gladly pay the premium.”

Fists tightly clenched, his countenance inscrutable, Rudy froze in the chair.

Daniel thumped the desk with the flat of his hand. “I do wish you’d learn to cultivate a more resilient attitude toward the facts of life governing our profession.”

“The hostages will be safe, cared for?”

“Certainly!” Daniel waxed indignant. “And please stop referring to them as ‘hostages.’ Once your willingness to follow standard procedure has been verified, should such a dreadful eventuality prove mandatory, they will be released.”

“You ask me to *trust* you?”

“Trust,” said Carlton Daniel, drawing out the word, “must by its very nature become a reciprocal commodity. I do feel, however, we now understand one another completely.”

One hop out of the chair, thought Cateel, a lunge across the desk and my fingers would be around the bastard’s flabby throat. He sensed how intently The Keeper was watching for exactly that sort of eruption.

“I don’t believe we have more to discuss.” The director’s reproachful statement also contained overtones of satisfaction. “We do sincerely hope good fortune favors you, Cateel. Our heartfelt prayers go with you.”

Cateel’s red glare seared the director, forcing Daniel to lower his eyes.

Gaining his feet numbly, Rudy struggled to sustain a show of outward composure. Not look at Pastoria or Howard Baste, he waited stoically, his spine rigid, for The Keeper to roll aside the shoji screen and open the door. Preceding the huge man into the hall, he started up the stairs with The Keeper lumbering upward with ursine tread a few risers below him. On the second floor landing Rudy glanced back.

A knowing, filthy grin warped The Keeper’s his craggy features. He snickered softly. “Damn shame, Soldier! Your very own sweet baby sister. If it’s sympathy you’re after, you’ll find it in the dictionary somewhere ‘tween shit and syphilis.”

Cateel spun in a crouch. His lashing foot caught the much bigger man below the rib cage, doubled him over forward. Before the other's expression of disbelief could jell, Rudy stepped down one riser and drove the stiffened fingers of his right hand deep into the other's paunch, just below the ribcage.

The Keeper uttered a chuffing wheeze as his diaphragm emptied. He reeled, fought for balance. Cateel's follow-up kick sent him sprawling backward down the staircase. Bouncing from the risers, making a great deal of noise, he fetched up crumpled in the lower hallway, groaning.

Rudy moved down as if to finish the big man, thought better of it, and marched upstairs into the bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him.

* * *

General Yee was painfully aware that more than enough time had passed for a resolution to the lethal predicament he had willfully constructed himself. He also realized his perilous situation, exacerbated by the protracted, interminable wait for Chairman Li Qin to judge the seven submitted scenarios and reach a decision, had grossly extended the period of uncertainty, spicing his days and nights with teetering sieges of self-doubt. A resolution simply *had* to be imminent. For weeks he'd been preparing to face the worst with honor if necessary. It was being kept in the dark so long that had encouraged an endless siege of chronic insomnia.

The aged autocrat who guided China's destiny with a clawlike iron hand in a silken glove could hardly afford to further prolong his deliberations. Beijing's ultimate judgment would either send him into a swift plunge from grace, or bestow a laudatory benediction; no conceivable alternatives or halfway measures would be possible. During the interim of uncertainty after biting the bullet and submitting the seven ultra-radical scenarios, his brave vow to carry on as usual had wavered, flagged as the days of not knowing passed, and finally been dismissed. Acute anxiety had transformed his every waking moment into a subtle form of self-torture.

Sometime during the wee hours, after twisting and turning while consciously and repeatedly analyzing and agonizing over the hubris he'd amply demonstrated by making the bold yet totally necessary move, sleeplessness had for the dozenth time in as many nights driven him to rise and prowl the penthouse office and living quarters at the elevator's Mt. Beturan ground station. Wandering aimlessly from room to room, pausing now and again to light an illegal Egyptian cigarette from the butt of one partially consumed, he paced and ruminated and paced, ravaged by somber thoughts about not only his own fate, but the uncertain future of beloved China. Two of the prospectives he'd furnished were indeed so dire that they made his personal prospects a secondary concern. Shuffling aimlessly into his silent office, he lit the banker's lamp atop his desk, squashed out the vile-tasting cigarette and punched the massive wall safe's dual-cipher combination. Withdrawing facsimiles of the seven documents, handling each delicately, as if it were radioactive, he plopped down at the desk. Rubbing his red-rimmed eyes, he donned a pair of old-fashioned rimless bifocals and began leafing through the only xerographic copies in existence of the seven computer-modeled scenarios.

Turning the pages slowly, he skimmed the fruits of an entire year of intensive research, pausing now and again to burn isolated, apocalyptic phrases into his consciousness. *If the road to hell, he thought bitterly, was indeed paved with good intentions, beloved China was streaking toward the netherworld on a road of its own making, a superhighway into the sky!*

Rocking back in the executive chair, General Yee arched his neck and stared directly upward through a circular, clear-glass skylight framing the lowermost, illuminated portion of four great tethers stretching up toward infinity from atop the thousand-meter high capsule launch and retrieval tower. What made his trenchant, potentially lethal problem doubly ironic was that the success of the awesome, decades-long elevator project had been grossly underestimated. If anything, the Artsutanov System had proven itself far *too* successful.

Sleepless and deeply worried, he had apparently become infected with a bad case of aphorisms and clichés that simply refused to get out of his head. *If nothing succeeds like success, of precisely what does successful overkill consist?* China had managed to alienate most of the world's major and minor powers, not to mention attracting a degree of enmity that smacked of something diametrically opposite "success." As the immortal K'ung Fu-Tzu was said to have remarked, "A cat may also be drowned in cream."

It sickened him to think how, during the torturous week spent in a final edit of the computer models, he'd been continuously racked with manifold doubts, debating reflexively with himself about the wisdom of formally expressing those selfsame doubts. In the end he had conquered the multifaceted dilemma by squelching all fears and misgivings by turning over the seven tracts to a trusted aide, Major Woo, with instructions to surreptitiously get them into the palsied hands of Chairman Li Qin, who was certain to allow them to be seen by absolutely no one other than perhaps select members of the Central Committee's inner circle, the Politburo.

Agonizing over the potential consequences of the anti-doctrinal, recidivist proposals for which he alone was responsible, Yee had rationalized his crucial decision, thinking of it as something he owed to himself — no, that he owed to beloved China! — and submit the tracts as planned. All he could do now was wait.

Fumbling drowsily, he lit another vile Egyptian cigarette, inhaled and tilted back in the executive chair, blowing the smoke upward toward the quartet of slender, insignificant looking tethers rising indecently out into the universe, and was disheartened to see a dawnlight aura invading the clear Kalimantan sky overhead into which China's blessed and cursed highway vanished.

* * *

By no means a sentimental individual, FBI Special Agent-in-Charge Murray Kapps nevertheless could not help but feel sympathetic toward the victim's husband. "Mr. Saunders, according to the statement you gave the detectives you're an attorney."

Sounding no less glum talking about himself than when questioned immediately after he had reported the kidnapping, Arthur Saunders nodded. "Junior partner, Century City law firm."

Kapps asked if he could think of any vindictive clients with whom he'd had recent dealings, someone he might have rubbed the wrong way, or perhaps someone unhappy over the way a case had been handled, and might want to payback some misdeed.

"N-no, I'm. . . I do corporate legal work. I'm in court only now and then, and have no more than a nodding acquaintance with specific clients."

"How about other potential enemies? Near and distant relatives, people with whom you've recently had not-such-wonderful relations, anything of that nature?"

"No, absolutely not." The despondent husband and father wanted to know if kidnapping was a common occurrence.

Out of consideration for the other, Kapps sensed a need for diplomacy. Wondering if the truth or dissimulation would better serve the sorely troubled man, he reluctantly opted for truth. “It’s largely a thing of the past, Mr. Saunders. The Beddington Enactment revived not only portions of the Lindbergh Act, but discouraged would-be kidnappers and terrorists; it decrees a mandatory death sentence for convicted kidnappers or active perpetrators of terrorist attacks who cause the death of a victim or hostage. Beddington’s been a blessing for the Department of Justice, but still frowned upon by those who oppose the death penalty on moral or religious grounds. Our local office hasn’t handled a case for quite some time.”

“Jesus Christ!” Saunders leaned forward on the settee and put his head in his hands “That doesn’t make me feel a whole lot better.”

“I apologize for adding to your worries, but it does seem wiser to be up front about the situation. Truthfully, what’s happened has been very surprising.”

Saunders’s eyes narrowed. “In what way?”

“We can’t understand why you haven’t been contacted yet. Historically, ransom demands come within hours — a day or two at most.”

“Maggie and Little Rudy,” said Saunders, his voice cracking. went missing three *days* ago. I’ve been camped here by the phone, slowly going crazy. My practice is down the drain, and I, uh . . . What can I do? What the hell can the FBI do, or the police? Isn’t there some way to trace that phony cop, the white van he suckered me into?”

Kapps studied the other analytically. Saunders’ eyes were dark-circled, his shirt and slacks rumpled. Obviously too upset to take care of himself, Kapps thought h’d most likely been getting what sleep he could fully dressed. Not that anyone could blame him. “Without a license number,” Kapps said gently, “or some clue to the van’s ownership, we’ve almost nothing to go on. LAPD put out an all-points bulletin, and a few unmarked, late-model white vans were stopped, but nothing came of it. Listen, is there a relative who could come stay with you?”

“A brother in Florida. He’s a dentist, can’t leave his practice.”

“How about your wife’s relatives?”

“Maggie’s alone in the world except for an older brother and a flock of cousins and nephews in the Philippines.”

“Have you tried contacting them?”

A negative headshake. “Never occurred to me. Her brother Rudy does undercover work of some kind he can’t talk about. I first met him when we were married over in Davao. He’s visited here in L.A. but . . . I don’t even know how to get in touch with him.”

Closing the folder he’d been consulting, Kapps slipped it into a leather attaché case that had seen better days. “Best advice I can give you,” he told Saunders, “is to get on with your daily life and keep your hopes up. Sooner or later you’re going to learn what these people want of you, or from you. So-called ‘senseless’ crimes are almost never that. I realize how hard it is to be objective about it, but it’s a necessary attitude you’d be wise to adopt.”

“Objective. . . ?”

“Yes, Mr. Saunders. You see, nothing about this case adds up. Someone posing as an LAPD officer — a felony in itself — and two accomplices appear on your doorstep along with a near-new vehicle no one has reported stolen. The perpetrators, whoever they may be, give more than one indication of being organized, of operating in a professional manner.”

“Pros . . ? You mean professional criminals may’ve kidnapped Maggie and Little Rudy?”

“At this point, it’s difficult to assume anything. But if it proves true, be thankful.”

“*Thankful . . ?*”

“I mean it. Pros know the score. Usually they cause less grief than amateurs who tend to panic at every bump in the road. You either have something someone wants very, very badly, or someone very, very badly wants you to do perform some specific act. There has to be an excellent reason for three perps to put their lives on the line by abducting your wife and little boy. We’ll eventually find out what they’re after, and when we do I promise you’ll see action.

“You have my direct-line number,” said Kapps by way of a farewell. “Call the instant you hear anything, day or night.” He did not mention that per a court order a trap had been placed on the Saunders home and office phones.

“I will. Thank you, Mr. Kapps.” Saunders saw the FBI special agent out, then he went into the kitchen and brewed a pot of strong coffee, from time to time glancing at the wall phone beside the breakfast bar, willing it to ring.

Other than several condolence calls from the lawyers, secretaries, paralegals and senior partners at his law firm, or messages inviting him to keep his hopes up from friends and acquaintances, the phone did not ring.

* * *

In late morning, The Keeper and Dr. Pastoria escorted Cateel to Narita International Airport. Muscle sent along by Ops Manager Howard Baste to ensure Cateel’s timely departure, the sullen, worse for wear in a number of places, craggy-featured giant limped like a gout-stricken gorilla. As they prepared to leave the safe house, Director Daniel had given Dr. Pastoria a few words of last minute coaching, urging him to stay close to Cateel and do what he could to assuage the field asset’s towering, enduring antagonistic rage.

A dispiriting drizzle shrouded the Tokyo-Yokohama megalopolis in misty gloom as the oddly assorted trio stayed out of sight in the rear seats of a windowless panel truck stenciled with ideographs proclaiming it one vehicle of a fleet once owned by a local electronics enterprise currently filing for bankruptcy protection. The youthful driver, an anemic graduate student who did odd jobs for UNIA’s Asian Section elected to stay on manual control, guiding the vehicle with sober concentration, occasionally giving vent to a hissed epithet directed at the miscreant drivers embroiled in the bumper-to-bumper traffic clogging Meiji Douri.

Tense as a coiled spring the slightest jar might unleash, Cateel sat stiffly upright fending off a stream of uneasy glances from Pastoria, who determinedly sought an opportunity to deliver the expressions of sympathy and understanding he and the director had rehearsed. Every time he thought to make a tentative overture, the words stuck in his throat. He believed mollifying Cateel in his present state would be like trying to soothe a volcano threatening to erupt.

Slouched in the rearmost seat, a fixed frown distorting his bruised, unlovely features adorned with several king-size Band-Aids, The Keeper’s pale yellowish eyes remained fixed on Cateel. At the airport, the big man got out and massaged his sore knee, then doggedly limped along in Cateel’s footsteps as the threesome filed through the drizzle into an airport maintenance hangar and boarded a Pacific Basin Airlines jet. No other passengers embarked; the short-haul airline was exclusively owned by the United Nations Intelligence Agency.

Once airborne, Cateel tilted back his seat, closed his eyes and pretended to doze. To Dr. Pastoria, it was apparent how wide awake and wired the troubled asset actually actually was, and he felt extremely reluctant to intrude and perhaps ignite fresh agitation, perhaps even cause Rudy to lose it. He compromised while airborne by drinking lukewarm coffee, and biding his time.

Formerly a tenured professor at Milan State University, Giovanni Pastoria, Ph.D, had been lured from the groves of academe by a tripled salary and a raging infection common to certain laymen: the Cloak & Dagger Syndrome. To date, his second career had proven more squalid than savory. He had gradually come to realize that the romantic aura surrounding intelligence work was essentially a chimera. During the flight from Narita to Manila he stewed about the present situation, reflecting on what the condensed information in Cateel's folder had to say about the star UNIA field asset's far from commonplace background.

One opinion extracted from a psychiatrist's notes had it that Rodolfo Taruc Cateel's vaunted physical prowess and volatile personality probably stemmed from unusual ancestral roots. In the wake of World War II, repeated acts of Hukbalahap violence and terrorism had rattled the Philippines, whereupon revered mid-twentieth century Secretary of National Defense and eventual President Ramon Magsaysay, had pressed for a state program aimed at relocating the Huk guerrillas in order to moderate or perhaps quell the bloody, ongoing Huk insurrection. The bait had been granting homesteads on the island of Mindanao. Cateel's great-grandfather had taken advantage of government largesse and resettled his family there in hope of earning a more peaceful and profitable existence. But the heritage of Hukbalahap intransigence and militant fury lived on in Cateel.

It was raining hard over Luzon. Buffeted by turbulence, the medium-range jetliner bounced and jittered electronically feeling its way down through the heavy overcast. Instead of disembarking his passengers at Manila's crowded main terminal, the pilot taxied directly to the Pacific Basin Airlines maintenance hangar, where a U.S. Navy jetcopter sat on the adjacent hardstand, its rotary wings drooping dejectedly in the slanting downpour.

The helicopter flew the trio of silent passengers through sheeting rain, circled and made a difficult windblown landing on the flight deck of an American nuclear supercarrier anchored offshore Cavite's long-deactivated Sangley Point Naval Base. Poised in the angled, rainswept flight deck catapult like a gray bird of prey, a sleek hypersonic fighter-bomber clutched the dead black, indistinct silhouette of Mute Snoopy like a surreal chick beneath the flare of the its unfolded variable-geometry wing.

Trailing Cateel, The Keeper stayed well back, taking no part in the informal exchange between Pastoria and the carrier's executive officer under orders to liaise with UNIA. Clad in a black, skin-tight wetsuit he had shrugged into aboard the 'copter in flight, Rudy ignored the pelting rain and in stoic silence led The Keeper across the flight deck to the paired aircraft.

Even if the fighter-bomber's needle fuselage had been able to accommodate passengers, no provision was possible for climbing down into piggybacked Mute Snoopy while airborne. Cateel knew he would be going along for the ride until the pilot, already preflighting the tiny intruder plane in the constricted cockpit was cast loose off Kalimantan's lonely Sarawak coast.

Bent over, The Keeper found shelter under the fighter-bomber's delta wing, from where he watched Cateel's every move as the asset scrunched down, folded his arms and legs through Snoopy's small hatch, and buckled himself into the parachute seat pack, then affixed a second

harness attached to the waterproof backpack containing rations and assorted survival gear, and finally chest-slung the flattened, totally deflated collapsible dinghy.

Lying with conviction was not one of Pastoria's talents, and he knew it. He also knew he had to take advantage of this final opportunity to deliver the coached message he and the director had jointly devised. Thinning dark hair plastered to his forehead by the driving rain, he prayed that his nervousness was not too obvious as he leaned in through Mute Snoopy's open hatchway. He had to raise his voice to out-shout the downpour drumming on Snoopy's fuselage, "Rudy, I want you to know I had no hand in what Daniel did. We ended up arguing about it."

When it came, Cateel's response amounted to a barely perceptible chin-dip.

"Listen, I want to . . ." Pastoria paused, made a futile effort to wipe away the wet. "Somehow, I ment to weasel out the whereabouts of your sister and the boy, and do my damnedest to see that they're released. That's a promise!"

This time, there was no response of any kind.

"Oh, what the hell! I have to work for son of a bitch, too."

"Forget it." Delivered grudgingly, Cateel's short-bitten words had a ring of finality.

"What I hope to hell you do understand," lied Pastoria, "is that what happened was no snap judgment. Daniel's been crowded into a corner by heavy political pressure — heavy as heavy can get, to tell the truth. The executive committee in London forced the decision down Carl's throat as an act of last-ditch desperation by . . . Oh, names don't matter. What I feel really bad about is . . . Hate to say it, but the blame for selecting you falls largely on my shoulders."

"No matter."

"But it *does* matter," insisted the other. "What they forced Daniel to do sure as hell matters to me. It was a shitty, cover-your-ass move by the mandarins in London *and* the wheeler-dealers in Geneva, plus the cousins in Washington. They've overstepped themselves this time. The thought of you going in with this worry hanging over your head is . . . You have my solemn pledge, Rudy. Your sister and the boy *will* be looked after to the best of my ability!"

Meeting the other's flinty gaze head on, Pastoria quailed under its intensity. It was all he could do to keep from backing away from the open hatch into the downpour.

His features expressionless, Cateel nodded. "You can't do a thing. Forget it."

"Maybe I can, and maybe not. We'll see. All I can promise is to do my damnedest. I have contacts of my own in California."

Cateel's silence was more eloquent than anything he might have said. High on the supercarrier's island, a green spotlight winked through the downpour.

"Have you Matsuda's photo?" Pastoria wanted to know.

Rudy touched a gloved hand the chest of his wetsuit.

"Study it, but for God's sake lose it if you, uh . . . I mean, before you get into the emigrant holding compound. Can't let anything tie you to the goods Matsuda's furnishing."

"How we're to meet wasn't made clear."

"Don't look for him, let him find you." Pastoria held out a tentative hand. "Wish you all the luck ther is, Rudy! I know you can pull it off, *know* it!"

Cateel ignored the proffered hand. He made a project of adjusting the seat belt.

Bent over double in the cabin's close confines, Mute Snoopy's pilot leaned rearward and motioned for Pastoria to duck back away the hatch, commanding it to click shut and latch.

The Keeper limped away, splashing hurriedly and limpingly across the carrier's deck in Pastoria's wake, and followed him into the sanctuary afforded by supercarrier's island. They watched together through the open hatchway as a deck crewman clad in hooded yellow foulweather gear swung a pair of lighted wands in circles.

Hybrid turbojet-ramjet engines spooled up one by one, whined into earsplitting thunder. The fighter-bomber strained against its moorings, rocking forward nose-down as if eager to return to its natural element.

"Always thought these barges," shouted The Keeper over the downpour outside, "had to do twenty knots or so into the wind 'fore they could launch planes."

His thoughts elsewhere, Pastoria said, "Not those equipped with hybrid engines."

Unable to hear the answer over the jet's deafening roar, The Keeper nodded anyhow.

An instant later the slim gray fighter-bomber was catapulted screaming into the air, vanishing immediately into dense, lowering clouds shrouding the harbor at Cavite.

* * *

"Good riddance!" The Keeper kneaded a sore, badly bruised elbow. "Last we'll see of that goddamn maniac."

Unbeknownst to Pastoria, the comment was meant to ruffle the physicist's feathers, and accomplished its purpose. "Don't be so sure," he said irritably. "He's the best there is, bar none. Go chase down the 'copter pilot. Let's get out of this filthy weather."

"Right, Doc." The Keeper moved to do as directed, then turned back. "I'm only riding with you far as the airport, okay? Sweet-talked Howard into a couple days off, I did. There's a hotsy-totsy girlie joint in Manila I'm real partial to. Welcome to come along, if you want."

"Another time," said Pastoria, further nettled by the crude suggestion.

"What's wrong Doc? Don't any of you superscience weenies have a yen for the ladies?" The huge man blessed his superior with a lascivious grin. "Listen, I know a slick Chineese tart who's a foursquare genius at —"

"Thank you, but no thanks!" Pastoria turned away. "Go round up the pilot. Tell him to spool up in about a quarter-hour. I have to go belowdecks for a minute."

The Keeper held his nasty grin. "Sure, Doc. Whatever you say."

Instead of going to the conning bridge as the XO had anticipated, Pastoria requested an escort to the supercarrier's combat information center. Undergoing the inevitable security check outside CIC, a marine corporal a full head taller than he was led him to the scrambler phone uplinked to one of Southeast Asia's geosynchronous communication satellites.

Whether in London or elsewhere, Carlton Daniel's personal aide and factotum, Stephens, rarely left the great man's side. Answering the scrambled, encrypted call, he alerted Daniel.

"He's off," summarized Pastoria succinctly.

"Excellent, John! Delighted to hear it. Don't suppose he bought your tale of sympathy and understanding."

"Who can tell, Carl? When wearing his game face, God Himself wouldn't have a chance of reading Cateel's mind. Oh, he acted distantly grateful for my offer to rescue his sister and nephew, but his deep freeze never began to thaw, let alone melt."

"You of course managed to mitigate my role as dastardly villain in the affair."

"Gave it my best shot, exactly as we rehearsed."

“Capital! If your reassurance struck home by even the smallest measure, the objective has been met.”

“Rudy doesn’t need it,” said Pastoria, “he was born reassured. Clammed up tight as a bung, hardly opened his mouth before climbing aboard the intruder plane. He did left-handedly thank me, told me there was no way I could be of any help.”

“Better and better! On your way back now?”

“Soon as I ring off. That lamebrained Neanderthal sent along by Baste as Cateel’s minder tells me he’s staying on in Manila.”

“Yes, Howard mentioned handing the brute a brief holiday after your man roughed him up. All in all, that scuffle may’ve been a therapeutic form of physical catharsis for Cateel, or so the psychology witchdoctors tell me. Physical release often works wonders when it comes to moving matters along smoothly.”

“I suppose so. Home to London for you?”

“Back to the fray, drat it!” complained Daniel. “I do hope this Bolivian business sorts itself out. The sooner we’re able to get cracking somewhere along the blasted equator, the less iffy your man’s adventure automatically becomes. I’ll look forward to our next chat, John. We shall pray for good news by then, eh?”

“A fervent prayer is in order. Have a pleasant flight, Carl.”

* * *

At the airport in Manila, The Keeper parted from Pastoria without so much as a by-your-leave or a wave. The tropical downpour had made a mess of public transportation. He got soaked trying to flag down a cab, then commandeered an electric runabout summoned by a pair of Indonesians who sized up his hulking brutish appearance, and declined to press the issue.

The cabbie drove through shining, rain-slick streets to the city’s less than fashionable Tondo District, a populous hodge-podge of narrow byways and alleys overlooking the bay north of the Pasig River. The Keeper tipped the driver and limped across the street, ponderously hopped over a gutter running overfull. The two-story building’s red tile roof and filagree-barred windows smacked of renaissance Spain. He pounded on a weathered plank door studded with wrought-iron straps and inset rosettes.

A peephole slid aside. “You want?”

In passable Mandarin The Keeper said, “Want come in out of gully washer, you liver-cheeked old cockerel.”

The heavy door swung inward. A grinning Chinese gentleman of at least eighty summers bowed and shook hands with himself. “Erik, friend of a friend. It has been too long. Why have you forsaken us?”

“Who says I forsook anyone?” The Keeper clapped the old man’s shoulder with gentle affection, paused in the entry to shake off the wet like a bird dog emerging from a stream, and limped into the parlor dripping rainwater on a far-from-new Persian carpet. “Where’s Mama?”

“She come soon.”

“Mama Rose!” Claspng the frail, elderly Philipina in his arms, The Keeper swept her off her feet. “How the hell are you, Mama? How’s business?”

The establishment’s madam prided herself on the polylingual ability she did not possess. “Big rain make business fall off,” she said in pidgin English.

The Keeper gave her the laugh she fished for. "Every time I visit this pox-ridden hellhole I sweat bullets about having *my* business fall off."

Mama Rose tittered. "Not to worry. Your business our business, hey?"

The Keeper's hearty laughter once again boomed through the parlor. "Where's my little sweetheart? Here tonight, ain't she? Or have you kept your promise and auctioned her off to some rich bloke?"

Though an idle one, threatening to carry out the suggested auction was Mama Rose's favorite tease tactic. Aware that the exotic receptionist was off limits, regular patrons recognized Siu Lan for what she was, a lure, a Sinic Circe who smiled and greeted customers and on occasion escorted them to view the establishment's wares, yet performed few if any other functions. In momentary snits directed at the young woman she thought of as the daughter she'd never had, Mama Rose continually swore to auction Siu Lan's virginal services to the highest bidder. It had not happened, nor would it.

"Siu Lan, she here," assured Mama Rose. "She very busiest right now this minute. You wait, Erik. You like drinke, hey?"

"I sure as hell would like drinke," mimicked the Keeper. "Rum, Mama Rose; your private stock, not the bilge drippings you dole out to customers."

Mama Rose snapped bejewelled fingers. Wearing his perpetual smile, the ancient Chinese gentleman tottered off to pour.

The Keeper dropped into an armchair, dampening the worn upholstery. A bevy of semi-clothed young women lounging in the smoke-filled parlor were communing with a quartet of off-limits Portuguese sailors. A chunky young Vietnamese girl gave Erik the eye, smirked enticingly and sashayed over with a practiced hip wiggle-waggle. When she made as if to sit in The Keeper's lap, he goosed her hard. His uproarious laughter was echoed by the sailors. The girl spat something nasty in Vietnamese and ankled away.

The Keeper was on his second tot of Mama Rose's best rum when the sound of a door closing reverberated on the second floor. A pair of chatting Philippine Army officers trooped down the staircase. Behind them on the landing, a svelte young Chinese woman clad in a flowing gown of crimson and gold brocade spotted the grinning Keeper, and stopped in her tracks.

"Erik, I don't believe it!" Siu Lan Yee hurried downstairs and fell into the big man's lusty embrace. He nuzzled her fondly. "How you makin' out, dear darling?"

"Oh, day to day, as always. Why have you been hiding from us?"

"Been bouncing around here and there, you know. What say we trot upstairs?"

Siu Lan halted in the upper hallway, took The Keeper's massive forearm cl possessively and touched a lacquered fingernail to her lips. In lightly accented French, she said, "Despite the weather, we're almost full, many long-stayers. Only Room Four is available."

"So let's hustle inside before some horny couple show up."

"Room Four," she reminded, "is the voyeur's special — one-way wall and ceiling mirrors. Precautions will be required."

A lewd grin softened The Keeper's rugged features. "Don't see why. We'll just have t'do what folks are s'posed t'do in there. Be rough to take, but I promise to handle my part."

“Randy foreign devil, don’t you wish!” Giving him the benefit of her piquant smile, Siu Lan led him into Room Four, where she turned up the radio volume and they began to dance, a prelude to passion for any voyeur in the adjacent room.

His lips close to her ear, The Keeper whispered, “He’s off from Cavite.”

“When . . . ?”

“At thirteen-fifty-two hours. I jotted down the revised timetable. Pass it on chop-chop.”

“In the morning,” she said, and slipped a folded square of paper into her bra.

“Uh-uh, tonight,” he whispered. “This one’s more’n hot. Superheated!”

“Tonight . . . poses difficulties.”

“Tell Mama Rose you’re feeling poorly,” he whispered. “One of her goons’ll drive you over to the clinic, and you can slip away. I want you out of this pest hole bag and baggage no later than next weekend.”

“Really?: she asked in surprise. “What excuse?”

“None. Do a vanishing act, ’n forget you were ever here.”

“No problem. But won’t it ruin everything?”

“Naw, we’re finished here. Scoot home first, then fly on to Pontianak. The general will meet you at the airport.”

They danced for a few more minutes just in case a persistent watch and wait customer lurked beyond the looking glass in anticipation of drooling over the interesting things to come. Breaking apart, they pretended to argue. The Keeper cursed, violently shoved Siu Lan sprawling on the bed and limped out of the room in a huff. No longer limping, he clumped downstairs and banged his way out of Mama Rose’s bordello into the rainy night.

FOUR

Chin Zhonghua Renmin Gonghehuo, the Peoples Republic of China, had flourished more than fourteen decades under a constitution that theoretically bestowed tripartite powers on the State Council, the Central Military Commission, and the infinitely stronger Communist Party. The unique and separate Party constitution divided governing authority between the National Party Congress and the Central Committee.

In practice, the Party Congress was, and had always been, a drone organization eager to “rubber stamp” any and all policies originating within the Central Committee’s inner circle, the Politburo, whose elite membership established doctrine. The Politburo’s adjunct, the Secretariat, was responsible for day-to-day decisions, as well as oversight and supervision of all Party activities.

Again in theory, the supreme posts within the all-powerful Communist Party were those of Premier and General Secretary. In addition to acting in those posts as China’s effective ruler, aging patriarch and revisionist Marxist-Leninist ideologue Li Qin had also assumed the burdens of Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and Chairman of the Party’s Central Advisory Commission. For decades Chairman Li had cracked the whip over earthbound billions, plus several thousand civilian expatriates living and working offworld in Luna.

At two minutes before three o’clock in the morning, a murky ground fog wafting across Jianguo Avenue forced General Yee’s driver to slow the electric limousine. Peering from a tinted

rear window, the general could barely make out the illuminated Altar of the Sun off to the north. His qualms soared exponentially as the vehicle passed through Tiananmen Gate, where the driver halted the vehicle at a checkpoint to let a taciturn sentry scan Yee's credentials in cursory fashion, then saluted and waved the limousine on toward the Forbidden City.

When the flagpole emerged from swirling mists, Yee told the driver to pull up between the Museum of the Revolution and the colonnaded, tree-lined façade of the Great Hall of the People, where the ruler maintained a small apartment when the National People's Congress was in session. Met atop the steps by an elderly majordomo, the general was ushered into the vast building and conducted directly to Chairman Li's temporary quarters.

Deceptively small and vulnerable, Li Qin lifted deep-set, youthful eyes that looked incongruous in his wizened countenance. Seated in an armchair, he tipped his head a few millimeters in greeting, and laid aside a pamphlet he had been reading. "Your promptness does me honor, Comrade General. Allow me to apologize for the hasty summons. It was a regrettable impropriety to call you away from your labors without prior notification."

Yee bowed low. "The honor is entirely mine, Comrade Chairman. My services are at your disposal whenever needed. But I fear a visit at this late hour will keep you from your rest?"

The other's brief hint of a smile was wistful. "Antiques like myself require very little sleep. Please be seated," he invited. "I would offer you the comfort of tea, but disposing of my reason for requesting your presence should take only minutes."

His polite welcome concluded, Li Qin's manner changed markedly. "Comrade General," he said, his voice more dynamic, richer in timbre, "the pluperfectly radical studies forwarded by your organization have stirred a maelstrom of controversy within the highest circles. All seven conclusions, or prognostications you have labored at such length, and expended extraordinary effort to effect have been discussed in depth, if only among our most astute, esteemed, trustworthy comrades. I fear everyone concerned, including myself, tends to view your projections as most disturbing . . . No, allow me to correct myself. I should have said they were viewed as *extremely* disturbing. The seven scenarios verge on being progressively radical and controversial until arriving at the stopgap solution you have dared to suggest be adopted."

Mouth dry, Yee's scalp crawled. Aware that the ice beneath his feet was treacherously thin, he responded warily. "No one, Comrade Chairman, could be more disturbed than I myself. Yet after a thorough evaluation of pertinent conditions and circumstances and derivative permutations and combinations arising from them, I sincerely believe the Herculean labors performed to design, construct and put on line the elevator system have ironically become victims of the law of unintended consequences, and are pushing beloved China toward the brink of a major disaster, if not a cataclysm. My sole reason for forwarding the material was a sincere desire to convince our leadership, through your good offices, of the necessity to skirt the abyss. My fondest hope, Comrade Chairman, is that you will allow me to discuss the crux of China's problem with a measure of candor, but with no iota whatsoever of disrespect."

The autocrat's expression did not change, although a querulous glint invaded his dark eyes. "Yee, my old and dear friend," he said, "five of the computer models you audaciously tendered for our review posit the likelihood of a thermonuclear confrontation with one or more Western powers. The other pair, I daresay, are even more troubling in that they describe the unthinkable as . . . well, perhaps not inevitable, but much more than simply likely. In truth, of the

manifold disappointments a long life has showered upon my weary head, the disappointing news you have brought before us is by far the most galling.

“Our Great Leap Upward,” continued Li Qin, referring to the Artsutanov System’s public relations theme, “was purchased at an frightfully exorbitant price in resources and lives. For nearly two decades Artsutanov drained the treasury, and we went out of our way to demonstrate humility by stooping to name the so-called ‘Jacob’s Ladder’ into the sky after an obscure Russian scientific dreamer, hoping thereby to inspire recidivist collectivism within the Russian Federation and the Balkanized hodge-podge of independent states.

“Personally, we found it doubly distressing,” pursued Chairman Li, “to think that now, when our frenetic labors are reaping economic rewards above and beyond the realm of prior credibility, you offer extrapolations which point out, and point up, what you presume to conclude are ‘indisputable’ facts. You advise us that, should economic matters continue on the present course, those selfsame rewards might plunge beloved China, if not the world, into cataclysm.”

Yee resisted an urge to wipe away the perspiration bathing his brow. “Under my personal direction, Comrade Chairman, the most able and reliable staff aides spent months individually and collectively researching in great depth, with meticulous care, all contributing issues.” Not wishing to sound overly defensive, the general fell silent, struggling to find the proper tack for framing his all-important rebuttal.

“Independent of one another’s efforts,” Yee continued, “each of the groups supervised by myself was tasked to blindly consult a discrete mathematical model deriving from a portion of each assembled database. Seven teams of experts labored for nearly a year, each without the slightest knowledge of parallel efforts undertaken by any others. Each unique, total model was then generated under my direction in all but total secrecy, with no external minds or hands contributing to the final results. Nor has anyone else seen a single word, except for my seven most trusted aides, you yourself, Comrade Chairman, and of course those with whom you chose to consult.”

Li Qin blinked, closed his eyes briefly, and cogitated at length. “Comrade General, would you have us believe that you subscribe without reservation to the validity of all seven projections?”

“Much as it pains me confirm it, Honorable Chairman, all I can say is that I truly and honestly subscribe with no reservations whatever to the validity of all seven submitted scenarios.”

The aged gentleman grimaced. “So much for our most recent Fifty Year Plan.” With a solemn head shake, he quoted a proverb of ancient China: “None love the messenger who brings bad news.”

“The message is scalding importance, Comrade Chairman, the messenger insignificant.”

Li Qin’s shadow smile flashed briefly. His voice softening to a lower, more conciliatory register, he said, “Your candor does you credit, my old friend; nor has your integrity and dedication gone unnoticed by many others. Now then, we must briefly deal with a number of blunt queries, and must insist that equally blunt answers be forthcoming. Please be concise. Why is a hiatus in elevator operations, to use your term, so critical, so vital at this juncture?”

“The overriding rationale stated in each model, Comrade Chairman, is purely economic.” Relieved to find himself on potentially firmer ground, Yee’s trepidation diminished fractionally. “Technical reasons have also arisen, yet consist largely of side issues.”

“How so?”

“Engineering reports enumerate a series of reworks and repairs deemed mandatory by our scientific and engineering senior leaderships.”

“Why?” The question rang like a shot.

“More than one reliable source,” said Yee without hesitation, “confirms the fact that rework will be imperative in order to either correct a collection of minor problems known to have cropped up during construction phases, or to ensure the longevity of those portions of the system which have been subjected to an unforeseen degree of wear and tear.”

Li Qin’s thin lips puckered shrewdly. “Consequences of marginal design? Poor workmanship?”

“Neither I am able to say with assurance, Comrade Chairman. The excellence of technical thought and effort that went into devising and implementing the Artsutanov System was absolutely unparalleled, beyond reproach. Yet piecemeal corrective actions are simply infeasible for an installation of the system’s immense size and complexity, not to mention a number of formerly unknown factors associated with the innovative project.”

“Then what would hinder the possibility,” demanded the ruler more sharply, “of quietly shutting down for a time to do repairs? Why must you advocate the complicated, fragile charade advocated in five of your seven theses? Why this . . . Operation Quench, as you term it?”

Yee explained slowly, choosing his words carefully.

China’s supreme autocrat sat perfectly still, eyes slitted, deep in thought. “I see. Other than yourself, Comrade General, how many individuals within and without your organization are aware of the details pertaining to this . . . Quench?”

“Three, Comrade Chairman.” Yee named them.

“Ah, yes. I recall your mention of the younger Caesescu; his name occurs frequently in your reports. If memory has not deserted us entirely, isn’t he the intelligence asset whose prowess you boasted of for successfully burrowing into the UNIA Asian Directorate.”

“The same, Honorable Chairman.”

“And he has informed you both, er . . . saboteurs are en route to Kalimantan?”

“By word of mouth only, Comrade Chairman: notification routed through my grandniece in Manila. I expect formal confirmation awaits my return to the ground station.”

“Very well.” Li Qin nodded. “Then if you will, please satisfy my curiosity about a secondary matter. Have you learned how did those adversarial to our cause managed to suborn the once respected financier selected to represent Nippon?”

“Honorable Chairman, when the Nikkei began its plunge through the floor, most of industrialist Hideko Matsuda’s considerable fortune plunged with it. One of UNIA’s hirelings used the oldest gambit in existence to recruit Matsuda: by waving a significant sum in front of his nose. But when Tomono’s shadow organization at the Ministry of Justice learned of it, things changed overnight. The authentic Hideko Matsuda is, or rather once was, an exceptionally wealthy gentleman. He remains comfortably at home in Kobe.”

The old man’s eyes widened. “*Authentic!*”

“Yes, Comrade Chairman. Our man in Tokyo,” explained Yee, “explained how Tomono duped the pro tem leadership of UNIA’s Asian Section. The actual Hideko Matsuda, a semi-recluse rarely if ever seen in public for a decade and more, is exceptionally leery of being photographed. His movements, never widespread to begin with, are presently restricted to his mansion and environs, pending the outcome of the trade conference.”

“You were able to *verify* this?” Li Qin made no attempt to temper his surprise.

“It has been confirmed by three independent, unrelated sources,” said Yee. “The Nipponese asset dispatched is a veteran field officer vetted by Tomono personally. He has, at least thus far, successfully posed as Matsuda. Caesescu the younger is absolutely certain the operative convinced UNIA’s people of his authenticity.”

“Your complex charade now begins to make a good deal more sense, Comrade General.” The Chairman pondered silently, his youthful dark eyes so at discord with his seamed, age-raddled countenance performed a riveting inspection of the suppliant seated opposite him. “Then I assume the alleged ‘trade conference’ aboard Artsutanov is in effect bait trolled to attract the high-ranking attendees and convince them of purported sabotage?”

“Essentially a theatrical stage, Comrade Chairman, upon which the play will be enacted.”

After a further moment of silence, Li Qin smacked his lips. “Again, many thanks for responding promptly to our summons, Comrade General. You have our reluctant blessing to go forward exercising all due caution. I detest the need to tell you something you are already know, yet I must. The frightfully delicate form of deceit you have worked long and hard to set in motion must be handled with not merely deftness and care, but utmost discretion lest this Quench charade rebound to our gross detriment.”

General Yee rose and bowed low. “You have my solemn pledge, Comrade Chairman. Absolutely nothing will be left to chance.”

Li’s nod was slow in coming. “So be it, my dear friend. Have a safe journey.”

* * *

The sleek U.S. Navy fighter-bomber banked shallowly climbing through heavy clouds scudding above Quezon City, raced seaward above the Polillo Strait’s offshore islands, and popped up into clear night air. Streaking on a southeastward heading, the warbird eased back to cruise, and then descended back through the overcast into heavy weather. Buffeted by turbulence and heavy rain, the fighter-bomber leveled off a scant dozen meters above the wind-lashed waves on a westward course toward the Celebes Sea, cruising at much less than sonic velocity.

Huddled in the rear of Mute Snoopy’s confined fuselage, Rudy was eager to have the mission’s initial phase over and done with. He tried more than once to perform isometric exercises, hoping to alleviate the stiffness he knew would be endemic after hours of inactivity, but inadequate elbow room thwarted his efforts. A stretch of immobility would also tend to make him clumsy — a temporary handicap he would gladly do without, especially if the pilot found it necessary for him to use the parachute. The prospect nagged him as the fighter-bomber roared and rocked through drenching darkness across the strait between Mindanao and Samar. Heading out over the storm-tossed Sulu Sea, hugging the coastline fifty kilometers from Brunei’s northern shore, the pilot held the aircraft to a course mere meters above the spume-tossed whitecaps.

A change alerted Cateel was alerted by an amber ready-light that winked on in the forward bulkhead panel, making him forget the inactivity problem. The pilot energized Snoopy's electrical system, hastily ran through his checklist, and started the intruder plane's small, acoustically muffled engine, looked back and gave Cateel a thumbs-up sign.

Rudy tolled the minutes that passed with glacial rapidity until an amber light on the partial bulkhead shielding half the cramped cockpit flickered to green. The paired aircraft pitched upward gently, and with a sickening lurch Mute Snoopy fell away from the fighter-bomber.

Cruising shoreward, the tiny aircraft's unnaturally quiet engine was insufficient to overpower the tropical deluge drumming on the composite fuselage that sounded like an end-of-the-world hailstorm. Cateel breathed deeply, hyperventilating to combat the nervousness hovering around the limbic edges of his mind. Snoopy jinked upward and downward during the interminable flight inland across Brunei, climbing and dropping as, just above treetop level to hopefully remain below radar surveillance, it closely following the contours of Borneo's mountainous terrain. Like a racehorse in the starting gate, Rudy chafed as the bumpy flight stretched interminably, seeming to last much longer than it actually did.

Downsloping toward the Kapuas River, Snoopy finally approached the drop off point west of Putussibau. The pilot checked and rechecked the aircraft's GPS waypoint position, swiveled he neck from time to time, glanced back at Cateel from the red-lit cockpit's dim interior. His negative head shake told his passenger Howard Baste had not overstated his optimism at finding an ideal weather window. A monsoon gale raged, shrieking to fifty or sixty knots. Rain pummeled the night-shrouded Kapuas River in a wind-driven deluge.

Rudy nodded to let the pilot know he appreciated how impractical a direct river drop would be. Though he cared not at all for the alternative, he reluctantly accepted the necessity of allowing the pilot to climb to a reasonable altitude and force him to use the parachute.

The pilot glanced back yet again, held his nose with two gloved fingers and bellowed over the drumming tempest, "Chute's out! Gale would carry you halfway across Kalimantan."

"What'll we do?" shouted Rudy.

"Let me think."

Bucking and gyrating, Mute Snoopy loitered minute after dangerous minute in a circular pattern, with the pilot sweating to control the aircraft, keeping a close watch on his head-up graphic and infrared displays. At last he twisted around and shouted, "Hearing us in this soup will take damn sharp ears. No way to semi-hover in these gusts. I'll make a low pass, slow as I can to stay airborne. We'll chance flashing the landing lights, let you see what you're diving into."

Despite serious reservations, Cateel acknowledged the plan by making a thumb-and-forefinger donut of approval. He sat forward, bent over due to the lack of headroom, unbuckled the parachute and wedged the pack out of the way at the rear of the claustrophobic cabin.

The pilot circled into the teeth of the gale before actuating the sliding rear hatch. Cateel rose, feeling as if he'd already plunged into the river as lashing, wind-driven rain hammered him unmercifully, conspiring with every lurch of the aircraft to tear loose his grip on handholds protruding on either side of the small, shoulder-wide hatchway. The driving rain blinded his faceplate, so he pushed it up to his forehead, blinking against the heavy droplets. Snoopy's landing lights flared into brilliance, lighting the river's splash-cratered surface hurtling past three

or four meters below with flashbulb intensity. He sucked in a deep breath, jerked down the faceplate and pulled himself through the hatchway in a headlong dive.

But at that instant the tiny aircraft lurched upward; the hatch's upper opening caught his ankles, and instead of cutting the water cleanly he was catapulted head over heels into the Kapuas like a tucked-up rag doll.

The faceplate was ripped from his head by the impact, the breath smashed from his diaphragm. Disoriented, he fought to swim upward through black water with no inkling at all in which direction the surface lay.

Training and experience cut short his swelling panic. Fighting against the impulse to breathe, he fumbled for the lanyard's D-ring on his chest, yanked it hard. A carbon dioxide squib ballooned the collapsed dinghy slung against his chest, and he rose upward, broke the roiling surface gasping and choking on muddy river water. Pulling himself headfirst into the dinghy, he sprawled panting, wasting precious breath cursing Daniel and UNIA in more than one language.

Drifting downriver in Stygian darkness and the pounding, torrential downpour gave him the leisure to mull his succeeding moves. Unbuckling and slipping free of the waterproof backpack, he affixed the straps to clips bonded on the plastic boat's molded gunwale. Judging the encumbering wetsuit of doubtful value, he shrugged out of it, then sat on the folded garment to keep it from slipping overboard and possibly found by the locals. Without the insulating garment he was instantly soaked to the skin, but this close to the equator the tropical rain was anything but cold, and he felt more comfortable, if sailing blindly down a rain and wind-whipped river in a pitching collapsible dinghy half-filled with water could be considered "comfortable."

Back in the field again, with ample time to think things through, he tried with limited success to thrust aside his outrage over Daniel's backstabbing act, and assured himself what the director had done would not be forgotten, nor most certainly forgiven, but for the time being pushed into an isolated compartment of his mind. Neither self-pity nor second-guessing were among his failings. During field operations, he had cultivated the knack of insulating himself from any and all distractions, a single-mindedness vital to adopt during the current "mission impossible" that forced him to carry out the superhuman assignment and stay alive long enough to repay that pompous bastard Daniel for "kindly" ordering Magdalena and Little Rudy placed in what the son-of-a-bitch had dared to call "protective custody." He would never have admitted it to another living soul, but privately he felt the odds against accomplishing either goal soared an order of magnitude or more beyond merely "astronomical."

Pastoria's offer of aid struck him as a touch too facile and self-serving to be believed. Yet despite his admittedly superior intellect and professional attitude, Asian Section's technical guru had not only dealt honestly and fairly with him, but had also accorded him a large measure of respect, treated him as more or less an equal; nor for that matter did he bear any animus toward any other intellectual, not so long as they kept their brainy convolutions to themselves.

Leaving the military not long out of late adolescence, he had enrolled in university courses without realizing the stint of lunar combat had soured him on intellectual pursuits. Being spoon-fed prominent examples of the world's literature, music, science, philosophy and art had reaffirmed an impression that a life of the mind was not for him. During the lunar campaign, as a vacuum slogger in the toughest of the tough UN High Rangers, he had witnessed varieties of senseless bloodshed and anguish, experiences which endowed him with zero patience for people

who talked a problem to death, but buried their heads in the sand when it came to inventing a hopeful solution. Yes, the former Milanese academic had displayed the compassion to be expected from a colleague, and had shown an understanding of what hard, isolated lives field assets led, an attitude directly in contrast to the dispassionate, “I’ve told you what to do, now go do it! demeanor of Howard Baste, or other control agents under whose guidance he’d worked.

But would his “friend” — chagrined, he realizing his actual friends could be counted on his thumbs — jeopardize his own privileged position by acting upon a nebulous sympathy for the “friend” he felt had been wronged? He wanted to think so, but also realized how tentative Dr. Pastoria’s resolve might become when it was time came to fish or cut bait.

No, that entire line of reasoning amounted to muddled thinking; or worse, counting on outside help to solve a personal problem, and that *did* smack of wishful thinking. There was no question that he would have to somehow survive, not only to free Magdalena and little Rudy, but also to gain the opportunity to redress a bitter grievance.

He dismissed the plight of his sister and nephew, and concentrated on peering downriver. Able to see less than a few meters through the rain and gloom shrouding the roiling water, only now and then could he barely distinguish the river bank.

* * *

“How long will you keep us here?”

“Depends,” replied the gross, unshaven man called Lenny by his phlegmatic, unkempt accomplice who answered to the name Bob, slouched against the doorpost eyeing Magdalena with lazy indifference. Lenny set down a pair of steaming plastic trays loaded with the same insipid microwave dinners served nightly by her abductors. There was milk for the boy in a plastic cup; a second cup contained tepid water and a supermarket tea-bag on a string.

“Depends on what?” Maggie wanted to know.

“Full-up with questions tonight, are ya? Put a lid on it, Missy. Eat your vittles, then lay back and take it easy. Lots healthier that way. Besides, you’ve got nothing to fret about.”

The door clumped solidly behind the big man. She heard a key turn in the lock, and a deadbolt slid closed with a clunk. Accustomed to bottling up her desperation, Maggie knew little purpose purpose would be served by letting Little Rudy sense her outrage, her helplessness. She wished her hands would stop trembling, unwrapped the plastic utensils from a paper napkin, and held out a white plastic knife and fork to the boy. “Umm-m-m, pot roast. Smells yummy.”

“Don’t want any.” Little Rudy pulled a face.

“How do you know you won’t like it? Go on, taste it.”

“Hate it!”

“At least drink your milk,” she said, striving to keep her voice level. “I know you’re hungry. Come on, eat something.”

“Where’s daddy? I want to go home.”

Oh, God, so do I! she thought.

The boy continued in the same vein, his whining complaints setting Maggie’s nerves farther on edge. She sipped tea — stale Earl Grey, tasteless and insipid. Setting down the plastic cup in disgust, her thoughts in a continual turmoil, she rose and began pacing the starkly furnished bedroom, hoping to avoid a pointless argument with her son.

Blindfolded when brought inside, her first glimpse of the surroundings showed that both windows had been boarded over. Except for that, their prison looked like a typical master bedroom in some cookie-cutter California housing tract — twin beds, a scarred, veneered mahogany bureau and night stand, a pair of cheap rattan chairs resting on faded wall-to-wall carpeting of bilious greenish hue.

She had listened for hours at the door, and at either boarded-up window, seeking any faint clue to their whereabouts. Whatever sound that might have penetrated the plywood sheets was effectively masked by the susurrations of an air-conditioner haphazardly installed in the bottom half of a boarded-over window; the high, beaded-glass bathroom window was also covered.

For at least the tenth time since being abducted, Maggied wondered what her brother would do in a like situation. As youngsters growing up in Mindanao, Rudy had been her protector, and on more than one occasion her savior. But once she had blossomed into young womanhood, his attitude had reversed. Her big brother had not requested, but rather *forced* her to learn emotional self-control as well as physical self-reliance. Rudy had taught her defensive moves she would never have dreamed existed, urging her to practice speed of hand and foot, drumming into her both the psychological and physical methods of dealing with a would-be aggressor, large or small. He had warned her time and again that he would not, *could* not always be around, had stressed becoming independent. There simply wasn't a way, he told her, to live without knowing how exceptionally attractive she was to men, some of whom might prove disinclined to take "no" for an answer. She would have to become her own protector, her own and savior, not dependent on him or anyone else.

His prediction had undergone subtle testings, but until now had never been fully necessary. Her brother's younger sibling, the fellow inheritor of a bloodline renowned for producing competent, uncompromising, self-reliant individuals, she eventually began feeling herself the distaff equivalent of her brother. If not for the presence of her young son, she knew she would have already tried to escape from the awful, depressing bedroom. But thoughts of harm or accidental injury to Little Rudy were terrifying, effectively sidetracking the impulse. What, she had nevertheless asked herself over and over again, would her brother have done in a similar predicament? Of one thing she was certain: hampered by fear of something happening to the youngster or not, the notion of giving in, or giving up, would never have occurred to Rudy. She could never have imagined him vegetating, doing nothing, waiting to learn what might happen next.

"Mommy, sit down." The boy had finished his milk, and was pecking at a nest of wrinkled peas, maddeningly spearing them one at a time with a tine of the plastic fork.

The sight came close to drawing a scream from Maggie. She closed her eyes, counted to ten. Sudden inspiration made her seize Little Rudy's empty plastic cup, step into the bathroom, wash it out and dry it with toilet paper. She went to the locked and bolted bedroom door, pressed the cup's open mouth tightly against the door's painted surface, pressed her ear against the cup's smaller end, and listened.

Muffled voices came through indistinctly, the words ragged, semi-intelligible.

"Yeah, ain't it a drag. Gus promised us relief, but you know him."

“No hurry.” Maggie recognized Lenny’s gruff baritone. “That copper-skinned quiff is some classy momma. Hate to hand her over to another watchdog so soon. Got half a mind to sample that myself ‘fore we split.”

“Half a mind is right,” said Bob. “Gus’ll tear you a new asshole if that skinny lady has one scratch on her.”

“Aw, don’t talk crap, Bobby. What’ve we got to lose? Dumb to be scared of Gus when you’re lookin’ at what happens to guys mixed up in a snatch.”

Magdalena could almost see Bob’s sober agreeing nod. “Stay cool, Len. We’ll be fine long as we don’t do something stupid. I was you, I’d leave the fancy broad be.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Her ear glued to the plastic cup, Maggie heard Lenny say he was turning in, so it was night outside. A door closed in another part of the house, and there was silence.

Little Rudy had corked off, nodding over the untouched food in his dinner tray. He stirred and snuffled when Maggie lifted him, carried him to one of the twin beds. She pulled the coverlet up under his chin, slumped in a rattan chair and tried to eat something. The microwaved frozen dinner had cooled, covering the alleged pot roast with a film of congealed grease.

She sank back on the other bed and counted cracks in the mottled acoustic ceiling until drifting into uneasy sleep.

* * *

Dim, wide-spaced pinpricks of light gliding past in the rainswept darkness kept Rudy current with the dinghy’s rate of progress. Consulted the luminescent dial of his analog wrist chronometer, he judged the habitation to be a riverside settlement called Bunut. Pitching and tossing in turbulent river water and the endless downpour, the little boat drifted onward.

Two uneventful hours later he spotted another settlement and again checked the time. Having committed the river route and predicated current flow to memory, he decided the Kapuas was carrying him past a community called Selimbau; on downstream, the settlement of Samitau would come next. Aside from a few dim lights glowing through the slanting rain and murk that obscured the invisible shore, he could distinguish nothing in the way of structures, nor was any discernible river traffic — hardly surprising in view of the relentless Monsoon rains only now beginning to slacken.

The first gray wash of dawn faintly lit the misty eastern horizon. Crouching low behind the inflated dinghy’s gunwale, he stayed low in the dinghy, watching the nebulous buildings of Silat drift past. The rain had abated noticeably, and the wind had diminished to a zephyr, making the river noticeably less rough. Able for the first time to distinguish objects along the shore, he could make out silhouetted stands of ironwood trees, sago palms, here and there the lofty umbrella of what, during a briefing, Pastoria had termed a *Koompassia Excelsa*.

The rain forest on either side of the river solidified as the fan of diffused light blossomed brighter in the east. Half an hour later, the dinghy rounded a gentle bend in the river and Cateel was confronted with . . .

Magic!

Prodding upward through broken, slowly retreating cloud anvils, a shaft of sunlight pricked out faint, fiery hairlines etched vertically in the sky. He stared with hypnotic fascination at the first visible manifestation of his objective, stared until his eyes watered and scudding

clouds obscured the spectacle. Lacking a perspective for comparison, he had no way to estimate the elevator's distance.

Another six or eight clicks on the river would bring him to his most immediate goal, a tributary stream draining the high country to the east that emptied into the Kapuas. Before arriving at the confluence and starting the long overland trek, he meant to deflate and sink the dinghy. He speculated about how safe it would be to stay riverborne another six or eight kilometers in daylight, and decided to speed the voyage as much as possible. Checking to make sure the backpack was secured in place, he removed, unfolded and locked open the flimsy plastic oar secured at the bottom of the water-filled craft. In the act of putting the oar over the boat's gunwale, he glanced downriver and almost dropped the paddle.

In the distance, a crimson PRC flag flying from the foretop, a shallow-draft patrol boat chugged around a shallow bend in the mist-layered river and bore down on the dinghy, leaving a broad wake as it churned upriver against the current.

* * *

"Came in the morning mail, Mr. Kapps."

"At about what time of day?"

"No more than an hour ago."

Handling it gingerly wearing latex gloves, FBI Special Agent Murray Kapps inspected the crude note, then tucked it inside a clear plastic evidence sheath. The message looked as if scrawled in green crayon by some retarded schoolboy — four lines of malformed block letters wandering haphazardly all over a sheet of cheap copy paper. One aspect of the note intrigued Kapps: either on purpose or by accident, the author had disdained using articles:

WIFE BOY SAFE NO WORRY
NOT TRY LOCATE OR ELSE
BEHAVE, THEY COME HOME
OKAY, OR REAL BAD NEWS

The plain manila envelope's address, scribbled in blue ink, had been scripted with childish erraticism using a wedge-pointed felt pen. It puzzled Kapps to note the incorrect zip code appended to the Brentwood address, and something else made him breathe a bit faster.

"What do you make of it?" Arthur Saunders hovered expectantly at Kapps' shoulder.

"Too early to read much into it, Mr. Saunders. We hold off on all opinions until our forensic lab finishes with it and the envelope."

"Can they . . ? What will they look for?"

"Latent fingerprints, of course. But I wouldn't get my hopes up on that score. Has anyone except you touched the envelope or note?"

"No, no. I called your office soon as I opened it. What else can your lab hope to learn?"

"A number of things," said Kapps, hoping to instill confidence. "Calligraphic experts will try and determine whether a man or woman did the hand-lettering, whether he or she is right- or left-handed, and also estimate the writer's age and background. They'll do a spectrographic analysis of the crayon wax, and a microscopic search for stray bits of hair or skin tissue that might be clinging to the paper fibers. A fluoroscopic examination and some other tests could also tell us something useful, though I doubt if we'll be able to trace where and when the materials

were purchased. The notepaper and envelope are inexpensive, recycled items available in any market or convenience store.”

“But you’re . . . You hope for a lead.”

“Definitely.” Tugging off the latex gloves, Kapps slipped them and both evidence sheaths into his attachè case.

With a hangdog air, Saunders walked the FBI man to the door. “What is it, Mr Kapps?” he asked. “Something bothering you?”

“Not really,” lied Kapps. “It’s just that no demands have been made, which is strange. The perpetrators obviously want something from you. Otherwise, no kidnapper in his right mind would think of risking the death penalty. I’d be willing to bet this first note was meant to put you at ease, bolster your morale. The next contact will probably tell us what they’re after.”

“Money, or . . . ?”

“Exactly, money or whatever.” Kapps shook hands firmly with Saunders. “Listen,” he said, searching the other’s woebegone countenance, “do yourself a favor and go back to work. You can’t help your wife and child, and least of all yourself by moping around the house. Do something to take your mind off the problem, and let us take care of worrying; it’s what we’re paid to do, and we’re very good at it. This whole mess will be straightened out, wait and see.”

“I’ll . . . try. Thanks.”

Once he reached the sidewalk out of view from Saunders’ picture window, Kapps broke into a trot. Something was indeed bothering him. The envelope’s incorrect zip code had been complemented by an uncanceled postage stamp. The letter had not arrived via USPS, but most likely had been hand-delivered, in which case the perps — and hopefully their victims as well — might still be in the Greater Los Angeles area. Wrenching open the door of his unmarked gray sedan, he took out his satellite phone, punched his office number.

In less than an hour, a team of FBI special agents were circulating up and down the block of nearby homes, canvassing the neighborhood, inquiring if anyone had seen someone come and go that morning from the Saunders residence.

FIVE

Bent over double, as close to prone as the dinghy’s confines permitted, Rudy slid the plastic oar over the side and stroked furiously toward the fringe of tangled vegetation on the riverbank. Scooting the half-filled, bobbing craft through thickly grown pandanus clogging the shallows, he forced it into and under a tangle of dripping foliage, laid the oar beside him and curled up in the fetal position, peeking over the plastic boat’s rounded gunwale.

The Chinese patrol craft had not altered course since first appearing. It plowed sedately upstream, the blind yet all-seeing eye of an elliptical radar dish nutating atop the foremast.

Had the dinghy been spotted in midstream? It had seemed all but inevitable then, but not now; the backscattered returned from a man crouched in a thimble-sized boat floating half-submerged a distance away may not have been appreciable. And at a range of a kilometer or so, even the most diligent optical observer might mistake the dinghy for one of the plentiful crocodiles infesting the Kapuas, or for that matter a floating log. Here against the shore, the

inflated craft's mottled gray-green camouflage blended perfectly into the botanical nightmare growing in wild profusion above and behind it.

With only his eyebrows and the bridge of his nose above the gunwale, Rudy held his breath as the patrol craft churned abreast of his hiding place. A uniformed mannequin perched in the foretop nest did not look especially attentive to his surroundings, nor did the watcher stationed along the portside rail strike Cateel as seeming overly vigilant. A fourth uniformed figure in the stern scanned the retreating shoreline on either side of the river with binoculars.

Dinghy and pandanus pads rocked gently on a fan of ripples laving the shore in the patrol craft's wake. Shaken by the near brush with disaster, he waited impatiently for the vessel to negotiate a bend upriver, and decided to stay where he was on the off chance the craft might double back and catch him away from a place of concealment. The whining drone of the riverboat's turbine engines dwindled, receded further, and gradually died away. He made a silent vow to finish the voyage close inshore.

Farther downstream, a shallow bend in the river brought a Dayak community in view. On the riverside, in the forefront of more modern structures, four thatched-roof long houses built high off the ground on hardwood pilings indicated what might once have been an appreciable settlement — a city in Dayak terms. During a round-robin of briefings in Tokyo, he'd been told each long house of the Land Dayaks might have once sheltered as many as thirty or forty families, but the recently industrialized regions west of the space elevator's foot had seduced gross numbers of Dayaks into performing collateral service functions in support of China's elevator system.

He left off paddling, sank low in the little boat and let the current carry him past the habitations. In early morning, no one was up and about other than a lone figure standing in an open doorway, and a more distant woman descending a bamboo ladder, a basket balanced on her shoulder. A dun-colored hound lifted its head, ears pricked, and watched the dinghy glide past from across the water. The dog uttered a feeble growl, lost interest and laid its head back on its forepaws.

Five or six kilometers farther downstream, the river widened perceptibly, and the current diminished. Stilt-rooted mangroves began to crop up here and there along either bank intermixed with what had hitherto been exclusively upland growth. He knew the broad delta, where the twisting Kapuas diverged into dozens of wide and narrow channels and mangrove swamps before emptying into the Strait of Karimata, still lay hundreds of clicks to the southwest. Even so, the character of the river had subtly changed. Knowing himself more vulnerable in daylight, and anxious to abandon the boat and strike off on foot, he planned his moves. He would slit the dinghy with the fish knife, weight it down and sink it where it would hopefully not be found. But weight it down with what? Finding anything sufficiently heavy and manageable posed a problem here in the marshy lowlands.

The increasing crocodile population also gave him something else to think about. More and more reptiles had appeared in the water, or could be seen sunning along an occasional muddy bank. A gurgling sound made him turn his head. An ominous reptilian snout, replete with a protruding fourth tooth, sent out widening ripples as a fairly large croc trailed the dinghy. Imagining what those long jaws could do to the flimsy plastic boat — and its even flimsier occupant — was no pleasant prospect.

* * *

Hoping to discourage the croc, he lifted the oar and swatted the water, at best an act that proved ineffectual. The good-sized reptile stayed in the dinghy's wake, indifferent to the threat. He stroked closer inshore. Several hundred meters downstream, he began searching for a bank clear of crocs on which to beach the dinghy. Before a suitable spot appeared, a bend of the river precipitated him into civilization of sorts. Not far ahead, beyond the left bank, a sizable riverfront plantation stretched along the shore. More importantly, opposite neat rows of rubber trees he spotted his jump-off point, the mouth of a tributary stream feeding into the Kapuas from the higher rainforest leading up-country toward his destination.

Any hope he might have had about slipping past the plantation unnoticed was quickly dashed. A decrepit wooden dock extended into the river atop rotted pilings. In the aftermath of the previous night's deluge, lone figure squatted on the planks, checking the moorings of three skiffs and a rusted white power boat. Knowing he would never be able to drift past unseen, Rudy called out a hoarse greeting.

Startled, the bandy-legged elder straightened on the dock, and watched with suspicious eyes as Cateel paddled to the pilings, arrested the boat's passage by seizing a bamboo ladder extending down to the water. Grasping a higher rung, he one-handedly tossed the oar up on the planks, unclipped the backpack and slung it over his shoulder. Mounting the ladder part way, he reached down, lifted the boat by its molded handle and emptied out the collected water, and heaved it up alongside the oar.

Judging from appearances, the man standing on the dock was not of the local Dayak or Kenyah population, but Melanesian. If that impression proved to be the case, the old fellow might be "one who had surrendered to God." Rudy chose a quick way to find out. "Go to Pontianak," he said in Tok Pisin, a pidgin based on English. "Find nice boat, gift of Allah, hey?" Having assumed the elder was Muslim, he awaited a response.

Regarding Cateel narrowly, the other took his time digesting the gratuitous information. "Your gift looks worthy."

The old fellow had responded in a Javanese form of bazaar Malay once fostered by Borneo's original Dutch settlers. Knowing only the rudiments, Rudy strained to understand.

His new acquaintance paced slowly around the dinghy, making a further appraisal. He hawked and spat into the river. "A 'found' boat, you say?"

"Much good boat, yes."

Squinting at Cateel, the other said. "Found boat belong to the sky people, who never tire of searching up, down river for strangers."

Rudy had managed to catch only every second or third word, but the gist came through plainly. "Sky people . . . fear strangers? Why . . . ?"

The elder shrugged. "Who can say?"

"Be wise to seek out sky people, give back boat, hey?"

The other's gaze turned oblique, disingenuous. "Wise only if papers in order and ready to answer many questions."

Rudy nodded. "Best keep mouth shut, hey?"

The old fellow shrugged again.

While conversing, Rudy had been sizing up what could be seen of the adjoining plantation. A dozen or more workmen moving between the rows of trees were harvesting either gutta percha or hevea, locally grown natural rubber. Here and there a few had stopped what they were doing and stared at the dock, curious to learn who the river had thrust into their midst.

“Have use for boat?” asked Cateel.

His expression unchanged, the elder did not respond.

A haggle began on that note. Apparently considering himself a shrewd bargainer who should have little trouble outwitting a Filipino simpleton who asked nothing more of Allah than to hand the gift back to the infidel sky people, the elder decided patience an intangible though valuable asset, and quoted a drastically low amount.

“Sixty *rupiahs* . . ?” Rudy scowled, grimaced and performed a violent head shake. “No want be robbed. Seventy *rupiahs*, hey?”

Now assured that obstinacy coupled with superior bargaining skills were the proper stepping stones to getting what he wanted, the other declared with a loft air, “It found boat, not purchased boat. Be worthless if sky people come, take back. Sixty-five *rupiahs*. ”

Frustrated over the need to fritter away minutes in a pointless dicker, Rudy had an urge to give the old fellow the boat free of charge, but also knew any hint of eagerness to be swindled would court danger. He capitulated reluctantly. He exchanged head dips with the elder, and sixty-six crumpled *rupiahs* changed hands. At the exchange rate quoted in Tokyo — twenty-three *rupiahs* to the U.S. new dollar — Rudy was gratified to learn he’d been screwed without being kissed first. He frowned, grumbled accordingly. “How far highway? Meet friend there.”

The Melanesian permitted himself a broken-toothed grin of triumph. “Follow the lane three kilometers,” he said, hooking a callused thumb to indicate the direction of travel. “Make sure papers in good order. Meet infidel sky people, best make up better story, hey?”

“Many thanks. I take care.”

“May Allah guide your steps!”

Returning the benediction, along with a silent prayer that the other’s blessing would bear fruit, Cateel slung the backpack over his shoulders, cinched the chest strap and parted from the inflatable dinghy’s new owner with a casual wave.

He encountered no one on his hike up the “lane” — a polite term for the chuckhole-pocked set of ruts the encroaching jungle threatened to repossess. Western Kalimantan, once lightly populated, had witnessed the advent of China’s space elevator system and associated commercial and services endeavors, spurring a radical demographic increase. Shortly before construction commenced, hordes had descended on Mt. Beturan, turning the region between Sintang and the coast into enclaves of immigrants and locals alike seeking employment. Here to the east of Sintang, however, were mostly Land Dayak settlements, plus those of scattered Kenyahs and Kayans along with what little was left of formerly working plantations that dealt in rubber and palm oil, logging and a several paper pulp mills.

Stiff-legged after his long ride downriver, Cateel nevertheless felt reinvigorated to be on foot. Striding energetically up the gentle slope, he became the object of derisive criticism by an honor guard of jabbering macaque monkeys tracking his progress beneath the dense canopy of jungle foliage bordering the lane. He decided to put off leaving the road and going into the

rainforest until after crossing the road his map showed running between Silat and Sintang. He followed the narrow, muddy lane around a bend, and froze in mid-stride.

Departing clouds had again unveiled his sky-rending objective. Rooted in the muddy lane, oblivious to his vulnerability of exposure, he was mesmerized by the vertical caesura that gleamed in the morning sun, bisecting the horizon. Many kilometers closer now than when last seen, the bright, scribed lines divided the clearing sky in halves, soaring up and up.

And up . . . !

Craning his neck, he stumbled, halfway losing his balance, and took a quick backward step to recover. The elevator tethers, forming a single, shining filament climbed impossibly high until vanishing at the cerulean dome's infinity point directly overhead.

Filled with a sense of wonder he hadn't known since childhood, Rudy resumed his trek. Intellectually aware of the elevator system's otherworldly scale, actually viewing the still-distant, skyrending tethers lent a first-hand *emotional* appreciation of its monumental scale and span, an experience that stayed with him indelibly.

The squish of tires splashing through the puddled lane warned of a vehicle approaching downhill. He dove headlong into a thicket dewy from the overnight rain, stayed prone as a scabby, mud-spattered Mercedes electric truck bumped around the curve and passed so close he could hear the driver and passenger jabbering. He kicked himself mentally for witlessly gawking at the sky and daydreaming when he should have been staying alert. Rising, he brushed away the wet as best he could and set off again. When he estimated the plantation to be two or more clicks behind him, he cut into the underbrush thickly grown with flowering shrubs and here and there a Panduratan Black orchid tree. Opening the backpack, he pocketed the sophisticated GPS receiver, clipped the fish knife's sheath to his webbed belt, and readjusted the backpack on his shoulders.

A half an hour later, perspiring as the day progressed, he warily approached a strip of haphazardly repaired blacktop, and stopped out of sight, standing still, listening intently. Moving closer, he peeked out of the undergrowth beside the road, searching what could be seen of the road in both directions, and then dashed across quickly. Guided by the GPS receiver, he picked his way southwestward, swatting at the voracious insects that forced him to stop again and smear repellent on his face and the exposed portions of his neck and arms.

Seen at eye level, the floor of the rain forest was a more open than he'd anticipated in most directions. It made him uncomfortable to know he could see, and be seen, for twenty or thirty meters through the stands of trees, tangled vines, creepers and shrubs. Moving cautiously, he grew tired of holding the global positioning device, took a last careful reading, and re-stowed it in his backpack, afterward maintaining an approximate heading by judging the angle of sunlight filtering down through the latticed canopy of greenery overhead.

From time to time during the succeeding hours, he extracted the GPS receiver, consulted it just to be on the safe side, then replaced it in the backpack and pressed onward.

* * *

The boy was crying when Lenny brought in their evening meal. "What's troublin' him?" Magdalena did not reply.

“Here, little fella, dry your eyes. Got a surprise here’ll pep you up some.” Once tall and muscular, the middle-aged man now running to suet set down a pair of plastic trays. “None ‘o that frozen swill tonight. These barbecue short ribs’re from a real tasty take-out joint?”

Magdalena nodded. Her abductor’s infrequent attempts to be ingratiating bothered her almost as much as the fact of being held captive. The other man, Bob, stayed at his usual post in the doorway, a toothpick in the corner of his mouth. Looking past him beyond a short hallway she made out the armrest of what looked like a brown corduroy sofa, an end table supporting a ceramic lamp with a tan, flower-patterned shade, and an old-fashioned black, audio-only telephone.

“What’s bothering the kid? Why’s he cry all the time?”

Maggie shrank against the wall. “Why do you think?”

“He’ll feel better once he swallows some ribs.” Lenny loomed above Magdalena, his bloodshot brown eyes. devouring her.

She glared at her captor. “We’ll both ‘feel better’ if you tell us what this is all about. Why did you kidnap us? Why are you keeping us here?”

“Missy,” the big man said gruffly, “you sure are full of questions. Take an even strain, okay? Me and my buddy, we’re going stir-crazy same as you. Babysittin’ you two is as much a pain in the butt to us as you. It’t make things a damsight easier if you’d sit back and go with the flow. How about a TV? Say the word, and I’ll roll one in here.”

“It’ll make things ‘a damsight sight easier’,” she mimicked, her voice brittle, “if you’d look the other way and let us walk out the door.”

“Uh-uh, no can do. Jesus! There has t’be a way to shut up the kid.”

“He’ll be fine once you leave.” On impulse, she softened the request. “Please go now.”

Lenny looked her over one last time, and shrugged. The door closed behind him, the key turned in the lock and the deadbolt clunked home. Maggie dropped to her knees and groped under the bed for the plastic cup. Shushing Little Rudy, she stepped to the bedroom door.

“Hoo-boy! That momma is some classy twist,” Lenny was saying. “Damnedest bedroom eyes I ever did see. She turns me on big time.”

“Do yourself a big favor,” was Bob’s muffled reply. “Turn yourself off. Playing footsie with that dolly’s not in the cards, Len.”

“Says who?”

“Says Gus, that’s who.”

A nasty chuckle. “What Gus don’t know won’t hurt him. We’ll see what comes down.”

Magdalena put the cup back under the bed. She cuddled Little Rudy, cooing and cajoling her son until he calmed down enough to eat something. After they finished the surprisingly good meal, she wiped her son’s mouth and fingers with a damp napkin and talked to him quietly for a while, then tucked him in bed. Her captors usually came back in about an hour or aso to collect the dinner trays and plastic utensils. She went into the bathroom, stripped to the skin and donned the sleazy Terrycloth robe she had found in an otherwise bare closet. Returning to the rattan chair, she sat down alongside her son and drained the paper cup of the lukewarm tea.

When at last a soft knock came on the door, the boy was asleep. *Polite bastards!* Maggie thought with a flare of helpless rage.

Lenny poked his head inside, gazed at her hungrily for an instant before he entered and gathered up the dinner trays. He hesitated, tipped his head toward the bed. "Kid's corked off?"

Maggie rose hastily, as if to protectively bar the man from her son, and let the robe to slip open for an instant.

Standing in the doorway, Bob's toothpick fell from his lips.

Lenny almost dropped the dinner trays. He swallowed hard, edged backward out of the bedroom, stumbling over his own feet in the hallway. His companion snickered as Lenny fumbled to close and lock the door.

It won't be long now, thought Maggie. Rushing into the bathroom, she was violently ill.

* * *

Rudy figuratively patted himself on the back. Having trekked all the way up to the Madi Plateau's heavily forested northern rim, he had made what he considered exceptional progress during the strenuous days spent fording streams and thrashing his way uphill through the tangled rain forest.

Hunkered on the edge of a small clearing, resting his back against the bole of an Nipa palm tree, he chewed a piece of jerky from his backpack. Looming six or seven clicks to the southeast, Mt. Beturan's peak reared in the broiling equatorial sunlight. The white speck of what he assumed was a radar installation crowned the summit, dwarfed by the upper third of the ground station's thousand-meter tower thrusting upward into the hazy sky, its sheet-metal façade reflecting sunlight, gleaming brightly against the peak's backdrop.

Ten times more spectacular when seen close up than at a distance, space elevator operations had fascinated Cateel day after day during his approach. He checked his wrist chronometer, tipped his head far back against the palm tree's rough bole and waited as the seconds passed until a shining pinprick insinuated itself into existence at the zenith point directly overhead. The silvery speck swelled gradually into a three-dimensional object, a gleaming, sunlit hyphen, and finally a bright lozenge descending at less than the pace of a free falling body. The capsule streaked downward and was swallowed by the tower. Rudy stopped chewing, his subconscious jarred by the wait for a crashing impact that never came. Instead, an identical white capsule shot upward, rising smoothly from the tower along the opposite pair of tethers.

Once the weather had cleared in the wake of yet another wild and windy night of rain and thunder, he had spent the preceding day climbing through a long, winding valley. During the grueling, sweaty trek, he'd learned to time the capsules' rising and falling with metronomic regularity, stopping to watch simultaneous capsule arrivals and departures while relaxing during infrequent rest stops.

On roughly a dozen occasions during this penultimate stage of the trek he had been forced to duck for cover when a helicopter thrashed past above the rainforest canopy. Lying immobile, the helpless victim of fire ants, scampering lizards, and a particularly vile species of beetle able to instinctively home-in on exposed human flesh, he had endured the intermittent torment until the throbbing thrash of rotary wings Dopplered away in the distance. Operations Chief Howard Baste had briefed him to exhaustion, warning him to stay alert for watchdogs manning jetcopters thought to be equipped with infrared scanners and linked electronically to motion detectors spotted here and there in the rainforest. The PRC search craft he had narrowly avoided on the river, and more especially the helicopter patrols allowed to burn precious petrol,

told him a good deal about the extent and intensity of PRC security measures. Now resting in reasonable proximity to his goal, he realized the danger of encountering foot patrols had tripled, or perhaps quadrupled. He had accordingly quintupled his precautions.

Clambering stiffly to his feet, he threw the backpack over his chafed shoulders, buckled it and doggedly pushed onward. Skirting the plateau's rim in an northeasterly direction, he reflected on the march upcountry from the Kapuas — a drenching, dreary uphill struggle through a tangled maze. In early February, the end of *landas*, the monsoon season was at hand. Mid-March would bring *tedoh*, the relatively more clement “dry” season, when local Dayaks, Kayans, Kenyahs and plantation owners solicited the equatorial sun's aid in evaporating felled vegetation enough to permit burning. Rice or some other local crop would then be planted in the cleared acreage, with ash from the extensive fires used to fertilize the crop. To an outsider like himself — even a native of the rainy Philippines — the difference between the island's “wet” and “dry” seasons struck him as somewhat academic.

Conditions were a touch more pleasant in the highlands, if only a touch. Trekking through lower country had meant enduring one siege of miserable heat and humidity following hard on the heels of another, mixed intermittantly with deluges of monsoon rain, but more often than not stifling heat and enervating, unrelenting humidity had been the order of the day, not to mention a plague of crawling, hopping, flying insects and blood-sucking leeches. He had managed damned little rest during the short, spotty interludes of overnight sleep.

Not very long after leaving the Kapus, the lowland rain forest had become a maddening green hell where the jocular wheeze, “You can't get there from here,” had taken on real meaning. Hoping to make progress in anything that resembled a straight line had been foolish fancy, for whichever way he had turned some obstacle had invariably presented itself — another in an unending succession of streamlets, thick brakes of tropical foliage festooned with dangling vines and creepers, or a confusion of impenetrable underbrush bright with rhododendrons, orchids, and pitcher plants. He had in fact crossed and recrossed the same meandering stream a half-dozen times, emerging on each occasion with a collection of leeches plastered to his ankles and shins.

Cursing, he'd taken matches from the waterproof box and burned the repulsive worms until they dropped off one by one. In the end, castigating his own bullheadedness for not recognizing the semi-invisible footpath or game trail for what it was, he had stumbled across the same wildly circuitous track time after time, and conscientiously ignored the subtle signs that it was manmade, not an animal route. When the truth finally dawned, he had followed the path, finding it not only easier, eventually leading in the direction he wanted to go. The twisting, devious, all but invisible footpath, no doubt trodden for numberless years by locals as well as local fauna, had greatly simplified progress. Yet sticking to the trail had also made him exceptionally leery of meeting unexpected fellow travelers.

The trek had taken him through an endless botanical and zoological hodge-podge inhabited by shrieking, weird looking proboscis monkeys, porcupines, tree shrews and a plethora of reptiles of all sizes, as well as timid little *plandok* — mouse deer not much bigger than overgrown rabbits. Thus far, he had luckily encountered no wild pigs, or honey bears; the notion of taking on a member of either species armed with nothing more than a serrated fish knife was not too appealing.

On several occasions the hike had provided a flash of genuine danger. Once, stopping to relieve himself, he'd looked up and come face to face with a medium-sized python drooping from an overhanging tree limb. The snake had regarded him sleepily. Needless to say, he had opted for a detour.

In late afternoon, footsore, thirsty, and ravenously hungry after an entire day spent circling the plateau, and cautiously creeping up Mt. Beturan's northeastern slopes, he found a screened vantage high on a hillside that afforded an overview of row upon row of barrack-like buildings isolated within a pair of fenced, graveled compounds. According to the satellite recon data Pastoria and Howard Baste had drilled into him, he was standing a few hundred meters above the labor pool compounds where emigrants were housed prior to shipping into space.

* * *

Careful to keep as much foliage as possible between himself and the looming elevator tower — what he had taken to be the summit radar station was now out of view, screened by the mountainside — he filled his plastic canteen from a rivulet spilling across a rocky outcrop, dropped in an anti-contamination tablet, swished the liquid around and drank his fill. Building a perfunctory hiding place, he heaped windfall atap fronds from very few surrounding palms at that relatively cool altitude, no more than twenty-eight or -nine degrees Celsius, he judged. The dense lowland rainforest had given way to isolated Nipa palms towering above clusters of dwarf trees, their northern boles covered with mosses and lichens, where a variety of birds squawked, cheeped, and screeched in competition with bands of quarreling monkeys. An infinite variety of ferns, vines, creepers and shrubs that made it difficult to move around the mountainside. But while the temperature was more amenable to comfort, the humidity was almost as unbearable as it had been lower down; worse, even, than in his native Mindanao.

"¡Ay de mi!" Slapping with futile energy at the squadron of mosquitoes attracted to his sweaty, defenseless skin, he smeared on additional repellent. Knowing he had to stay hidden, yet able to observe the site and make plans, he studied the partially obscured scene below.

Off to the west, beyond the mountain's flank, ranks of skeletal, tee-shaped pylons marched downhill four abreast, supporting the catenary loops of power lines diving into hazy lowlands in the direction of the recently born industrial community of Sintang. A four-lane highway wound uphill through a wide, cleared swath of jungle, and terminated in an extensive complex of buildings ranging around the more distant slopes. Alongside the highway, dual lines of magnetic levitation shells gleamed in the low afternoon sun; farther off, he spotted the white arrow of a maglev bullet train surging uphill toward the site.

Cautiously parting branches on the clearing's brow, he surved the region directly below. Uniformed individuals boarded and stepped down from the open cars of a "people mover" tramway interconnecting the ground station facilities. He watched an electric switch engine push a short string of flatcars packed with cargo containers into a cut in the hillside and disappear into the mouth of a tunnel leading deep inside the mountain, where inferred space elevator loading and offloading operations took place.

With darkness encroaching, it began to rain — a dismal though cooler downpour than he'd become accustomed to at lower elevations. Withdrawing a camouflaged poncho from the backpack, he unfolded it, pulled it over his head, and then went back and arranged atap fronds, covering himself as best he could. Resting his head on the lumpy backpack, he tried to sleep but,

even though physically exhausted, he remained mentally and emotionally wide awake, and sleep refused to come. He twisted and turned for a time, and eventually realized hunger and apprehension were conspiring to keep him wakeful. In the morning he would have to make some kind of move. The longer he attempted to stay hidden on the mountainside, the more certain exposure became; nor could he afford the added risk of foraging very far in search of the local fruits, berries or other consumables short-listed in the intensive briefings as safely edible. He stirred restlessly a while longer, gave up and rose to wander the small clearing, ignoring the rain pelting down mercilessly, as well as the gut-rumbling hunger gnawing at his vitals.

On the floodlit holding compounds below, prospective lunar emigrants queued up in the rain were filing inside a central building, presumably to take their evening meal. Invisible in the fast-fading afterglow, he searched every square meter of either holding compound, racking his brain, trying to invent a feasible means of gaining covert entry to either enclosure. The forest had been cleared in a two-meter-wide perimeter around the dual compounds, where guards posted in evenly-spaced watchtowers enjoyed unobstructed views of the barrack areas. Cyclone fencing surrounded each compound, topped by secondary sections canted outward and interwoven with coils of what from a distance looked like vicious concertina wire.

The gloaming faded, turning into full night with tropical suddenness. Floodlights atop high poles burst into brilliance, harshly illuminating the holding compounds and the periphery. Rudy checked his wrist chronometer; the lights had come on precisely at the even-hour hack, which probably meant they were timer-activated, not manually controlled.

Standing in the soaking rain and darkness, he was dismayed by the near-hopeless prospect of attempting to sneak unobserved into either holding compound. He thought and thought, revolving one notion after another but try as he would was unable to imagine a reasonable method of sneaking into either holding compound unobserved.

SIX

The lab director's image radiated enthusiasm. "Jackpot, Kappy!"

Leaning toward the vidicom flat-panel display, Special Agent Murray Kapps said eagerly, "You found what, a partial print?"

"Print, schmint!" sneered the microbiologist. "To coin a cliché, neither the perp's hide nor hair was on the envelope or message. We found something twenty times more exciting than a lousy fingerprint. Residual trypsin, plus a few dollops of pepsin and patain."

"Enzymes?" Murray was incredulous. "You mean . . .?"

"Hey, you *are* on your toes! Yeah, salivary enzymes — big, fat, juicy protein molecules. For a cop, you now and then do show flashes of unsuspected brilliance."

"Knock off the clowning, and spill it, Doc!"

"One of your baddies has got to be a careless moron. His or her tongue caressed that uncanceled postage stamp before it got pasted on the envelope. What's more, he, she or it also licked the envelope flap, not too long ago, either. The daryotype differentiation work-up's is about half-complete. We'll have a cytogenetic ultrastructure of your villain in, say, forty-five minutes, an hour at the outside."

"Lose the jawbreakers. What're the odds of getting the perp's ID?"

The lab director grinned. "Fabulous! Staggeringly good, somewhere between six and seven hundred million to one."

"In favor of, or . . . ?"

"Hell yes! Chromosome subfibrils, DNA, and so forth never lies," said the other with the superior air Kapps hated. "Hey, come to the party, Kappy. You sound like Sherlock Holmes, who solved everything with a deerstalker cap and his handy-dandy magnifying glass. Sherlock couldn't begin to compete with modern superscience."

Weary of the other's good-natured ribbing, yet forever thankful of his lofty expertise, Kapps displayed more patience than he felt, asking when the suspect's ID would be available.

"From us?" An expression of surprise. "You're under the impression that our underfunded, understaffed lab has access to DoJ's Main Magnafile? We can digitize the info, but you'll have to run it through Hoover's encyclopedic database to get a make. If the perp was born in an American hospital, is old enough to vote or be employable, ever went to any school, was in the military, got married, applied for credit, anything along those lines, his bio should be on record. Magnafile may spit back everything but his current whereabouts. How's that grab you?"

"Right by the forebrain!" enthused Kapps, snapping his fingers. "Terrific! I owe you a lunch. No, make it a seven-course dinner."

"Don't think I won't take you up on it. We'll indulge ourselves at the fanciest, priciest eatery in the burg."

"Deal! You've earned it. Thanks, Doc."

And that, thought Kapps, switching off with a triumphant smirk, *puts a dollop of frosting on the Saunders kidnap cake.*

Computer-aided analysis by the Bureau's calligraphy experts had resulted in a guesstimate that the same individual who'd addressed the envelope had also scrawled the crayon note, most likely a male between forty-five and fifty-five years of age. Canvassing the Brentwood neighborhood near the Saunders home had confirmed Murray's original suspicion. On the morning in question, an elderly retiree living across the street and two doors down from the Saunders residence, had answered his front door chime and been seduced into buying cookies from a pair of sales-minded Girl Scouts. He had also noticed a pale green runabout pull to the curb directly across the street, and a balding, bluecollar type in a tan jumpsuit who had skirted the shrubbery, dodged up to the Saunders entry, hustled back to his car and driven away.

Fifty-three minutes after receiving the lab's director's news flash, a dime-sized magnetic cassette was laid on Murray's desk. Too impatient to wait for the elevator, he bounded down a flight of stairs and plugged the cassette into a slot in the secure communications cubicle. Via the Bureau's guarded satellite uplink, he tapped the eidetic memory of the multi-lobed gallium arsenide electronic brain in the complex beneath Washington's Hoover FBI Headquarters.

Two minutes and twenty seconds later by the clock, the printer began spewing data:

Leonard Alfonse Blasco, AKA "Lenny;" SSA 9613-56-1290; b. 17 October, 2058, Cleveland, Ohio, USA; 6'-3" stature; Wt. 270 lbs.; thinning dark brown hair, brown eyes; blood type "O" pos. (digitized iris patterns available on request); prominent scars left cheekbone, left clavicle, upper right thigh & lower back; surgical scar tissue, both knees.

"Bingo!" exulted Kapps. A large man, maybe an ex-football player judging by the cited height, weight and scar tissue on either knee. He decided to wait and pulse the database later, in

addition to pulling up historical college and NFL team rosters. Hunched attentively over the hardcopy, he skipped down to a lower paragraph.

A twice-decorated U.N. Peacekeeping Forces staff sergeant, Blasco had served in the Holy Land and on the bloodsoaked Iranian Front during the Second Mideast War. Subjected to a general courts-martial, he had been convicted on two counts of strong-arm rape, earning seven years at hard labor served at the infamous U.N. Madagascar open prison. Murray pursed his lips and frowned. The rape rap was a news item he definitely refused to pass along to poor Arthur Saunders.

Will wonders, he thought, never cease! As if by magic, the lab geniuses had handed him a suspect dressed out on a silver platter. He happily recalled how the ace microbiologist had good-naturedly ragged him about Victorian detective work, and chuckled. The test tube jockeys could sit back and rest on their laurels. Now it was time for Sherlock in his modern guise to don his deerstalker hat and cape, grab his handy-dandy magnifying glass and spring into action.

Murray opened the intercom and asked his secretary to make four copies of the printout, meaning to supply one to whichever on-deck agent answered his summons. The colleague who entered the office minutes later made him grin at one of the too-good-to-be-true coincidences life occasionally dished out. “Up, Watson!” he said with theatrical intonation. “The game’s afoot.”

Special Agent Timothy Watson tilted one eyebrow suspiciously, looked at askance at Kapps. “What’ve you been smoking, Murray?”

“Forget it. So happens I’m in a much better than good mood.” He briefly explained how a major break in the Saunders Case had erupted from the forensic lab. “Take two men and scope this address. The perp may be there, or maybe not, so watch your step. With a death penalty rap hanging over their heads, Blasco and whoever else is involved may well be, as the cliché has it, armed and dangerous. Alert LAPD, and don’t hesitate to call for SWAT backup if you feel it necessary. Phone and fill me in on what comes down.”

“On my way, Murray.”

The door closed behind Watson, and Kapps went through the computer printout again line by line, item by item. He pondered, tapping a pencil against his teeth. Something about the report didn’t ring quite true. Blasco’s occupation was listed simply as United Nations employee, Labor Grade Six, but a specific division of the global, many-tentacled organization was not specified. It bothered Kapps to think a known sex offender — especially one convicted and sentenced by the U.N.’s military arm — would ever be afforded gainful employment by the same outfit that had busted him in the first place. That was nonsensical; it whiffed of mackerel long dead in the noonday sun.

Intrigued by the vague hint of political fish swimming in the Saunders kidnap stew, it occurred to him in passing that Blasco might be a U.N. spook. *But, no*, he thought, *scratch that*. Not by any stretch would a U.N. intel weenie carry a low-on-the-totem-pole labor grade six classification. More than likely Blasco was an errand boy, or considering his listed size and heft plain vanilla hired muscle.

Closing his eyes, he tried to picture his quarry — a tall, possibly overweight ex-GI who, considering the surgical knee scars, might’ve also been a football player. The Bureau almost never dealt with rape, or with almost equal rarity these days kidnapping. He was nevertheless aware that, statistically speaking, many if not most rapists harbored an intense dislike of women.

Rape had almost nothing to do with sexual attraction; it was a vicious, nauseous put-down of any person of the female gender, often accompanied by a beating, and on occasion murder. Ergo, a high probability existed that the suspect was not a ladies man. Having electronically distributed nationwide several photos of Mrs. Saunders obtained from her distraught husband. Opening the file, he extracted and studied one of the pix, and then a second. He began to think the kidnap motive might be nothing more than sexual assault, which struck him as a very long longshot, considering the mandatory penalty any court would be forced to invoke. The much younger Magdalena Saunders pictured during her modeling career made her look exceptionally exotic. Her figure, while slender, was rounded and full, lacking the semi-starved “boniness” of high-fashion models. Her appeal, he decided, stemmed mainly from the classic mysteries dwelling in her subtly tilted, dark brown eyes.

Intuition made him dismiss rape as a suspect motive. Had the collective perps been seeking a rape victim, period, why would they have made it a point to grab the youngster as well? A single rapist might have rigged it that way to blackmail the victim, and force her to “cooperate.” Yet a minimum of four suspects were known to be involved in the Saunders case, including one who’d gone so far as to pose as a uniformed LAPD officer — a felony in itself. No, the case reeked of teamwork by pros who knew the score, possibly pros backed by an organization of some kind. The kidnappers were definitely aiming at something other than causing harm to a lovely, unfortunate young woman.

But what other motive could there be? Saunders had heard nothing from the abductors since receipt of the crayon-scrawled note. What the hell did the perps want from him? And why, after literally putting their necks on the block by snatching the woman and boy, had they neglected to make their demands known?

The implication of political involvement raised its ugly head at once, the stray notion nagging Kapps. Experience had taught him that mixing politics in a criminal investigation invariably bred one or more skull-splitting migraines. Having been down that twisty path more than once, he was aware than in each instance the chase had been plagued with obfuscating details, and had more than once ended in a blind cul-de-sac.

Returning the photo of Magdalena Saunders to the file, he decided on a wait-and-see attitude to learn what Watson’s team turned up before stewing further about the case.

* * *

Cateel came awake all at once, his five senses stretched to the limit. Blinking away the cobwebs of sleep, he gradually lifted his head from the backpack’s lumpy pillow.

Nocturnal rainfall had ceased, but the surrounding rain forest lived up to its name, tinkling, gurgling and dripping from every leaf, frond and limb. The chorus of subdued sounds compounded the difficulty of hearing whatever it was that had awakened him. He could neither hear or discern any sign of a prowling human or animal in his limited field of view.

Low-pitched voices seemed to be growing louder, forcing him to breathe shallowly, open-mouthed for silence. Freezing in place, he lay absolutely motionless, semi-concealed beneath the soggy atap fronds he’d spread over the plastic poncho covering him. Peeking about, only his eyes moving, he scoured the darkness for any hint of movement.

Nebulous in the crepuscular predawn gloom, indistinct forms materialized. Emerging from the scrub forest on his left, a file of figures moved into the small clearing. Mutterings in a

dialect sounding to him like Cantonese evoked hushed laughter from someone. Clad in dimly seen uniforms and billed fatigue caps, the phantom procession of shapes was briefly silhouetted against the faint sky-glow of the floodlights downhill.

The intruders moved directly toward the spot where he'd dosed down for the night and marched past so closely that he could have reached out and touched any one of a succession of plodding boots. The snout of a silhouetted, shoulder-slung automatic pellet assault rifle was momentarily silhouetted against the faint wash of light from below.

Whoever he was, the leader halted and stepped aside and turned round and round in the center of the clearing. Apparently satisfied, he barked a low-voiced command. In single file, the patrol moved off around the mountain's sloping shoulder.

His pulse racing, Rudy waited dozens of heartbeats before daring to stir. Had it been simple good fortune for them to miss spotting him, or . . . ? No, not that alone; couldn't be. More than luck had to be involved, although good fortune had certainly played a part. He checked the luminous dial of his wrist chronometer. If the patrol had passed even a quarter-hour later, when a wash of dawn light would flood the clearing, they would've had to be blind not to pick out his camouflaged poncho beneath loosely mounded palm fronds.

Personal experience made him aware of what a thankless task patrolling Kalimantan's mountainous rain forest had to be; even in daylight, an army could lose itself in the trackless, tangled wilderness. To cover the huge expanse of rough terrain, another patrol might not pass his way for some time. If his luck held, that should afford him a chance to study the well-guarded ground station and evolve a method of gaining covert entrance to either compound.

It grew steadily lighter. He shook off the atap fronds, rose and balled the poncho, stuffing it into a thicket against future use. After performing a few bending and stretching exercises to relieve the stiffness, he went to the brink of the clearing. The rows of barracks below were remindful of old black-and-white photographs depicting the previous century's Nazi concentration camps. As he watched, floodlights girdling the area's perimeter flickered, died.

Desperately hungry, he envied the dozens of prospective emigrants queuing up on either side of what he judged the central refectory. Having eaten nothing but dry pemmican and tough jerky during his long trek, he couldn't fast through many more hours. Drinking deeply from the canteen, he went to refill it at the rivulet trickling across a channel of bare rock, popped in an anticontamination tablet, swished the contents thoroughly, and drank again, then scrounged uphill, searching for any fruits, nuts or berries the briefings had informed him were edible.

He came back to the clearing carrying a cluster of *durian* — an evil-smelling fruit covered with tough, pyramid-shaped spikes resembling the skin of a giant water chestnut. Using the fish knife, he sawed through the fibrous skin and gorged on pulpy fruit. As breakfast, all that could be said in favor of *durian* was that it partially filled the rumbling void in his midsection.

Seeking a better, more comprehensive overview of the holding compounds, he took off his muddy boots, shucked off the filthy sweat socks and climbed a dwarf tree on the perimeter of the clearing, and parted the foliage. The perch afforded a better, broader perspective, revealing not only all of the nearer compound, but the cross-braced timber underpinnings of the adjacent watchtowers. Assiduously examining the ground station's layout a square-meter at a time for entry clues, he was treated to a daybreak changing of the guard.

A squad of soldiers in camouflage fatigues came marching up the perimeter road, and halted in front of each watchtower, where a pair of men fell out of the front rank, hustled to the tower and climbed the ladder to its thatch-roofed cupola. Those being relieved clambered down, drew themselves to attention and saluted the officer, and fell in at the rear of the column. The squad marched onward, stopping at each succeeding tower to repeat the process.

Rudy studied the holding compounds and their environs, analyzing every visible feature. A pair of guards were stationed outside the sentry hut beside the nearer compound's entrance gate; above them, videos cameras scanned both the approach and the inner compound. He took note of something confirming a prior guess when two individuals, Algerians by appearances, each clad in a light-colored *djellabah* and red *fez* — wandered to the fence and, as if rehearsed, raised their arms in unison, took hold of the chain links and stared directly upward at the soaring elevator system tethers as if contemplating their celestial destiny. He silently filed away the important datum; it proved the cyclone fencing was not electrified.

To a person, most all of the somewhat scruffy, unkempt individuals in the nearer compound's graveled yard had queued up for the morning meal, with a few hunkered down apart in conversation. Less than certain due to the distance, Rudy thought he also spotted a few *dhotis*, the garb of lower caste Indian nationals appropriate to the quatorial climate. In general, the near encampment had a "peasant" look, a visible manifestation of poverty familiar due to a youth spent in provincial Mindanao. On the other hand, occupants of the more distant compound gave an overall impression of being more genteel. A mildly interesting observation, he supposed, yet of doubtful tactical value.

His calves began to cramp after an hour spent in the leafy perch. He clambered down, put on the soggy socks and boots, sat down began fretting in earnest. The sun had risen higher above the mountain's lush green flank, giving birth to a steamy mist that layered the forested slopes as rain-soaked vegetation began its diurnal drying cycle. Leaning against a moss-slick tree trunk, he pondered his untenable situation. The more he pondered, the more frustrated and restless he became, goading him to take action.

But, *what* action?

The outlook darkened further as one scheme after another was examined, evaluated and discarded. The options were not merely limited, they ranged from farfetched to suicidal. He gave serious thought to creating a diversion of some kind, some ruse to lure at least some guards away from the watchtowers. Ah, but what *kind* of diversion? A fire would be easiest to manage, except the notion of starting a fire anywhere in the waterlogged surroundings was laughable.

A deeper problem intruded and inhibited his thinking to the point of bothering him more than any other aspect of his predicament. He realized with a degree of certainty that he would have to make whatever move he opted for now, now, now. Today!

He refused to even think about the alternative.

* * *

In late afternoon he was no closer to a viable solution than shortly after sunup. A cornered animal, he perspired freely not only because of the cloying humidity. In the early throes of desperation, he prowled the clearing in a quandary, trapped between the need for watchfulness and an ever more urgent requirement to take positive action. There were moments when he nearly wished another patrol would stumble across his hiding place, drag him downhill and at

least give him a bowl of steamed rice before standing him against a wall and unlimbering their assault rifles.

Each and every hint of a hoped-for solution dissolved when subjected to close scrutiny. The concatenation of multiple guarded gates to the holding compounds, watchtowers manned around the clock, video surveillance, a pair of compounds floodlit nightly and barbed-wire entanglements atop high cyclone fencing combined to confound every scheme and notion that popped into and out of his mind.

He willed himself to stop aimlessly pacing the clearing, resolutely planted his muddy boots and tried to think more calmly, more clearly. It was drawing on toward evening, with time running out. Off to the west, a resurgence of towering thunderheads would soon lend saffron and bronze hues to the usual garish tropical sunset. The prospect of another night in the open ravaged by a gale-ridden deluge, not to mention darkness, enervating hunger and the certainty of eventual capture, made him spasmodically pound a frustrated fist into his open palm.

What to do? A glance at the wrist chronometer told him nightfall, now on the order of a half-hour away, meant the perimeter floodlights would again blaze into life and bathe the holding compounds and immediate suffoundings in raw glare, making any covert entrance move he might attempt a stark impossibility; conspicuous consumption of power shunted down from orbit eliminated any need for conservation. Whatever he decided to do would have to be done in the next few minutes, before the floodlights flared into . . .

But, wait . . . *floodlights!*

His thoughts gyrating wildly, he broke down the radical inspiration into its constituent elements. Day or night, no matter; any thought of climbing into either holding compound unseen was be unthinkable, unless . . .

“¡Ay de mí!” Swearing a soft Spanish oath helped make up his mind. Foolhardy it might be, but the go-for-broke notion appealed to his instinctive love affair with spontaneity. If the floodlights were to switch on before he got into position . . . No, there should be enough time if he had correctly assumed the perimeter lights would again illuminate automatically at the even hour hack. If so, there were only seconds, and none for second-guessing his decision. It might work, it might not. What the hell! With virtually nothing to lose, even failure during an honest attempt was preferable to lurking on the mountainside, a sitting duck waiting to be plucked.

He whipped the fish knife from its sheath, found a spongy low spot in the clearing and began feverishly hacking and digging, with ground water seeping into the hole faster than he could scrape away mud. When he'd pecked and hacked and scooped a sufficiently deep cavity, he shucked off the filthy, thorn-scratched linen shirt and khaki trousers worn during the trek, dunked them in the watery hole and trotted over to collect the mylar poncho, which he wadded, stuffed it into the hole along with the GPS receiver, knife and sheath. He started to unstrap and discard the wrist chronometer, then realized holding on to it would be vital. If the floodlights were to come on in accord with the previous night's even-hour tick, he would have to know the exact second when the timer was due to close a switch.

Washing the mud from his hands and feet in the nearby rivulet, he withdrew from the backpack and unfolded a clean linen shirt, a pair of rope-belted khaki trousers. Taking care to soil the garments as little as possible, he draped them atop a flowering rhododendron bush,

crammed the backpack into the hole and scraped mud and debris over the unneeded items, and scuffed the muddy ground with a bare foot, scattered windfall atop fronds over the area.

The wet socks and mud-caked boots would have to do. Lugging them to the rivulet barefooted, he took care not to leave soggy footprints. Buck naked, he sat on the slab of exposed sandstone and hastily washed himself as best he could, laving his stubbled jawline, smoothing back his matted hair and scrubbing his torso and legs, wondering all the while if his prospective hosts, or captors as the next few minutes would determine, might notice the reddish blotches left by the clinging leeches he'd burned off his shins during the trek. Donning the socks, boots and fresh clothing, he cinched the rope belt snugly about his waist, hurriedly began picking his way downhill in the gloaming, alert for trip wires, video cameras, motion detectors concealed in the trees, or for that matter any other surprises put in place to warn of an intruder.

* * *

Dodging from cover to cover bent over at the waist, he crept downward, halting behind the trees on the border of the macadam perimeter road. Across the roadway, a semi-cleared strip between road and cyclone fence formed the last hiding place this side of the near holding compound. He moved to the left several meters, positioning himself in a hoped-for blind spot between watchtowers, and studied the structure on his left, then the tower on his right, where a guard's profile was silhouetted against the ruddy sunset glow. No one was visible in the shadowed cupola atop the watchtower next in line, but that didn't mean it was unoccupied. The low crown of the macadam road humped before him; on the far side, the brush had been trimmed waist-high for most of the semi-cleared area's breadth, leaving two or more meters of bare, muddy ground between underbrush and fence.

Waiting poised until dusk had descended more fully, he darted across the road wraithlike, went down on his belly, squirmed forward in a commando crawl making no sound in the wet foliage, moving deeper into the tangle of lopped off vines and ferns, where he stopped and lay perfectly still, breathlessly waiting to see if an alarm sounded from the adjacent watchtowers.

Thunderheads rolling in from the west had blanketed the mountainside in heightened gloom. The rain came, huge, wide-spaced droplets spattering all around him. The pattering increased in tempo until it became the now familiar pounding of a torrential downpour.

It was difficult to see through the sheeting rain. Encouraged by the welcome help from above, he counted the slow seconds dribbling away. When the wrist chronometer's luminous dial told him less than half a minute remained until the even hour, he slipped the watchband from his wrist, shoved the watch deep into the thicket's mud. Praying that the floodlight schedule had not been changed, he wriggled out of the underbrush, surged to his feet and splashed across the cleared area, already a miniature lake, and climbed the cyclone fence ladder-fashion.

Stretching upward, he clutched one of the posts cantilevered outward to support the coils of Concertina razor wire. Gradually, painfully, using equal measures of agility and finger strength, he bowed his head and turned around so that his shoulders arched against the outwardly canted section of fence, the wire's cruel barbs stabbing through his soaked shirt, raking his back.

Arms extended, rainwater coursing down his face, the heels of his boots dug into the chain links, he hung there like a crucifixion victim, limbs quivering from the strain, teeth gritted against the cramps tightening his forearms, shoulders and thighs, ignoring the sharp barbs tearing up his back.

The floodlights flaring into blinding brilliance. Eyes closed tightly, he forced himself to count off two seconds, let go and jumped despite the dazzle. Landing heavily, squishily, with obvious clumsiness in muddy, puddled rainwater, he grunted and sprawled forward face-first, gained his feet, arms flailing, knee-action high and thrashed awkwardly through the cropped, hindering underbrush.

A klaxon began hooting “*ah-oo-gah!*” from the guard tower on his left. Crossing the macadam roadway, he worked hard to make his premeditated fall look convincing, stumbling and sprawling prone. The purposeful self-delaying action gave a pair of shouting guards time to hurriedly clamber down the watchtower ladder.

Struggling to rise, one hand clutching his bloodied knee, he hobbled away from the holding compound at a limping trot, and plunged straight into the arms of two uniformed Chinese soldiers who had not bothered to unsling their burp guns.

“Why run off, you?” demanded a captor in pidgin Maylay.

Rudy held himself rigid, rolled his eyes up at the monsoon heavens. “Sky not for me.”

The other guard grinned. In Cantonese he said, “This turd makes three this month, and we’re already two up on Liang. He’ll have to buy us dinner in Sintang.”

The soldier holding Cateel’s arm said, “Liang will say we swindled him.” Returning his attention to Rudy, he switched back to primitive Maylay and said with mock gravity, “No be afraid, you. All fine in sky. Do much good work, earn much good pay.”

Rudy hung his head. The picture of dejection, he gave an impression of being practically in tears when the entrance gate was unlocked and the soldiers frog-marched him into the emigrant holding compound he had desperately schemed and worked hard to enter.

* * *

“Once more, please. Your full name?”

“Roxas, sir. Antonio Roxas. I already tell guards.”

“Where did you learn to speak Chinese, Mr. Roxas?”

“In Singapore, sir.” Managing to sound both surly and servile, Rudy informed the interrogator he had worked the docks there. “I was . . . Sorry, not know Chinese word.”

“A stevedore?”

“Yes, yes. Load, unload ships.”

“May I see your hands?”

Cateel held out his palms, still callused from the cover used during his truncated assignment laboring on Singapore’s old Empire Docks.

The slender, silver-haired questioner’s features remained impassive. Folding fine-boned hands across his middle, he rocked backward in the executive chair behind the desk. Examining Cateel with unwinking concentration, he said, “Tell me, what made you decide to leave us in such an abrupt, unnecessary way?”

The penthouse office suite featured a large, clear skylight. Although the space elevator’s anchoring terminus was a kilometer or more distant, the lowermost illuminated segments of four awesome tethers soared directly overhead. “I . . . not happy,” said Rudy, pointing upward, “in camp with coolies, poor men from India, dirty Ibans. Not always stevedore, I once assemble electronics. No wish to do slave labor, clean toilets in sky.”

“I see. And your papers?”

Standing before the interrogator's large, orderly desk, Rudy shifted his weight uneasily. "Burn before . . . jump fence."

"I fear that may not be entirely true, Mr. Roxas," said the other, his intonation droll. He indicated a thick sheaf of computer printouts by riffling the stack meaningfully with a thumb. His flinty gaze disconcerting, he said, "Your name does not appear in the manifest of any current contingent of prospective emigrants. Telling tales is useless. Who are you? How did you manage to get into the compound?"

Gazing down at the carpet, Rudy shuffled his feet.

"How?" repeated the other more firmly.

"I pretend to, uh . . . In Pontianak, sneak on train at dock."

"Did you indeed? That strikes me as extremely unlikely. Applicants for lunar employment are screened with great care. Prior to acceptance, their backgrounds are scrutinized in depth before they are allowed to enter quarantine. What made you think you could get away with sneaking aboard the bullet train?"

"Hungry, sir. Need . . . work. Apply for sky once in Singapore office, but . . ."

"But . . .?"

"Interview not . . . good."

"You were rejected?"

Rudy shook his head. "No, sir. Foreign fellow and I . . . not get along. I walk out."

"Who interviewed you in Singapore? What sort of . . . 'foreign fellow'?"

"Mean older Russian. Not know name. He not like Filipinos."

The inquisitor's expression changed. "That would have to be one of Colonel Vlassikov's security officers. Interesting, yet also improbable Mr. Roxas. To the best of my knowledge, no Filipino gentlemen were recruited from Singapore or the Maylay Peninsula. In any event, I'm glad you told me of this. Our comrades in recruitment will be questioned about the problem, if such exists. In the meantime, let me apologize or whatever indignity you may have suffered at the hands of an interviewer. We make every effort to solicit emigrants with total impartiality, categorizing them according to individual capability, aptitude and attitude, not ethnicity.

Rudy dipped his head in feigned understanding.

"Very well, we shall assume a mistake was made, though not entirely our doing. In 'sneaking' aboard the bullet train, you accidentally segregated yourself among a group of, shall we say, less accomplished prospective emigrants." The Chinese official pushed back his chair and came around the desk. "I am General Yee."

A chill ran through Cateel when the interrogator made his identity known. He nevertheless show instant deference. "I honored, General, sir."

Yee's probing, analytical stare persisted. Regarding Cateel as a potentially valuable art object delivered by mistake, he said, "Your halting acquaintance with Mandarin sets you apart. Are you able to read and write as well?"

"Only . . . little bit, General, sir."

"That can be remedied. If you can demonstrate an ability to prove your competence in one or more fields of automated electronic assembly, I predict a profitable future for you in either Artsutanov or Luna."

"You . . . most kind, General, sir."

A knife-thin smile. "Truthfully, as that may be I had other than kindness in mind. The lunar factory is woefully shorthanded where skilled technicians are concerned, especially those with bilingual ability to complement their expertise. The timing of your sudden appearance is was not well chosen, however. A major trade conference in the offing has disrupted emigration shipments, hence you will have to await your turn. In the meantime, I think perhaps we shall assign you to the ground station's cargo-handling crew. Your stevedore experience will be a welcome addition to the load, offload gangs. Does that appeal to you?"

"Very much, sir." Rudy bowed obsequiously. "Not know how to thank you, sir."

"You are most welcome, Mr. Roxas. First, we shall clean you up a bit, get you something to wear. Leaping over barbed-wire fences in the rain has ruined what remains of your garments. I also noted the mark of a band on your left wrist. Were you in the habit of wearing a timepiece?"

A glum nod. "A good one, General, sir. I trade for food in Pontianak."

"Of course. Well, if things continue in your favor I doubt if you will ever be hungry again." Yee pressed a buzzer, summoning the soldiers who had escorted Cateel into his office.

"Again my thanks, General, sir. I much appreciate."

* * *

The guards escorted Cateel from the office. China's counterintelligence director stared at the closed door, his lips curved in a shadow smile. Operation Quench had taken a giant forward leap of its own volition. The officer, a squad leader who had led his men wearing infra-red night goggles, had reported seeing the hidden intruder, and had been directed to "find" him again on the next patrol, and seize him so that the games could begin. Now what would have followed had been made unnecessary by the UNIA asset himself. Praised highly by his mole in Tokyo, Cateel had outdone himself in praiseworthy fashion by seamlessly inserting himself into the ongoing Quench scenario with neither a ripple nor any need to be told more fairy tales than necessary. The general marveled at the asset's ingenious method of gaining entry.

Perhaps there was even more to him than Erik Caesescu had advertised.

SEVEN

Special Agent Tim Watson said, "There on the left, Murray."

Kapps touched the driver's shoulder. "Roll on past and pull up beneath that big parkway tree. Has the stakeout seen anyone go in or out?"

"Not a soul," Watson told him. "From the street, the place looks deserted, except there's a vehicle of some kind behind the gate. See the whip antenna sticking up next to the garage? I spotted it on the first drive-by."

Kapps nodded. "Okay, let's everybody keep things low-key. No weapons in sight, but stay on your toes. If things turn rancid it could happen fast. Kidnappers aren't known for brilliance. I doubt if the suspect's dumb enough to keep hostages at home, but you never know."

An aging "Hollywood Moorish" palazzo in the tradition of the past century's opulent Teens and Twenties, the house was situated on a winding street three blocks above Los Feliz Drive. Desiccated, sun-browned foxtails had usurped the lawn's rolling frontage, where a pair of fan leaf palms drooped in the yellowing heat. A mansion once, crack-raddled stucco and missing roof tiles attested to the sea change wrought by many decades, many owners.

Above the roofline, atop a chaparral covered spur of the Hollywood Hills, Kapps could make out the smog-shrouded outline of the Griffith Observatory's greenish triple domes. Pausing on the circular drive, he rose on tiptoes, peeked over the sagging gate. A battered electrocycle was propped against the garage wall, its fuel-cell packs absent, the front wheel missing.

A tattooed, anorexic youth wearing only faded Hawaiian swim trunks took his time answering the door chime, greasy peroxide-blond hair hanging in ringlets to his shoulders, a skull-shaped pewter earring dangling from his left ear. His squint challenging the men in business suits, he said flippantly, "Whatever you're sellin' we don't need."

"We'd like a word with Mr. Blasco."

"Uh-huh, me too. Lenny ain't here."

"When do you expect him back?"

A shrug. "Beats me. Try again later."

Agent Watson's shoe interrupted the closing door's swing. Murray flashed his credentials. "FBI. Mind if we come in, have a look around?"

The youth's demeanor changed. "I, uh . . . Yeah, 'pose it's okay. Not much t'see."

About that, Kapps decided, the scruffy youngster had been truthful. The expansive, beam-ceilinged living room had a distinctly lived-in look, its tranquillity unsullied for some time by vacuum cleaner or dust mop. Moldering Spanish draperies of sun-faded crimson were tightly drawn across an arched picture window overlooking the street. A curlicue wrought-iron curtain rod lay amidst a swirl of fallen drapes beneath one of the filmed rear windows. Barren plaster walls looked down on a seedy three-piece sectional sitting askew before the littered fireplace, and a rickety end table looking lonesome rounding out the room's less than sparse furnishings, on it sat an old-fashioned black, audio-only telephone.

"You guys got some kinda beef with Lenny?" the kid wanted to know. "What's the big guy into now?"

"Are you related to Mr. Blasco?" Kapps missed nothing while pacing the length of the spacious, high-ceilinged living room.

"Naw, he's just kind of an okay Jay, know what I mean? Lets us hang out here even when he ain't around."

"Us . . . ?"

"My friends 'n me. They're, uh, out by the pool."

The once delightful terrace was missing a number of flagstones, with weeds growing in the bare spots. Soupy water half-filled the swimming pool; at the far end a mass of soggy leaves and one or two discarded food wrappers bobbed uninvitingly. Across the pool, a stark naked teenage girl sunbathing on a chaise lounge pulled reflective dark glasses down over the bridge of her nose with a mauve fingernail, looked over the new arrivals incuriously, pushed the shades back in place and resumed leafing through a magazine. On the terrace, a pair of youths drank beer and argued under a sun-faded blue-and-white umbrella.

"How can we get touch with Mr. Blasco?" asked Spedial Agent Tim Watson.

"Y'got me," said the kid, folding his arms defensively over his narrow chest. "C'mon, what's the scam? What sorta problem's Lenny into? If he's in a jam, I'd like to, you know, help."

"We would like to ask Mr. Blasco a few questions," said Kapps.

"Questions, uh, yeah . . ."

At the front door, Murray handed the boy his card. "When Mr. Blasco comes back, please have him call my office. The matter is urgent."

"Urgent, sure. I'll let him know minute he shows up."

When he and Tim were beyond earshot, Murray ordered surveillance maintained around-the-clock.

"Snotty little fart's lying in his teeth," remarked Watson. "I'm pretty sure he knows where Blasco is."

"Likely as not. I got a peek at the phone's ID plate. Call in, Tim; have an automatic trace-and-record trap hung on this number." Kapps scribbled the digits on the back of another card, handed it to Watson. "I'm going over totalk to the men on stakeout."

"Think the kid'll warn Blasco?"

"Hope so. It'll jolt Blasco out of his socks to hear we're prowling in his house. Could roust him, make him stir. Go, Tim! The kid may be picking up the phone right this second."

* * *

Reposing in air-conditioned comfort, his limousine parked at a red curb beneath a bilingual sign procaiming in Maylay and Chinese NO STOPPING AT ANY TIME, General Yee waited for the jet from Nanjing to disembark passengers at Pontianak International Airport.

The first straggle of passengers began entering the terminal's glassed-in concourse. From the limo's tinted window, Yee saw queues of new arrivals forming in the customs cattle chutes. With no small sense of pride, it delighted him to note how distinguished his grandniece looked flashing her credentials, and how the crisply she was rewarded with an exaggerated bow of deference from the customs clerk, who gestured a polite invitation to bypass the gaggle of disembarking passengers.

Siu Lan Yee made her way to the exit, where the general's driver met her, and bowed. He took her single piece of carry-on luggage, and inclined his head toward the waiting limousine.

Yee smiled and pushed open the rear door, his arms extended. "Dearest Siu Lan."

The comely young woman slid inside and embraced him warmly.

Twenty minutes later they were seated in a private compartment aboard the maglev bullet train carrying them to Mt. Beturan.

"A delicate subject, I realize," said the general, "yet mordant curiosity compels me to inquire about your adventures in Manila."

"It was . . . It's far better for you not to know, honored Granduncle."

Yee looked solemn. "On occasion, Dearest, our peculiar profession demands distasteful undertakings. Erik fulsomely praised your outstanding performance. He could not stop talking about how magnificently you held up during the ordeal. Was your departure difficult?"

"There were no fond goodbyes," she assured him. "The morning after Erik came by, I slipped out of Mama Rose's back door, caught a cab to the airport and flew straight to Nanjing."

"Ah, Nanjing. How is my beloved brother's son, his charming wife, the children?"

"All are well, esteemed Granduncle. Father insisted that I stay overnight in the hospital to undergo a complete physical exam." A wistful smile. "It took all my patience to convince him I acted only as . . . well, live bait in that place."

"As always, your father's wisdom is beyond question," approved the general. "You could not help but come in contact with the lowliest of the low, and one can ever be sure."

“Has my delay created any significant problems?”

“None. Oh, a minor one not worth mentioning. The trade conference is still weeks away.”

“I take that to mean their man has arrived.”

A thoughtful look invaded the general’s dark eyes. “Cherished Grandniece, we have welcomed into our midst what may indeed be a most singular individual.”

“Erik spoke highly of him.”

“Justifiably, it now seems. My chief aide was given the detailed information you transmitted. But even armed with his timetable and proposed route, Major Woo’s best people managed to lose Roxas, as he styles himself. Only two slip-ups occurred. He allowed a river patrol boat to briefly detect his presence, and then committed a second faux pas upon emerging from the Kapuas at a plantation west of Silat.” A dry chuckle. “Clever devil that he is, he had the effrontery to sell Woo’s man his inflatable boat before vanishing in the rainforest, where not even ‘petrol-wasteful’ helicopter sweeps our comrades in Beijing condemn were able to locate him.”

“You make him sound competent.”

“Eminently so, in my judgment,” assured the general. “During the sleepless nights we spent conceiving Quench, Erik spoke of his capabilities as not merely outstanding, but uniquely so. Major Woo estimated a minimum of one full week or more would be needed to complete the overland trek upcountry after leaving the river. We spent days biting our nails, hoping he had not fallen victim to the wildlife, fever, some other unforeseen pitfall. Then, lo and behold! A mere five days after leaving the Kapuas and selling his boat, he miraculously appeared.” Yee described Cateel’s bold, unorthodox method of gaining entrance to the emigrant holding compound.

“Ingenious!” exclaimed Siu Lan.

“Indeed. His bold arrival however, is only the second upward step in what could well be a monumental ascent. The success of Quench will depend upon whether he and his accomplice render unanimous reports to Daniel’s organization as well as the Ministry of Justice. Further complicating the outcome will be the vital necessity for both operatives to perform the charade in a thoroughly convincing manner.”

“Erik,” remarked Siu Lan, “characterized the asset in question as an authentic survivor type, but also voiced concern over an ability to convince a hard case of his stripe of our benign intent. He appears to be someone not easily deceived.”

“Never deception, not with this individual.” The general sounded firm. “We do have succulent bait to dangle before him. Promising to safely free his sister and young nephew might well suffice. Abducting his own star field asset’s next of kin of simply to force him to undertake what under normal conditions would be a suicide assignment demonstrates brutal arrogance on Daniel’s part. Now and then the man manages to act shrewdly, with forethought when dealing with less weighty matters, yet often turns into an outright buffoon when some truly serious issue arises. Having wormed his way into accessing Tokyo’s deeper secrets, Erik performed his wonders in typical fashion. The pro tempore leadership of Asian Section was aware of where the woman and boy were being held. Erik appreciated the importance of acquiring that information enough to accepted the grave risk of calling his saintly father in Prague.”

Siu Lan groaned. “Erik dared a *direct* call?”

Yee’s smile was tinged with irony. “By now you should know how Erik’s mind works. His father’s son, he is, and believes himself not merely invincible, but immortal. Bereft of the

pipeline you provided so diligently in Manila, his relayed message included a wish that he had been a touch less hasty in ordering your departure.”

The young woman caught her breath. “Am I . . . to return?”

“No, no. It would be impractical, if not impossible.”

Her expression less troubled, Siu Lan said, “I sympathize with Erik’s wishes, but I’m delighted to be out of . . . I refuse to ever again think about that pesthole. It’s merely a guess, revered Granduncle, but it sounds as if you mean to spirit the woman and child away, present Daniel’s asset with an accomplished fact.”

The general nodded. “I alerted San Francisco minutes after Erik called. We shall bring the family here, including the husband if it is his wish. Roxas, as the asset is known, will either meet them aboard Artsutanov, or out at the spacecraft terminus. Freeing his relatives should do much toward endearing us to him. Upon the successful conclusion of Quench, I intend to make a guarded overtures, hopefully enlist him in our cause.”

“As a concept, Quench is more than brilliant, esteemed Granduncle.” Siu Lan paused. “One prays Beijing will not interfere.”

Yee regarded at his grandniece keenly. “An astute observation. I have endured more than one hair-raising interview with Chairman Li over that question. At first, he termed the operation a ‘charade.’ Convincing him otherwise required every iota of salesmanship in my possession. Li Qin did not gain his empyrean post by thinking loosely, nor does he dodge the intelligent, often bold decisions complex issues often boldly demand. He eventually recognized the scheme’s alternatives for what they were, and sad to say still are.”

“Two of the seven alternatives you forwarded are . . . Unthinkable.”

“Precisely, You’ve taken the words right out of honorable Chairman Li’s mouth.”

The young woman said gravely, “And, my part?”

“You shall be my executive assistant, Sulin Quong. This Roxas is nimble-minded. He did a superb job of masking his fluency in Chinese, and we know he has other languages as well, including a nodding acquaintance with the barbarous Nipponese tongue. You and he will become acquainted when next he is summoned to my office, where you will compliment his linguistic talent, and offer to tutor him in our so-difficult language. You must, however, exercise delicate care in how you go about the task.”

“Must I . . . sleep with him?” she asked bluntly.

General Yee deliberated. “Siu Lan, you are blood of my blood. You recently endured an utterly distasteful experience among the unclean in order to perform a crucial duty. In good conscience, I cannot ask you to unwillingly accept this man’s flesh. The . . . romantic aspect of your liaison shall be left entirely to your discretion.

“On the other hand,” he added quickly, “should you find the interesting gentleman attractive . . .” Yee trailed off. “Such a liaison, should it come to that, would form an ideal excuse for having him accompany us skyward. It is my firm opinion that Daniel and his UNIA factotums have unwittingly sent us a gentleman of inordinant value.”

Siu Lan had listened not only closely, but analytically. Despite the clouding rhetoric, she clearly distinguished the “aye” buried within his subtle disclaimer, and her training came to the fore. She refused to allow her unhappiness to show.

Yee patted her hand in avuncular fashion. "Such unimportant details often sort themselves out. We shall wait and see, eh?"

"Yes, revered Granduncle."

* * *

All business, the Chinese woman doctor in the ground station infirmary was ignorant of the term "bedside manner." She tersely instructed a nurse to clean, disinfect and dress Cateel's scraped knee, and lacerated back, and proceeded to thump and prod him. Aware of his nodding acquaintance with Mandarin, she lifted the stethoscope from between his shoulder blades, demanded to know how he had come by the lacerations and cuts on his back.

"I . . . careless jump down."

The doctor scowled. "One would think you'd have injured your forearms, abdomen and thighs crawling over barbed-wire, not your back."

"Careless," he repeated.

The doctor chalked up her disbelief to the Filipino's faulty command of Chinese and proceeded with the superficial examination.

Pronounced fit and able, he was issued a cotton jumpsuit of neutral gray and escorted to the skilled labor contingent billeted in the compound opposite the one from which he had "escaped." Ignoring an order to keep the bandage on his knee dry, he luxuriated in a hot shower, and eagerly restored himself with a decent if monotonously rice-oriented supper. The particular batch of skilled emigres he'd fallen in with — Miao, Manchu and Uygur Chinese for the most part, plus a sprinkling of Indian nationals, Egyptians and Kurds from Russia's Caucasus region — knew not one syllable of Spanish. He spent the evening in the half-filled male bunk room fending off conversational overtures with brusque "*No comprende*" replies, then gratefully slept the sleep of the weary.

Allowed to relax for a wonderful day of inactivity to acclimate himself to life in the emigrant compound, he left his bunk on the following morning in a revitalized frame of mind. Feeling whole again, ready for whatever might come next, he congratulated himself for having dodged the Chinese dragon's initial fiery blast, and also for having correctly judged the lowly status of émigrés in one holding compound versus the moderately elevated "skilled and semi-skilled" assortment in the present one. The crucial, kill-or-be-killed main event in the sky was still weeks in a future, but that future loomed considerably brighter than during the frustrating time spent lurking on the mountainside. He had successfully penetrated the Mt. Beturan complex without a scratch . . . well, with only minor scratches.

After a breakfast of fresh tropical fruit, rice cakes and tea, "Roxas" assembled per instructions for roll call in the puddled, gravel-strewn compound. Huddling with the others against a remnant of overnight rain drizzling from leaden skies, he listened to the polylingual commands issuing from speakers installed beneath the refectory's eaves.

Those around him began to disperse in groups, leaving him to wonder what to do. Idling by himself in the compound, he was accosted by a squat Chinese woman whose belligerent, rapid-fire exhortations he was sure would endanger anything made of glass. Clad in a bright orange jumpsuit, the roly-poly lady made it clear with a combination of words and gesticulations that "Roxas" was to accompany her.

Stopped by the sentries at the compound's gate, the brass-lunged lady exchanged badinage with a pair of grinning soldiers, they boarded the tram for a short ride to another building. A pert Javanese storeroom clerk issued "Roxas" a jumpsuit of gaudy Day-glo orange, a white plastic hard hat, and fitted him with a pair of rope-soled boots with steel safety toes.

Instructed to duck into a nearby washroom and change, he rejoined his loudmouthed lady escort clad in the gaudy orange jumpsuit. His pretense of difficulty comprehending what she told him caused her to motion for him to again swing aboard an open tram car. The electric people mover wound around the flank of the dormant volcano and turned into a widemouthed tunnel leading deeper into the mountain.

Just before the tunnel swallowed their car, Rudy glanced upward. Early sunlight reflected from the thousand-meter tower's sheer, corrugated metal face, making the symmetrical structure seem to rise halfway to orbit on its own; above it, the four incredible tethers soared directly up toward infinity in a dizzying, diminishing vertical perspective.

The woman led the way stepping off the slowed-down tram car outside what resembled an old-fashioned railroad roundhouse situated behind the cavernous pre-staging area's gates. Rudy was brusquely presented to Sergei, the harried, middle-aged Russian supervisor Team Orange's noon-to-three pm load gang, who spoke enough Chinese to make what he said ambiguous.

A white armband stenciled with ideographs handed to "Roxas," authenticated his status as a member of Load Team Orange. He nevertheless made it a point to ask what the armband signified, and was told it permitted the wearer access to the space elevator's pied-à-terre only during the designated shift hours. Slipping the armband around the sleeve of his jumpsuit, he secured the Velcro closure strip and was briefly questioned by the Team Orange pusher, a Malaysian straw boss who greeted him with no enthusiasm until the new assignee related his prior cargo-handling experience. On this indoctrination visit, bellowed the Chinese woman in parting, he was to stay well back, study the proceedings, and learn the basics by watching.

Standing outside the roped-off bullpen ideographs designated a passenger loading chute, he had his first view of elevator operations. A hodge-podge of intel data gleaned by the work of others who had risked, and on occasion forfeited their lives, had provided varied fragmentary accounts of operations. Viewing the elevator system's brightly lit subterranean root, he felt privileged to witness the real thing.

The scene was reminiscent of a flat photograph he'd once seen of an archaic railroad roundhouse. Six spokelike passageways radiated from the central chamber, where the four great tethers were centered immediately beneath the tower's rectangular shaft. Of necessity, the kilometer-high tower rising from the mountain slope was roofless, open to the sky, and allowed minor spurts and waterfalls to cascade and dribble down from above, the runoff carried away by a circular pattern of drains in the center of the dished concrete floor.

Beaded with water, a departure-ready passenger capsule hung suspended from the beams and davits of an oblong accelerator platform. Below the platform, the four tethers vanished into buffer slots set in the roughened concrete, descending deep before tying into the monolithic anchoring structure. Like flowing rectangular beads three hundred and sixty kilometers apart on string-straight, parallel necklaces, a mixture of two hundred ascending and descending passenger capsules or freight modules crawled skyward and earthward without cease, with the master

computer meting out simultaneous arrivals and departures at precise hour-and-forty-minute intervals.

The longer he watched, the more his interest became piqued by the overall operation. Ground crews trotted about like precision drill teams. Members of the offload gang stationed to meet incoming capsules and freight modules wore sky-blue dungarees, whereas his prospective co-workers — the men and women servicing outbound units — were dressed like himself in day-glo orange jumpsuits.

Casually questioning a fellow onlooker, he was told that when the computer sensed a descending capsule eighteen kilometers above the terminus, a klaxon would start honking to alert the Team Blue standing by in an adjacent gallery. When the klaxon died, a beeping, five-minute countdown would light up winking digital readouts scattered throughout the complex, and at that point Team Orange personnel would abandon the accelerator platform and wait for an automated procedure to magnetically couple the outbound capsule to the ascent tether pair.

From time to time as the morning wore on, Rudy tracked an arrival by glancing at the countdown readout in a large flat-panel display. Precisely at the minus-four-second hack, the electric accelerator platform and its burden would vanish upward into the shaft, accelerating at four-tenths of a gee to a velocity of sixty-meters-per-second in precisely fifteen seconds. Sensing with millisecond precision the instant when the falling decelerator platform matched velocity with a descending capsule, the computer would depower and unload the descender from the opposite tether pair, and simultaneously initiate magnetic levitation pulses, releasing the orbit-bound unit from the davit's shackles. Bereft of its load, the lofting accelerator platform would brake at a punishing three gravities, come to rest against momentum snubbers more than a kilometer overhead, and begin a slow downward crawl. Diverted into an adjacent passageway-spoke of the ground station's roundhouse, the platform would be serviced by the Team Blue offload gang, then immediately prepared for reloading a next-in-line orbit-bound capsule.

In early afternoon, watching from across the chamber, he saw the decelerator platform glide downward into view, its captured burden secure, and ground gently against massive shock absorbers. In the upper windows figures could be seen stirring. Once the capsule's magnetic levitation follower rollers had been unlatched and swung open, releasing the capsule, it was seized by an overhead traveling crane, lifted from the decelerator platform and backed away from the tether pair used to guide its plunge to earth. The newly arrived capsule then trundled away into a branching passageway, heading for one of a half-dozen disembarkation bays. The moment access to the arrival tethers was available, an empty decelerator platform glided in from a branch passageway, was swung into place, and sent aloft to take station during what remained of the hundred-minute wait until the next simultaneous arrival and departure.

Even before the recently used accelerator platform had descended into the chamber and grounded, he watche his fellow Team Orange personnel swarmed to their stations, preparing to manhandle the davits of a waiting carrier sling. The loaded pre-departure capsule was brought to rest on a weigh platform to undergo a final computer check. Additional ballast in the form of medium-sized bags of lead shot were placed aboard one by one until the numerals displayed in a digital readout opposite the weighmaster's cubicle winked from 0.998 to 1.000, and a amber light winked green. The capsule's lower hermetic hatch was then sealed, the traveling crane elevated

the unit a half-meter or so, and it began a stately crawl toward the waiting accelerator platform that would eventually take it aloft.

Rudy cataloged every move made by the Team Orange members as they rigged the passenger capsule in the platform's davits with practiced efficiency, then retreated to stand in a neat line, hands clasped behind them, their rope-soled boots aligned along an orange stripe on the concrete floor. Pivoting sections of the follower rollers at either end of the ascent-ready capsule swung around ponderously, nesting about the ascent tether pair, and magnetic latches snapped home with audible clunks.

In passageways radiating from the weigh platform in the "Load" half of the service chamber, processions of passenger capsules intermixed with freight modules and a single flask-like, shielded unit stenciled with trefoil radiation warning decals waited in turn, the foremost in line suspended from the overhead traveling crane. The "Offload" section opposite was much smaller, since arriving units were simply trundled around to be serviced and readied for another ascent.

Rudy's escort confronted the waiting passengers after a traveling crane deposited the next capsule designated for ascent on the weigh platform. Using her brass vocal cords to good effect, she issued a barrage of directives in rapid fire Mandarin, repeated them in Maylay, and circulated among the congregation of nervous transportees, selectively distributing handouts to a few Sikhs, Vietnamese and a pair of Egyptians she had assumed unable to understand the verbal orders. She gave the linguistically deprived passengers only a minute to read the handouts, then unhooked and let drop the braided rope barrier.

A spectrum of apprehensive looks and grimaces overtook the emigrants as they filed aboard toting hand luggage, where Team Orange members helped them stow their belongings in bins along either side of the lower deck. One by one, the passengers climbed narrow spiral stairways at either end of the cargo bay, men to the right, women to the left; no children were in the present contingent. Rudy could barely overhear the amplified on-board instructions directing the passengers to choose bunks and stay in them until departure, after which privacy screens would be erected once the male-female distribution had been established. Any deviation from this procedure, the passengers were warned, would be dealt with harshly.

The lady's final warning brought a grin to Rudy's chapped lips. He guessed that when the brass-lunged woman said "harshly," that was exactly what she had meant.

At loose ends, he loafed through the remainder of the hundred-minute wait, witnessed a second simultaneous arrival and departure. Then his escort summoned him imperiously with a "harshly" crook'd index finger, and hauled him over to the mercies of the Maylaysian straw boss, who assigned him to "watch but touch only to help out" Team Orange apprenticeship.

EIGHT

Of one thing Magdalena Saunders was certain: she and her son were being held somewhere in the vicinity of a major airport. For the third or fourth time she had switched off the noisy air-conditioner and listened, head cocked, for a sound not totally muted by the boarded-over windows — the low-pitched rumbling thunder of a hypersonic jet taking off, or now and then the throttled-back turbine whine of a landing aircraft. Otherwise, except for the voices of her captors

filtering through the locked, bolted bedroom door, or the occasional faint jingle of a telephone, she and Little Rudy were being kept deaf, dumb *and* blind.

But what airport? Living in the Greater Los Angeles vicinity, she suspected it to be Palmdale International. Ever since an aroused citizenry had successfully petitioned for the closure of noisy, overcrowded LAX to air traffic other than short-haul commuter flights and private planes, the high desert reaches of Antelope Valley had blossomed into a major commercial aviation hub.

She thought back over the spiritless days and nights cooped up in the dreary bedroom, reconstructing the sequence of events that had brought them here, wherever “here” was. Boldly snatched from her home, she had been roughly blindfolded, though not before seeing two goons dump her unconscious husband out of sight behind a hedge. The remembrance made her cringe, and once again prayed Artie had not been badly injured. Discounting distractions during the terrifying ride — her son’s racking sobs, the hoarse commands of their abductors to shut the kid up, and herself in an admitted funk over Little Rudy’s safety — she estimated the drive to have taken not much more than an hour, a time span that fit the template of a trip to somewhere in the vicinity of Palmdale International. It was probably was a good bet, but even if she had correctly judged the van’s approximate destination, of what value was that?

Seated dejectedly in the rattan chair, she searched the smooth planes and angles of her sleeping son’s face, listened to the soft insufflation and exhalation of his breathing. There were times when she knew she was going mad, times when the bedroom walls actually did seem to close in around her. Without a hint of whether it was night or day outside, nor any clue to her whereabouts other than far off jet thunder, she sank deeper into despair that swiftly approached desperation, and the tears wanted to come. Thus far, she’d managed to hold them back.

That brutish slob, Lenny, drooled over her every time he entered the bedroom. Yet it seemed to make little difference whether she played up to him or stared through him in disdain, the slovenly bastard refused to tell her what the abduction was all about. A forlorn hope that her chance would eventually come, contingent upon ensuring the safety of Little Rudy, was all that occupied her mind. If an opportunity did present itself, she meant to take it, whatever the cost.

An indistinct clumping sound in another part of the house signaled a door closing. She reached beneath the bed, wearily retrieved the plastic cup and resumed her eavesdropping vigil. This time, her captors must’ve been in the hallway; their voices came through clearly.

“... oh, four, maybe five hours,” the one called Bob was saying. “I’ll check back in before sunup, Len. Need anything special?”

“Pick up a couple liters of vodka,” Lenny told his partner. “And some ciggies — those extra-long cancer sticks if you can find ‘em. I’m damn near out.”

“Hey, you are in the big bucks. These days, black market smokes cost an arm, a leg, a foot and a hand.”

“Don’t I know it. Listen, if you’re anywhere near Sunset and Vermont try Gus’s bootlegger. He sometimes puts aside a couple packs for me.”

“Okay.”

“Last time I phoned in,” added Lenny, “They promised to rustle their butts and get us some relief. Always knew that sumbitch Gus was two-faced. I told him both of us were goin’

dipshit loafin' around this dump, and he guaranteed us a break days ago. While you're there, hit up his number one boy. Tell him t'have Gus get his act in gear."

Bob snickered. "Give him what for in your name? You know how Gus operates. He'll take care of our problem if 'n when he gets around to it."

"Give his kissy ass helper the goddamn word anyhow," insisted Lenny.

"Okay, don't race your motor. I'll tell him you're ready to up and quit this chickenshit outfit if we don't get a vacation."

"Smartass me, Bobby, and we'll find out how high you bounce."

"Just kidding. See you later."

The thump of another closing door sent a thrill of anticipation coursing through Magdalena. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure Lenny was now alone, she chucked the plastic cup under the bed, undressed to the skin and pulled on the tattered cotton robe.

Dear God, she prayed, *please let Lady Luck smile just this once!* Nerves stretched taut as piano wire, she crouched on the edge of the bed, waiting for Lenny to come in and collect the supper trays. Having heard Bob say he meant to "check back in" before sunup answered one question: it was night outside. This time, when it came the knock might mean opportunity tapping, not Lenny coming in to ogle her.

The anticipated knock never came. A key turned, the deadbolt slid back, and the door swung wide. "Hiya, Sweet Stuff. How's by you?"

Pretending nervousness, Maggie gestured at the soiled trays. "We're . . . finished."

The man grinned. "Aw, don't say that. We've hardly even got started."

She drew back. "Shush-h-h, don't wake Rudy."

Blasco rested a hairy forearm on the back of the rattan chair, eyeing her with gelid fixity. He dipped his chin toward the sleeping boy. "That his name, Rudy? What's he now, three, four?"

"F-four, and six months."

"That a fact? Good looking sprout, too. How long you been married, Sweet Stuff?"

Maggie answered grudgingly.

Lenny clicked his tongue. "Seven whole years? Been doing without any for a while now, haven't you? I bet you're every bit as horny as me." Straightening behind the chair, he took a tentative step toward her.

Maggie surged to her feet, purposely allowing the unbelted robe to slip open. She gasped, clutched the cotton folds tightly about her, and shrank against the wall.

Lenny's bloodshot eyes were round. He licked his lips. "Kiddo," he said hoarsely, "you really are somethin' above and beyond."

"Keep away!"

He had her in a single bound. Ripped from her shoulders, the robe, fell around her ankles. He pulled her close, nuzzled her roughly, his scratchy cheek redolent with pungent after-shave lotion mixed with a whiff of stale tobacco. Then his hands were all over her.

"Jesus!" he grunted.

Maggie struggled half-heartedly, uttered a choking sob and wilted in his embrace as if giving up. "Not . . . here in front of the boy," she pleaded weakly. "Please!"

"A lot more room out on the sofa," said Lenny, "and even more on the floor."

Lifting her without apparent effort, he carried Magdalena out of the hated bedroom. Slumped flaccidly in his arms, she whimpered in mock defeat.

Lenny dumped her on the living room's brown corduroy sectional and began pawing her hungrily. "What's wrong? You aren't putting up much've a fight. I'd like it better if you'd got to battle stations." The man grinned lewdly, stood up and fumbled to unbutton his shirt.

The audio-only phone chose that inopportune moment to jingle. Lenny turned and glared at the handset. He let it ring a second time. "Don't go away, Sweet Stuff." Husky-voiced, hypnotized by her nudity, he groped behind his back, lifted the receiver. "Yeah? Oh, it's you. Listen, I'll call you back. You picked a rotten time to —"

Blasco flinched, clutched the telephone tightly. The lustful expression faded on his flushed features. "They *what*? They were at my place? Early afternoon? Chrissakes, you stupid punk! Why'd you wait till now to call? You and the other freeloaders haul your sorry asses out of there right now, hear? I don't give a shit if your bike's stove up. Split, and split now!"

Lenny banged down the receiver. Breathing raggely, he scowled, his panting no longer the result of passion. "Okay, you! Get your cute little tush back in the bedroom."

* * *

Rudy settled quickly and easily into the Team Orange loading routine, and found the work during a three-hour shift nearly as monotonous and uninspiring as monastic after-hours life in the emigrant barracks. Picking up the drill had been second nature for him, earning a few words of praise from the Maylaysian straw boss, plus garbled kudos from Sergei, the load gang's mush-mouthed Russian supervisor.

Coming off shift in the underground complex at three in the afternoon, he emerged from the communal shower, a towel wound around his waist, flip-flops on his feet, just as the barrack speakers crackled to life:

"Antonio Roxas, to Building Twelve. Antonio Roxas, to Office Six Hundred, Building Twelve." The summons was repeated, like all directives, in Maylay.

He dressed hurriedly, with no small degree of apprehension. He was familiar with Office Six Hundred due to the prior interrogation there by General Yee. Enduring curious glances from other shift-three Team Orange men, he donned a clean jumpsuit, combed his overly long hair, exited the barrack hurriedly and swung aboard an open tram car occupied by three chit-chatting Javanese women. Building Twelve, a modern six-story steel and glass structure, housed the space elevator's directorate, the upper floors devoted to suites reserved for top officials and visiting dignitaries. Along with the guards who had captured him during his "escape" from the holding compound he had waited in the lobby prior to his interview with Yee, taking advantage of an opportunity to study the directory, which listed the penthouse suites occupied by Yee, his Russian counterpart, Security Director Vlass, and another senior Chinese executive.

One of the soldiers stationed in the lobby accosted Cateel, who haltingly described the verbal summons. His eyes narrowed suspiciously, the stocky junior officer seemed reluctant to believe a lowlife capsule loader in an orange jumpsuit had been summoned to the office of any higher-up, let alone the general. Picking up an audio-only phone, the soldier jabbered for a few seconds, listened, hung up and hooked a thumb toward the lift. "Sixth floor, you."

Rudy tapped on the door to Yee's outer office, and heard a feminine voice say, "Come."

A piquant young woman seated behind a cantilevered desk in the anteroom waved him to a settee. She lifted her eyes in surprise when he announced himself. “Why, Mr. Roxas, I had no idea you spoke Chinese.”

“Only some, Miss. Not well.”

“Have you lived in China?” she asked shyly.

“No, Sulin. he learned Chinese in Singapore.” His expression neutral, China’s silver-haired counterintelligence director stood in the doorway to the inner office. “Is that not so?”

Rudy dipped his head. “Yes, sir. Correct..”

“How does the work assignment suit you?”

“Fine, sir. Whole thing go up into sky is . . . How you say? Not believe till see for self.”

A thin smile was the general’s response. “Many share your reaction. Forgive me for stealing a few minutes from your leisure time. You are here to take a brief test.”

“Test . . . ?” Rudy feigned anxiety.

“Nothing to be concerned about. It’s time we learned how much you actually know about the production of monolithic microcircuitry, and more importantly how much you may be able to learn. Aristarchus is literally screaming for experienced technical help.”

“Do much to assemble electronics in Macao, and more later in Singapore.”

“I don’t believe you mentioned Macao during our interview.”

“Macao also, sir. Year before I work Singapore docks. Macao plant shut down, many layoffs when business fade.”

His tone ironic, the general said, “For that, I imagine the influx of our lunar products was partially responsible.”

“Is true, sir. Much bad riots. Company not compete with cheap goods from sky.”

General Yee looked pained. “Please, let us say inexpensive, not ‘cheap,’ Mr. Roxas.”

The young woman behind the desk giggled.

“Don’t mind Sulin,” said Yee indulgently. “Easily amused, she means no harm.”

The young woman giggled again.

“At any rate,” pursued the general, “Mr. Alexiev will be here shortly. A technical expert, he is an automation manager in Aristarchus who’s returning to Luna after a sabbatical leave. Sulin is fluent in Russian; she’ll be happy to interpret for you.” Yee stepped back inside the inner office, hesitating before he closed the door. “You will be informed of the test results so that plans can be made for you, Mr. Roxas.”

“Yes, sir. Much thanks.”

Smiling, young “Executive Assistant Sulin” busied herself at the desk.

* * *

Having been coached in the fundamentals during arduous briefing sessions under Dr. Pastoria’s tutelage, Rudy sat down and nervously reviewed the cramming lessons on automated electronic manufacture. UNIA Asian Section’s physicist, something of an historian in the subject, had described how, early in the third decade of the twenty-first century micro-miniaturization had evolved to a starkly incredible degree — ultra-complex, myria-gated circuits interconnected by hair-thin superconductive traces affording near speed-of-light clock speeds had been successfully incorporated in chips smaller than a squared pinhead, plus nanotechnology processes resulting in “Mainframe in a Matchbox” products. But the quantum leap from ultra-microminiaturized units

to ergonomically sound devices bound for the marketplace had grown too great to be coped with by tried-and-true automation methods. oard's dielectric substrate material.

Adopting the rationale of step-by-step growth from ultra-miniature to macro-electronics, researchers experimenting with advanced additive techniques had eventually evolved a six-stage to ten-stage buildup of increasingly scaled "layers," with each layer's active and passive circuit components deposited by the same "sputtering" technique once used to produce only the microchips, a technique calling for incremental enlargement as each automated partial assembly was completed and tested at a particular phase of build-up. The completed unit, encapsulated in a hardened resin compound, transformed it into a literally "cast in concrete" monolith, but a throw-away item in the event of failure. Device failures became extremely rare, however. Monolithic microcircuit units not only tended to operate indefinitely, but required little or no maintenance. As an added virtue, the electronic products assembled in China's lunar factories were shipped down to Mt. Beturan via the elevator system at a minute fraction of the transportation cost normally associated with goods produced on the ground, and tended to operate forever.

A portly, middle-aged man opened the door and shuffled into General Yee's anteroom without knocking. Wearing a pained expression, breathing heavily burdened by a bulging briefcase, he groaned and plopped down in a settee across from Cateel.

"The blasted *tchort* sitting on my shoulders," he complained in Russian, "will not budge. Young lady, do you realize I weigh six times what I should?"

Overly sympathetic, Sulin said, "Coming home must be a terrible ordeal, Mr. Alexiev."

"Absolutely hellish! My feet hurt all the time, and my aching back will never be the same." Tilting his head, the Russian looked at Rudy askance. "Is this the man Yee mentioned?"

Listened to her explain Roxas' claim to electronic manufacturing experience, the automation manager examined Cateel's orange jumpsuit with thinly veiled displeasure, his brow furrowing at the notion of gauging the employability of a lowly stevedore. "Well, we shall see, eh?" He unzipped the briefcase, extracted a glossy flat photograph and held it up for Cateel's benefit. "Do you know the purpose of this machine?" he asked in Russian.

Rudy forgot himself and started to frame a response that would have given himself away. Just in time, he looked inquiringly at Sulin, who repeated the question in Mandarin.

"Is phase three step-and-repeat trace depositer, sir?"

Sulin translated the reply. Alexiev's curt nod evidenced mild surprise. "And what do you know of the process itself?"

Cateel waited for Sulin to elucidate. Trying to look like he was working hard, he fumbled for the proper terms. "Take phase two monolith one jump higher to . . ." He asked Sulin how to say 'finished circuitry,' and then completed the explanation. "Deposit active circuitry and component interconnects one size more big than phase two."

Acknowledging the response as correct, the Russian displayed sudden interest. "And the succeeding assembly process . . .?"

"Phase four autoloader, sir," responded Rudy in the wake of Sulin's translation. "Put in place, interconnect components one size more big than phase three."

Alexiev's bushy brows rose. He turned to Sulin, "Well, I must say this is encouraging. The young fellow shows a great deal of promise. Tell the general there are esoteric details he may be fuzzy about, but I believe he could grow into a valuable staff addition." Flashing a brief,

congratulatory smile Rudy's way, he gathered up the photos and papers, stuffed them into his briefcase and rose laboriously. "I must finish packing. Soon, thanks be to whatever gods abide in the sky, I will be back where a man can live and work like a human being." Waving a casual farewell, Alexiev shuffled out of the antechamber.

"You did well, Mr Roxas." Sulin's lips curved in a teasing smile.

"He say . . . I do good?"

"Favorably impressed, yes. He mentioned in passing certain processes you may not be familiar with."

As if in alarm, Rudy said, "That . . . not good."

"He also felt your language skills need sharpening," she told him.

Having listened closely to the Russian while continuing his pretense of not understanding a word, her mention of language skills puzzled him. He was sure there'd been no such comment.

"It would be helpful," added Sulin, "for you to become fluent in spoken and written Chinese. Learning basic conversational Russian would do no harm, either. If you wish, I'll can coach you in both languages."

Equally puzzled by young woman's offer, Rudy said, "You do this for me, Miss Sulin?"

"Why not?" she said brightly. "Here at the ground station, it's work, work, work, with little to do in the off-hours. Your inflections are a bit unusual, but you show a definite flair for languages. Russian is more difficult, but you've conquered the basics of Mandarin, so spoken Russian should not be a problem. We could do much during the days we have left."

"Days left until . . . ?"

Sulin glanced at the wall calendar. "The Artsutanov trade conference starts in two weeks. As General Yee's executive assistant, I'll be leaving with him in ten or eleven days."

"I go to Moon before, or after?" inquired Rudy.

"Difficult to say. Emigrant shipping will be erratic because of all the preparations and the numbers of delegates scheduled to be lifted up to orbit."

On impulse, Rudy bowed. "You spend time, trouble to teach me, I very grateful."

Sulin dimpled. "Good. If you're free tomorrow evening, wait for me down in the lobby."

"When, Miss Sulin? What time?"

"Oh, sixteen-thirty, seventeen hundred. We'll start in the cafeteria over supper, then go up to the recreation room in my domicile."

"Thank you, Miss Sulin. Thanks so much . . ."

Descending from the sixth floor, Rudy's image in the mirrored lift compartment reflected his slight frown. The attractive young woman's offer to tutor a load-gang grunt like him was not simply illogical, it didn't ring true. He wondered about it, revolving and discarding several rationales while walking slowly back to the barracks, trying to discover whatever hidden reason might lie at the root of her kind offer, and came up empty.

* * *

Special Agent Watson burst into Kapps' office unannounced. "Got a firm yea on the phone trace, Murray. That snotty kid finally talked to someone who sounds like he might be our perp."

"Blasco . . . ? Where?"

"A street address way to hell and gone out in the Mojave."

“Town of Mojave?”

“No, on the outskirts of Lancaster. I listened to the playback twice. Blasco, if it’s really him, sounded like he’s running plenty scared, about to jump out of his socks.”

“Can’t say it’s a surprise.” Murray reached for his jacket. “Alert Lancaster PD, Tim; the Sheriff’s Office, too. But hold back on the address. We don’t need big-foot street cops busting in, maybe trashing this one. Hustle up a ‘copter standing by on the roofpark helipad.”

“Right. Will you let Saunders know we’ve had a break?”

Kapps did not have to deliberate. “No, that’d be premature. Let’s not get his hopes up till this wraps. The perp’s been warned, and if he has half a brain, which I’m beginning to doubt, he’ll skip, which might give us our best shot.”

“You mean letting him run?”

“He can run,” assured Kapps, “but he’ll have one helluva tough time hiding. We know who, and at the moment where he is. If he scarpers, he could lead us straight to the other suspects. And if we really get horseshoes, we could collar the whole bunch.”

Watson nodded uncertainly.”

“Saddle up, Tim,” urged Kapps. “Make it march!”

* * *

Round-eyed on the corduroy sofa, her hands covering her breasts, knees drawn up protectively, only minor acting skills were needed for Magdalena to look petrified with fright. *The phone call also scared him*, she thought wildly.

“Quit messin’ around!” Blasco loomed above her, his features contorted. “Getchur ass back in the bedroom or I’ll drag you by the hair.”

The heel of Maggie’s bare right foot lashed out, smashing into her abductor’s groin.

Lenny roared in anguish and backed away doubled over, both hands on his crotch, then dropped to his knees.

While he’d been talking on the phone, Maggie had scoured the living room for anything useful. Slipping lithely from the sofa, she yanked the power cord from a wall socket, seized a table lamp. A naked, vengeful amazon, adrenaline exhilaration coursed through her as she lifted the lamp’s heavy ceramic base high overhead.

“Lousy bitch!” Blasco started to rise, still clutching his privates. “You’ll pay for —”

The lamp came down, chopping off whatever threat her abductor had in mind.

Maggie dropped what was left of the shattered lamp, dashed into the bedroom. With maniacal haste, she pulled on slacks and a sweater. “Rudy! Get up, dear. We’re leaving.”

The boy came awake groggily, and rubbed his eyes. Whining and cranky, he was difficult to dress. Maggie took his hand and led him through the living room. Blood was oozing from the fallen man’s left ear, pooling on the carpet. Not much more than half-awake, the youngster paid no attention at all to the crumpled figure.

Her thoughts whirling, Maggie unbarred and yanked open the front door, twisted the knob and hesitated, assailed by indecision compounded by emotional turmoil, she turned and looked back at the telephone. Run like hell, or call for help? It was a tossup. Her instincts told her to get out, to flee into the night, but logic insisted that using the phone was smarter than dashing blindly into a strange neighborhood shrouded in darkness. Lenny was no longer a problem; he

looked as if he might be out for hours. *Even forever*, she thought, not at all surprised to learn the notion caused few if any regrets.

“Sit down, Rudy.” She dashed back, lifted the audio-only phone and managed to punch two of three emergency digits when a black-gloved hand snatched the receiver from her grasp.

She opened her mouth to scream, but a second gloved hand closed over her mouth and stifled the cry in her throat. She found struggling useless; whoever held her had twice her strength. Wild-eyed, she twisted her neck. Little Rudy was in the arms of an abnormally tall Asian man with a hooded black anorak pulled over his head. A third figure kneeling beside Lenny looked up and solemnly moved his head from side to side.

“Relax, Mrs. Saunders.” The smooth, lightly accented voice was close to her ear. “You don’t know it yet, but you’re among friends. I promise no harm will come to you or the boy.”

Magdalena did not believe him.

NINE

Two dozen businessmen and women bound for the PRC’s Artsutanov trade conference — government economists of one nationality or another, investment banking officials and assorted financial bigwigs — disembarked at Pontianak International Airport.

Sequestered in the VIP Lounge surrounded by high-level strangers from the Far East, Near East and Pacific Rim, Katsugi Miura, the Nipponese intel officer posing as former industrial tycoon Hideko Matsuda had difficulty masking his impatience over the necessity to sit quietly and pretend to relax. His features impassive, he tolled the minutes slipping by with outward composure and inner turmoil. In slightly more than twenty minutes the segregated delegates were due to board the bullet train that would carry them to the space elevator system’s Mt. Beturan pied-à-terre. The veteran field asset’s inner agitation grew exponentially as time passed, although not the slightest hint of waxing anxiety marred his outward serenity.

Time was of the essence. The upcoming transfer of goods was the foremost dangerous element of his mission, forcing him to *will* himself to stop glancing upward in order to check the hands of the ornate analog clock above the arched entrance to the VIP lounge.

Relief flooded through him minutes later when next glanced at the clock. The time had come to make his move. He rose and approached the nearest escort, a nattily clad young Chinese whose carriage and general demeanor bespoke a military career. “I must visit the men’s room,” announced the double-agent in Mandarin.

“Certainly, sir. Through the archway, on your right. You may leave the dispatch case with me if you wish.”

The faux trade conference delegate shot the cuff of his wrinkle-resistant travel jumpsuit. A silver chain dangled from a band around his left wrist, with the other end secured to the attaché case. “I carry documents of some importance,” he said.

The escort blinked. “As you wish, sir.”

Miura paced along the corridor, his gait leisurely, and pushed his way into the washroom. A white-smocked attendant — a dour Laotian elder from the look of him — dipped his head in a deferential greeting.

Miura ignored him. At the end of a toilet row was an extra-wide stall used by disabled travelers. A peek under the door revealed neither shoes nor trouser cuffs. Miura's eyes widened when he opened the lavatory door and his gaze locked with that of a thin, youthful Malaysians sitting on the water closet's tank, his blue-and-white sneakers planted on the toilet seat.

The stranger eased his weight down to one side of the stall. Not a syllable passed between them as Miura unzipped his specially tailored travel jumpsuit, tugged open the Velcro fastener at his belt, let the one-piece jumpsuit drop around his ankles, and sat on the tank,.

The contact deftly wrapped a molded roll of putty-like substance around each of the agent's shins, securing the rolls in place with duct tape. Miura sucked in his belly and a larger, flatter roll was wound about his midsection. Two thinner rolls went around his beefy thighs.

While Miura hurriedly dressed, the contact used his own key to unlock the attaché case and insert four remote-control detonators, a timer, and a keying device enclosed in plastic bubble-wrap. The Malaysian gingerly cracked open the stall's door, peeked out, acknowledged the elderly attendant's high sign. He left the stall, and sauntered out of the lavatory.

The gelignite's recipient adjusted his jumpsuit and flushed the toilet. Lifting the attaché case, he exited the stall, glanced in passing at a pair of delegates at the bank of urinals.

After Miura had washed and dried his hands, the Laotian elder bobbed his head and invitingly held out a clothes brush. In the act of waving the attendant away, Miura glimpsed the folded square of flash paper protruding from the brush's bristles. Turning around slowly, he allowed the attendant to brush nonexistent lint from his jumpsuit, retrieved the slip of flash paper on the fly, pocketed it smoothly.

Effusively, as if anticipating a tip, the attendant began issuing compliments in halting Japanese, stepped closer, interrupted his monologue whisper, "Our friends have need of a fact."

"And that . . . ?"

The attendant waited for the second delegate to dry his hands and quit the men's room. "They must learn," he said, "if your secondary employer suspects you of flying a false flag."

"No reason for suspicion," whispered Miura. "I must go."

"Not yet. Return to the end stall, reopen the satchel."

"Why?"

"Better goods, and a two-hundred-hour timer."

"Useless!" hissed the double-agent.

"You will learn its usefulness," insisted the attendant, "when you read what our friends have written. Quickly now, before someone else enters."

A good deal less than delighted with the development, Miura nevertheless complied. The Laotian accompanied him to the extra-wide stall, where he extracted the timer and keyer left by the Malaysian and popped in a bulkier timer, a more compact keying device. "Now we rid you of this Play-dough," he whispered.

Miura undid the belt, dropped his jumpsuit again. He watched with hooded eyes as the Laotian ripped the duct tape from his shins, thighs and waist, and replaced the rolls of plastique with a more brisant form of gelignite. When he finished, the attendant hurried out of the stall. Miura locked the attaché case. Emerging just as a quartet of chatting delegates came into the men's room, he exchanged polite head bobs with the newcomers, washed and dried his hands a second time, tipped the attendant and strolled nonchalantly back into the VIP Lounge.

Later aboard the speeding bullet train to Mt. Beturan, he went into the small lavatory at the end of the car, unfolded the square of flash paper, read the short column of Japanese ideographs, sucked in his breath, went back to read the note again:

ELIMINATE UNIA ASSET FIRST OPPORTUNITY.
IGNORE ARTSUTANOV POWER COMPLEX.
RUPTURE ANY (1) SUPPORT TETHER & OTHER (3)
WILL FAIL. KEY 200-HR TIMER AT DEPARTURE
(RANGE >1.5 KM) & ARRIVE GROUND BEFORE
DETONATION. DIET CONCURS. HEART, MIND AND
SPIRIT OF NIPPON WILL BE RIDING WITH YOU.

Miura found himself perspiring in the air-conditioned lavatory cubicle. Reading the missive a third time, he etched the damnable wording in his mind and uttered a sibilant curse. Although not addicted to illegal cigarettes or other tobacco products, he flicked the gold-plated lighter he carried for the benefit of pleasing those superiors who smoked. The instant flame touched the flash paper, he released it and the message flared into a fine residue of ash.

He absently closed the toilet lid, overcome with sincere misgivings. What Tomono and his control officer at the Ministry of Justice were ordering him to do was not only next to impossible, it was grossly unpalatable. Targeting one of the elevator system's monster tethers meant going EVA in unfamiliar vacuum gear. How, he wondered, could he be expected to covertly acquire and use a strange pressure-suit? Worse, even if he did manage to obtain one, how could he possibly avoid being compromised by leaving the satellite, venturing into space?

The veteran field officer closed his eyes and pondered. The risk factor had ballooned by an order of magnitude. No, more! Nothing of such drastic nature had been discussed during Tomono's intensive briefing in Kobe, and he was certain that was no oversight. It amounted to thoroughly infuriating out-and-out deception.

Withdrawing a kerchief from his jumpsuit's slash pocket, he mopped his brow and neck, picturing the disaster commanded by the flash-paper message. Shear any of the four great tethers linking equatorial Kalimantan to the immense Artsutanov satellite, and unsymmetrical loading would cause the remaining three to acquire the full load and eventually rupture. Both the satellite and the out-orbit spacecraft inertial launch complex would drift slowly into space under the mild overbalance of centrifugal force. The failed tethers would crash down, wrapping themselves around the world in a swath of destruction and loss of life.

Murderous fury would erupt within the People's Republic of China. China's enraged autocratic rulers would react instantly, violently. The Mandarins — he invariably thought of China's rulers in that archaic term — would no doubt keep their lethal promise and rain thermonuclear warheads indiscriminately on the West, not hesitating to avenge the demise of their sky-rending golden goose. Not now, certainly; not when the cash cow procured at such truly astronomical expense had been laying the economic eggs China coveted.

Beneath him, Miura sensed the maglev bullet train's smooth, headlong rush toward the elevator's ground station, and wondered if its velocity was analogous to his own pell-mell rush toward a now very uncertain future.

* * *

"Dew neh lo moh!"

Sulin rolled her eyes in feigned embarrassment.

"Sorry," said Roxas sheepishly. "Forget myself, Miss Sulin. Chinese writing difficult."

"You're doing better than you think," she encouraged. "Practice every chance you get; that's how school children are taught. Continuous practice makes a huge difference. Hold the brush lightly, and recopy each ideograph and its variations over and over. Eventually, the strokes will come naturally, without thinking about how to paint them. You're doing just fine."

Yes, fine! thought Cateel, his frustration twofold. *If it gets much finer, they'll have to fit me with a straitjacket.* Doing his damndest to conceal a proficiency in the written language from Sulin, he had soon discovered hiding the ability from Yee's delicately molded executive assistant was no simple task.

That, however, had become the lesser of two trials. Every moment they were together had driven him to concentrate on keeping his hands to himself. During the weeklong tutoring sessions, sitting close beside Sulin Quong, constantly interacting with her, she had somehow evolved from an interesting, appealing young woman into a sensually enthralling goddess. He had disappointed himself by allowing matters to reach their present state. At times, it was all he could do to keep from jumping up and dashing from her apartment. Certain that a romantic liaison would be absurd at this point in the game, even if Sulin were to become a willing participant, which struck him as very unlikely. There had been no woman in his life for many weeks. Nor was he a monk, even if recent periods of intense loneliness made him feel like one.

"Try it again," urged Sulin, placing an encouraging hand on his shoulder.

Unable to think, his self-control withered and evaporated. An unconquerable impulse overtook him, making him write the phrase with adept brush strokes. He was instantly sorry, but by then of course it was too late.

"Why, that is . . . It's perfect," she said. The congratulatory hand moved from his shoulder to his bare arm. "No mistakes, not one."

"I . . . fast learner," He said, shifting away her touch that felt like warm honey on his arm.

"What is it, Antonio? Why so jumpy?"

"Is . . . nothing."

Facing him squarely, she searched his eyes. "You've been holding out on me."

"Why you say that, Miss Sulin?"

"It's . . . I'm beginning to get an impression that you know more written Chinese than you're willing to admit. You would have to in order to zip through that exercise like a professional scribe."

"Only wish it so," he said, his emotions churning.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what, Miss Sulin?"

She wrinkled her nose in disarming fashion. "Why pretend backwardness? The general means to have you schooled in Aristarchus. It could be a road leading to electronic automation supervisor status. Demonstrate every degree of proficiency you can muster. It could mean rapid advancement, a fat paycheck. What sort of game are you playing? Come on, you can tell me."

"Game . . . ? No, uh . . . understand."

"Oh," she said knowingly, "I think you do."

"Try my best, Miss Sulin," he said, realizing how false it had sounded.

Too sophisticated to take the bait, Sulin regarded him mischievously, a Mona Lisa smile tickling the corners of her generous mouth.

Disgusted at his inability to suppress the demands his body was making, he bent slowly and kissed the young woman. Her reaction startled him. He found himself partaking of a soft, tremulous kiss instead of having her recoil in the reticent, angry reaction he had expected.

“Forgive, Miss Sulin. You so nice, so . . . pretty.”

“It hurt only a little bit,” she said lightly.

“I, uh, forget self. You not upset?”

She smiled. “Should I be upset? If so, why so? You’re a very attractive man.”

“For a Filipino.”

“For a . . . For anyone.”

Abruptly, as if slipping from a precipice, he abandoned what little reasoning ability remained, and let himself go. His arms went around her, and he pulled her close. Their second kiss was longer, more filled with sweetness, more deeply felt.

Shortly before “Roxas” arrived for his language lesson, Siu Lan Yee had allowed herself a glass of rice wine and a mild tranquilizer, girding herself for a replay of the traumatic propositions and confrontations she’d been accustomed to fending off throughout the months spent in Mama Rose’s house of joy. Yet as at other times in her professional life, the unexpected turned out to be anything but unexpected. Believing herself immune to maleness, even in a man bursting with masculinity like Cateel, but the kisses had roused a thrilling flush of excitement.

Later in bed, she gasped at his bronzed muscularity, succumbed willingly to his attentiveness and inventiveness, delighted in his tendernesses.

Dawn broke over Mt. Beturan’s evergreen fastnesses before they fell asleep in one another’s arms, sated and content.

* * *

Carlton Daniel was livid. “A *problem*, you say? Rather simplistic, isn’t it? John, what this affair amounts to is an absolutely intolerable balls-up, not ‘a problem’.”

Dealing remotely with the great man’s overt arrogance was bad enough. Glad he didn’t have to cope with the irate director face-to-face, Pastoria waited anxiously until the director’s torrent of criticism flagged before daring to voice a temporizing rebuttal. “There’s no hard evidence that they actually have her, Carl.”

Ten thousand kilometers away in his soundproofed London office, Daniel broke off his tiger pacing, swung about and glared at the speaker phone as if it were the living embodiment of Pastoria in Tokyo. Although shouting over the secure, encrypted satellite uplink was senseless, Daniel nevertheless raised his voice. “*Hard* evidence! Good Lord! Is diamond-hard evidence required? Who else would bother to locate and run off with the woman and child?”

“Mightn’t she have . . . escaped?” suggested Pastoria weakly.

“Ah, of course! How dull of me for failing to reach that obvious conclusion. Let’s see, a slip of a woman weighing perhaps eight stone, further burdened with her toddler, contrived to escape after attacking and injuring the hulking dullard those duller morons in Los Angeles set to stand watch over her and the boy. Do you subscribe to all fairy tales, or merely a select few?”

Pastoria found it difficult to swallow the acid retort on his lips.

“Listen,” the director added harshly, “the federal police held in such high esteem by our Yankee cousins has ferreted out the information that the dunderhead Augustus assigned is a U.N. employee. Every U.N. office on the planet has been queried, root, branch, and twig, about this Blasco idiot, and they’re tenacious as bulldogs when a capital crime falls their way. Stonewalling has sufficed to quell matters temporarily, but in time they are bound to discover that the man was in our employ. When they do, he’ll be squeezed like a ripe lemon.”

“The report,” said Pastoria, “lists him as comatose in some hospital.” Realizing how lame the excuse sounded, he added, “He may not make it, Carl.”

Now beside himself, Daniel said, “How *extremely* fortunate we are to learn the prognosis unfavorable. John, really! Saying he ‘may not make it’ utterly fails to serve any purpose. I very strongly suggest that you speak to our West Coast colleagues over there, and insist that they do penance for this monstrous cockup. What we shall need is an absolutely iron-clad guarantee that the bumbling fool does *not* make it, but turns up his toes soonest.”

Pastoria risked saying, “He could divulge hardly anything of a harmful nature, Carl.”

“Oh, for the love of . . . ! I daresay ‘hardly anything’ would be much too much. Tying Augustus’s operation to our sordid business dealings Kalimantan would be . . . Please listen coosely to a fragment of sterling advice,” the director said heatedly. “I think it wise for you to stick to technical matters and allow field management personnel to handle this delicate . . .” Daniel broke off once again. “On second thought, you do have a dram of penance to perform. I want you to call Augustus straightaway and lay it on the line. Tell him he has precisely twenty-four hours to once and for all close the book on the odious business over there. Instruct him in no uncertain terms to use his star performer, should such an individual exist.”

Pastoria swallowed his pride. “I’ll get on it at once. Better yet, I’ll have Howard send over Magda our star performer.”

“A woman . . . ?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. Magda is *bellissima* — an understatement. She’s lovely as Belladonna in full bloom, and every jot as deadly.”

“You’re beginning to sound like . . . Oh, devil take it! Arrange the matter however you see fit. To date, the handling of this relatively minor tangential affair has been abominable. If Augustus’s people cannot manage a simple, straightforward task, think what a balls-up they’re liable to make of more complex issues.

“But speaking of issues,” said the director, abruptly digressing, “what I called you about is something of vastly greater importance. As acting chiefs of station, you and Howard must by necessity deal immediately with a delicate issue I detest even mentioning. I’ve concluded that there simply has to be a leak somewhere within Asian Section.”

“A leak . . . ?”

“Beyond any shadow of doubt,” declared Daniel. “There has either been a major leak there at headquarters, in one of our safe houses, across the pond in California, or God knows where. But, somewhere, John. One place or the other, and perhaps all of the above.”

“I don’t see how that can possibly be —”

“On the other hand,” broke in Daniel, his tone doubly acerbic, “I see quite clearly that you’d do well to argue less with the observations and judgments I choose to render.”

Chagrined, Pastoria managed to hold his temper. "If there is a leak, what's taken place could rest entirely on Augustus's shoulders."

"If?" sputtered the director. "John, I'm beginning to despair of you. How else but a leak? How else could Yee's people learn where the woman and her son were being held. There has to be a leak, and it has to be stoppered tightly, and stoppered at once. Do you hear me?"

"I'll sit down with Howard the moment I ring off," promised the physicist. "We'll do an in-depth review of all Tokyo personnel. When I alert Augustus in L.A., I'll ask him to do likewise in your name, and instruct him about the, uh . . . about using Magna." Pastoria fidgeted anxiously, waiting for the director to break his stony silence.

"What has transpired becomes crystal clear," said Daniel, thinking aloud. "Word was leaked of the assurance policy we'd taken out as a surety to guarantee our asset's performance. Yee's people have obviously cashed in the policy, biding their time until the clod charged with watchdog duty was alone with the woman and child, then bludgeoned him and carted off the subjects to who knows where. The police report mentioned one fact which may be the key. When the officers arrived, the house was deserted save for that selfsame dullard bleeding on the floor."

"I know." His throat dry, Pastoria's voice broke. "We received an encrypted telex to that effect. But, think about it, Carl. Here in Asian Section, no one except Howard and I knew where the hostages were, uh . . . Excuse me, where the woman and child were being held. The leak, if there was one, had to come from L.A., not here in Tokyo."

"Umm-m-m, yes . . ." The director ruminated. "That eventuality does seem likely."

"I'll sign off now," suggested Pastoria, "and get on it."

"Not quite yet," denied Daniel, once again in a huff. "I saved another crucial assignment till last. There is our asset himself to be considered."

"Cateel? What about him? We've no way of learning whether or not he managed to penetrate the ground station, let alone —"

"Precisely," interjected Daniel. "For the sake of argument, let us assume he was successful. Here is what I want you to do." Speaking slowly and distinctly, as if giving direction to a twelve-year-old, the director explained tersely, and concluded by saying, "I fully realize with what esteem you hold this particular asset. Should he manage to achieve his objective, he must never return."

"Now hold on, Carl! He's —"

"Think about it analytically," insisted the director, "rather than emotionally. Think, John! A successful endeavor by Cateel may indeed level the economic playing field temporarily, as desired. But should he be taken, the opposition stands to reap extraordinary dividends from the very assurance policy for which we're paying an exorbitant premium. I fear we've left ourselves open to precisely the situation we hoped to avoid by placing the woman and child in safekeeping."

"But, Carl! I don't see how he —"

"Were he to fall into Yee's hands," Daniel continued firmly, "the general would have in his patty-paws a truly wonderful pry with which to extort information that simply *must* stay under wraps. Why, with ammunition of that caliber he might even succeed in turning the man."

When Pastoria again began to protest, Daniel cut him off. "No, no! I shan't listen to any objections. Your protégé knows far too much, and is too susceptible to subornation, to ever return. I really won't have it any other way. Do we understand one another now?"

“But, how can it be done?” asked Pastoria unhappily. “He’s totally out of reach.”

“Um-m-m, perhaps not totally. You forget our friend Matsuda. Pardon me, Ishi . . . Oh, drat! Whatever his bloody cover name! We have Matsuda in place, do we not?”

“Yes, but he’s likewise unreachable,” argued Pastoria. “We wouldn’t dare message him.”

“Certainly not. Yet indirect as well as direct methods do exist.” Daniel smacked his lips, pleased with the astute nature of his observation. “I put it to you that Howard could slyly seek out one of his contacts at the Ministry of Justice and perhaps solicit an ounce or two of cooperation. Baste prides himself on being casually acquainted with several Japanese higher-ups, any one of whom might be willing to dispatch an obscurely worded message via the diplomatic pouch. What with numerous foreign delegations heading into space shortly, I imagine communiques of that nature will be flying to and from Artsutanov like starlings.”

“But,” objected Pastoria, “wouldn’t it be an outright admission that we ourselves have suborned Matsuda.”

“No, no! Not at all,” denied the director. “John, I fear that in changing professions you’ve yet to become adept at other than straight-line thinking. The PRC in all its wisdom has limited trade conference delegates to the designated representatives of eastern hemisphere nations, plus a select few from the Islamic world, Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and elsewhere. In addition to the delicate mission we’ve actively sponsored, Matsuda’s government has doubtless urged him to observe and report on conference highlights, plus certain sidebar sessions reflecting Japanese interests. I want you and Howard to put your imaginations to work and devise a simple, obscurely worded message only Matsuda himself will be able to decipher and act upon. Clear?”

“Obscure . . . ?” said Pastoria uncertainly. “And the gist would be . . . ?”

“Oh, I should think it might read something like this: ‘Your backup parcel contains faulty, invalid data and is to be forthwith discarded.’ Unless we are overpaying the former tycoon in an outrageous manner, and he proves himself just one more dullard we’ve unwittingly taken to our bosom,” said Daniel, oozing sarcasm, “he’ll surely understand such a basic instruction.”

“I suppose so. But if he were to, uh . . .”

Losing what little patience he still retained, Daniel said archly, “No ifs, ands or buts if you please, John. Do you perceive a serious flaw in my reasoning?”

“Uh, no. None at all. Howard and I will set things in motion, keep you informed.”

The answering silence dragged on until Pastoria said tentatively, “Carl . . . ?” Additional seconds passed before he realized Daniel had abruptly terminated the conversation. With a mixture of anger and disgust, he uttered a blistering Italian curse, switched off the scrambler, set the alarm circuit and locked the electronically shielded door to the communications center behind him and bounded upstairs to the office of Field Operations Chief Howard Baste.

Before reaching his destination, a disturbing thought occurred to him. He halted on the mid-level landing, struck by the realization that it was not only Cateel’s life he was preparing to collude with Baste and order terminated. If any more foul-ups occurred, Dr. Giovanni Pastoria, Ph.D., had a premonition that his tenure at UNIA might also be in jeopardy.

* * *

The passenger capsule next in line trundled out of a "spoke" passage in the roundhouse to be gently deposited on the weigh platform. The bossy lady superintendent issued her standard spiel, a polylingual barrage of commandments to the passengers waiting behind a rope barrier,

then circulated, giving handouts to those emigrants she assumed were ignorant of Chinese or Maylay. Pausing in front of “Antonio Roxas,” she winked slyly before moving on.

Rudy grinned. As a working member of Team Orange he had witnessed dozens of the brassy lady’s pre-departure sermons. This one affected him differently, since he himself was among the passengers awaiting departure at the rear of the boarding pen.

The present contingent was egalitarian compared to the usual complement of emigrants bound for orbital or lunar employment. Mixed in with the emigrants were multinational dignitaries representing their respective governments at the unprecedented Artsutanov trade conference. Something else also struck him as out of the ordinary; despite the significance of imminent departure by delegates, only one correspondent from China’s Xinhua News Agency was there to cover the propaganda-rich departure. His “acquaintance” with Sulin Quong, the general’s executive assistant, was the sole reason for his surprising inclusion in the collection of prestigious spacebound passengers. Accordingly, he hung back on the rear fringe of the queue, aware that Sulin and her boss, the silver-haired counterintelligence director, as well as a second Chinese VIP and the elevator system’s Russian security director, Colonel Vlassikov, had already boarded the capsule.

When the rope barrier was unhooked and allowed to drop, he shuffled up the ramp at the rear of the pack, acknowledging the grins and bon voyage waves of his Team Orange co-workers. He ducked into the cargo bay, taking note of the inward-opening hatch’s hermetic seals, the modular freight and luggage containers secured with broad, webbed straps to oblong, slotted tie-down fixtures, and followed an anxious looking Thai emigrant up the spiral stair, emerging in a narrow, low-ceilinged compartment, where thin gray coverlets neatly covered utilitarian double-decker bunks. At either end of the capsule, adjacent to twin spiral stairways, ideographs made it clear that the communal lavatories were not segregated according to gender.

He stopped at the first unoccupied bunk, plopped down his duffel and sat beside it per the brass-lunged lady’s instructions. A distinguished looking Korean gentleman hefted his briefcase, surveyed the Spartan compartment with obvious distaste and elected to clamber monkey-fashion into an upper-tier bunk. Behind the Korean, a dapperly clad middle-aged Japanese crossed glances with Cateel.

The flash of recognition was mutual. Rudy quickly averted his gaze.

The newcomer settled into the adjacent lower bunk and lay back, hands clasped behind his head, gazing with studied indifference at the underside of the bunk above him.

Cateel thought the distinguished former industrialist looked younger, more fit than in the flat photo Pastoria had urged him to study, and also different somehow.

Instead of the cattle car accommodations accorded run-of-the-mill emigrants bound for the lunar mines and factories, only two-thirds of the bunks would be occupied during the coming transit skyward. A pair of jumpsuited members of the Team Orange load gang came up the spiral stair and quickly rigged a nylon floor-to-ceiling privacy partition, zig-zagging it along ceiling tracks to screen off the much larger men’s section from the women’s quarters.

One of Cateel’s load gang co-workers waved farewell before disappearing down the spiral stair. Minutes later, Rudy felt the passenger capsule stir beneath him, and automatically pictured the traveling crane lifting its burden, carrying the capsule along the overhead track and depositing it on the accelerator platform with a discernible jar. Faint, conducted clanks and

scraping sounds announced the conveyance being coupled to the ascent platform's beams and davits. The noises abruptly ceased. A taint of nervousness began to infect the polylingual chatter going on around him.

A young Chinese stewardette descended the spiral stair from the upper deck. Clad in a light green jumpsuit, with a perky billed cap holding splash of raven hair in place, she moved between the rows of bunks, politely admonishing a few passengers for congregating away from their stations, assuring them there would be nothing to fear as long as they stayed in their bunks. A buzz of hasty translations followed in her wake.

She stopped beside Cateel's bunk. "If I'm not mistaken, you are Mr. Roxas, sir."

Before he could respond, the Japanese gentleman in the adjacent bunk spoke up. "Excuse, me. I'll be happy to translate if you wish. I know a few words of Tagalog."

The stewardette smiled. "Your kind offer is appreciated, sir. I don't believe it will be necessary, however. I was told Mr. Roxas speaks Chinese."

"Only . . . little bit." Rudy pretended shyness. "Where Miss Sulin Quong?"

"On the upper deck, sir. She asked me tell you there will be an invitation to dine with her during ascent."

"I . . . honored, Miss. Thank you so much." Demonstrating a pretense of nervousness over the impending departure, he asked, "You do this often, go up in sky?"

The young woman smiled. "Twice, sometimes three times each month. Don't worry, sir. For the first few seconds it's like riding a high-speed elevator, but afterward almost like being back on the ground."

The stewardette moved on. "Please stay in your bunks, ladies and gentlemen. We depart in exactly four minutes."

"Your pardon," said the Japanese gentleman, addressing Cateel with a show of diffidence. "I did not mean to butt in so rudely. It's just that I have yet to meet a Filipino gentleman who was conversant in Chinese."

"Was thoughtful of you," said, Rudy, playing along with the charade. "I learn in Singapore."

"Ah, Singapore! A most interesting city; I have visited there often. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Hideko Matsuda. Friends call me Mas."

Rudy exchanged head dips with the other. "You are gracious, sir. Antonio Roxas — Tony to friends. And you, sir; are you . . . How you say, delegate to trade conference?"

A curt nod. "I have that honor. And you, I assume, will take part on behalf of the Philippine government."

"Oh, no. Being here lucky accident. Later I go to Moon for job in electronics factory."

"I see." The other pretended to appraise his new acquaintance. "You look fit, Roxas. Are you by chance an adept of the Tae Kwon Do?"

"Somewhat, sir. I mostly follow Shotokan discipline."

"Excellent!" The other displayed restrained enthusiasm. "Perhaps you will honor me with a workout? I'm told we shall have time on our hands during the coming week in transit. It does not pay to let oneself become soft."

"Honor will be mine, sir." Rudy mentioned the compartment's narrow aisles. "Finding place for workout not easy."

“Leave that to me,” assured Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura.

Rudy lay back in the bunk, evaluating the smooth way contact had been established. A sudden jolt of acceleration caught him unprepared. The stewardette had understated the case; the upward surge was considerably more violent than that afforded by the elevator in any earthbound building, pressing him firmly into the bunk’s foam mattress. Seconds later, just as he was becoming used to the pressure, it abated with equally startling suddenness.

Falling upward at a constant velocity, the sensation of motion ranged somewhere between minimal and nonexistent. He exulted quietly. He was on his way toward . . .

What?

The buoyant emotion died quickly. In essence, he was on his way to do battle against astronomical odds — a clichéd observation, yet in this instance apropos. On second thought, ‘astronomical’ described to a tee the odds against completing the ‘mission impossible’ he had been blackmailed into accepting. He speculated wryly about whether questing knights had ever been called upon to tackle fire-breathing dragons one-tenth so large, or infinitely well equipped with fangs and talons. Never, he was certain, had any knight been asked to undertake such an against-all-odds venture barehanded, sans armor or weapons.

Lost in contemplation, he roused when the pert stewardette returned and evenly divided the lightly populated male bunk section into two groups, or shifts.

* * *

Working alone in a VIP cubicle on the capsule’s upper deck, General Yee looked up at a light tap on the sliding door. Folding closed the red-bordered dossier he had been reading, he said, “Come.”

The stewardette the sliding door a short way. “They just met, sir.”

“Already? Are you sure?”

“Yes, General.” She explained the circumstances.

A sage nod. “Good. Keep your eyes and ears open, but be very careful not to make your watchfulness too obvious.”

“It shall be as you wish, sir.” The stewardette closed the pocket door.

A shadow smile flirted with the corners of General Yee’s mouth. After a moment he reopened the document and resumed reading.

TEN

The renowned neurosurgeon flown to Palmdale International by the FBI had just finished an extremely grueling procedure. Very tired, his weariness made the response to FBI Special Agent Watson’s question sound noncommittal. “The patient is doing fairly well at the moment. For how long, no one can say.”

“He was pretty bad off?”

“He’s middle-aged, still robust in some ways, but he’s let himself go. Considering what he’s been through, the acute trauma and so forth, I’ve tabbed his condition critical but stable. All we can do now is wait and see.”

“I’ll pass it along, Doctor.” Seeking reassurance, Watson had obtained almost none. “Any chance of his regaining consciousness in, say, a day or two?”

Watson's persistence displeased the physician, and he frowned. "A day, a week, month, or perhaps never," he said irritably. "Subdural hematoma makes things awfully complicated. At this stage, a specific prognosis has yet to reach the iffy stage. He could make a full recovery, wake up a vegetable, expire quietly, or anything in between."

It was not what FBI Special Agent Watson wanted to hear, and he was forced to report. Yet he had no choice other than accepting the other's expert evaluation. "Thanks, Doctor. Appreciate you flying out on such short notice."

The neurosurgeon nodded, mumbled something indistinct. He punched the elevator button at the end of the corridor leading to Antelope Valley Medcenter's intensive care unit.

Watson yawned. The two Lancaster cops assigned to night duty, a brash recruit named Brandt and his policewoman sidekick, were stationed on folding chairs outside the extra-wide door to the private room where the kidnap suspect clung tenuously to life. Watson glanced at his digital wristwatch. Twenty to three; later than he'd thought. "How's it going, troops?"

The Afro-Caucasian policewoman's lip curled peevishly. "Up past your bedtime?"

"One way to put it. Be daylight before I get home. Listen, there's no reason for you both to waste the night flaked out here. The perp isn't going anywhere. Why not flip a coin, see who gets the brass ring?"

Charlie Brandt, the rookie cop, frowned. "Darn! Just when I finally had a shot at hustling Lubelle one-on-one."

"In your dreams, Chucky!" the long-suffering policewoman told him. "Drag out a quarter if you've got one. You're a born loser."

"Forget it." Her partner grinned amiably. "Scoot on home to your hubby's warm bed, Lubelle. I feel extra-charitable tonight."

"Mean it?" The policewoman brightened. "I take back the hundreds of nasty things I've said about you." Not hesitating lest her partner change his mind, she gathered up a shoulder bag bulging under the weight of her weapon. After an airy wave, she said, "Nitey night, fellas."

"Later, Lubelle."

Watson asked Brandt when his relief was due.

"Oh, six-ish, thereabouts."

"Um, more 'n three hours to go. Don't leave the door for any reason, Brandt. Use the john in the suspect's room if you feel the need. No one goes in, and no one goes out except doctors and floor nurses here in ICU. Okay?"

"You've got it, FBI. Oh, hey!" called Brandt.

Watson turned back. "Yeah?"

"Can you ask at the nurse's station if they'll kindly bring me another cuppa?"

"No problem. Black?"

"Yeah, strong and black, same way I like my women."

Watson chuckled. "Don't let Lubelle hear you say that."

"She promised to be gentle with me," quipped the officer. "One thing more, ask the nurse to bring a magazine, too."

"Any any *Playboy*," was Watson's parting shot. "It might distract you from your vigil."

A half-hour later Officer Brandt crushed the empty styrofoam coffee cup and set it on the polished floor tiles. He continued riffling through the stale articles in a dog-eared telefacsimile edition of *Time*.

Losing interest, he dropped the periodical and knuckled his eyes. Rookie cops, he decided, live in a sub-basement of the food chain. Routinely assigned to the dog watch with no one to yak at, or few if any to share the misery, he reluctantly put up with the fact that no duty could be half so miserable as squatting in a deserted hospital corridor, counting the wee hours.

He yawned expansively, and the only sound in the whole west wing was the creak of ligaments in his jaw as he gaped. He wished for a safe way to sneak one of the bootleg cigarettes tucked in his left sock. But a bull dyke of a head nurse had warned him and Lubelle not to “smoke ‘em even if you’ve got ‘em,” explaining that in addition to hospital rules and regulations there was too much pure oxygen about in the intensive care ward.

Brandt was concentrating on staying awake when Miss Universe in a starched white nurse’s uniform ankled into the ICU. He sat bolt upright as the vision drew closer and became transformed into a walking wet dream, and he jumped to his feet.

Carrying a clipboard and a fountain pen that looked longer and fatter than normal, the nurse’s flirtatious smile verged on the bona fide come-hither. Her honeyed contralto finished tripping all of Officer Brandt’s romantic circuit breakers when she said, “Hi, Officer. I need a quick peek in at the patient. Only take a minute.”

“You’re not the, uh . . . aren’t the regular nurse,” said Brandt, ogling her unashamedly. A faint whiff of atar of roses reached him, enhancing the walking wet dream’s image.

“Mrs. Borden was called away,” she said, “some minor emergency at home.” After a reprise of her dazzling smile, she tapped the extra-large pen against the clipboard, its uncapped end inches from Brandt’s nose, batted her lashes and breezed past him, pushing through the door wide enough to admit a hospital gurney.

From the doorway, Brandt studied the gorgeous nurse’s calves as she bent low over the patient. Even encased in sterile white nurse’s stockings, her gams struck him as nothing less than magnificent. He wondered what it was about hospitals and nurses that made guys extra-horny.

Hidden by a privacy curtain half-drawn around the head of the hospital bed, the nurse held a kerchief over her face, pinched her nostrils tightly shut after drawing a deep breath, and lifted the oxygen tubes from Leonard Blasco’s nose. Holding the bulky fountain pen beneath steady, she depressed the clasp. After a barely audible hiss, she jammed the tubes back in place.

“There, that didn’t take long.” The nurse swung the door closed behind her.

“Hurry back,” urged Brandt.

“I’ll come by again in about an hour. Stay alert,” she admonished, wagging a manicured forefinger.

“I’ll . . . try.” Brandt studied every fluid movement she made ankling away.

Less than a minute after the gorgeous walking wet dream disappeared, an alarm buzzer went off at the ICU nursing station. The nurse on duty had been talking on the telephone. Noting that Leonard Blasco’s vital-sign squiggles had flatlined, she stabbed a button.

Brandt was startled when a red light began flashing insistently above the door to the private room he was guarding. The Code Blue team erupted from closed doors, trotting toward

Brandt from both ends of the corridor. The orderly pushing an emergency dolly toward him paid no attention to Brandt, taking in inside for use by the medical team already in the room.

Open-mouthed, Brandt listened to crisply rattled instructions. He admired the precision with which the medics employed syringes, oxygen equipment and other resuscitation gear. They worked frantically for minutes.

The orderly came out, glanced at Brandt and solemnly shook his head.

“What went wrong?”

“Looks like heart.” A finger snap. “Must’ve gone like that.”

The most recent addition to Lancaster’s Finest did not learn of his close encounter of the worst kind until much later in the morning.

* * *

The ascending passenger capsule’s uppermost compartment had been apportioned unequally, the lion’s share of deck space given over to a combination lounge and recreation alcove, with the remaining square meters devoted to four cramped VIP cubicles. In the center of the forward bulkhead, tucked between small triple-thermopane windows, a one-man airlock chamber labeled EMERGENCY USE ONLY in three languages afforded access to the capsule’s ribbed topside. Curious, Rudy questioned the pert stewardette about the airlock. To the best of her knowledge, she informed him, the emergency egress was seldom used.

General Yee, his personal assistant, the Russian security director, and a third transiting VIP were quartered in the executive cubicles. In Rudy’s estimation, and probably that of the trade conference delegates occupying the lower deck, life in general aboard the capsule was too monotonous and communal. To the displeasure of the dignitaries accustomed to less plebian lifestyles, the passengers ate in shifts, slept in shifts, made up their bunks in shifts, bathed and spent their leisure hours in shifts, forcing them to mingle daily with the same standoffish faces and varied accents.

Shift Two’s Asian delegates were given to conversing quietly, most often while gathered around an ivory-inlaid board to kibitz the moves of polished stones in a game of GO that seemed to “go” around the clock. Plain yet palatable meals from the galley’s microwave ovens were served, with synthetic protein-flavored rice the staple.

Twice General Yee surprised Rudy by tendering an invitation to share a meal with himself and Sulin Quong. On the second such occasion, they were joined by the pompous Russian introduced as Colonel Vlassikov. The puffy-faced Russian, having apparently journeyed down to Mt. Beturan for the express purpose of conferring with Yee during ascent, looked down his bulbous nose at Cateel, and decided he had very little to say to a former load-gang worker.

For hours on end, amid the chatty hum and buzz of conversation in the upper deck recreation lounge, Sulin coached “Roxas” in Chinese, plus now and then switching to a few Russian phrases. To Rudy’s disappointment, no romantic interludes ensued. Sulin explained that for reasons of delicacy and “face” she could not invite him into her cubicle.

Workouts with Matsuda helped break the monotony. Due to the lack of privacy, and the inevitable presence of potential eavesdroppers, neither of them had thus far mentioned anything having to do with their actual reasons for being aboard. Despite being in early middle-age, Rudy found the stocky, distinguished looking gentleman surprisingly adept. Blessed with above average strength, agility, and quickness, even when pulling his punches the phlegmatic Japanese

gentleman lost no chance to prove himself a worthy adversary, in fact a dangerous one since he outweighed his opponent by a significant number of kilos. Not long after departing Mt. Beturan, when the delegates had been released from their bunks and allowed to move about, the upper deck observation cum recreation lounge became the social center for either shift.

The first hour of ascent had lofted the capsule to roughly the cruising altitude of a hypersonic jet. Enthralled by the dark blue sky above and glimpses of the dwindling ground and seascapes falling away beneath them, the oohs! and aahs! of passengers gave ample evidence of intoxication with the unfolding panorama. When his shift's turn came, Rudy found himself as deeply affected by the spectacle as everyone else. During his stint in the military, he had been blindly quartered in a troopship during trajectory to and from Luna, and denied the celestial sightseeing experience. A sense of godlike omnipotence overcame him the first time he stood at the viewport. The space elevator's pied-à-terre, and the majestic tethers forming arterial links to the ground, were obscured by the capsule's substructure. Looking outward, Southeast Asia's pastel greens, buffs and grays were spread at his feet like a relief map rendered in living color.

Borneo's eastern region, Sabah, and most of the Sulu and Celebes Seas were veiled in heavy cloud. Far to the northeast, sheened in sunlight beyond the Philippines, lay subtly graduated blues of the Pacific, while westward half the Malay Peninsula and much of Sumatra lay pocked with shadow beneath batts and swirls of dazzling white cotton. A portion of Hainan Island was the only visible dry land in the Gulf of Tonkin. He marveled at the band of ethereal azure glowing along the world's curved horizon. On high, the arching sky above now shaded delicately into deep indigo.

Rising from sleep with his shift on the second morning of ascent, he anticipated an eyefilling encore, made his toilet quickly, and hustled up the spiral stair to the observation lounge. He was grossly disappointed; both viewports were obscured by heavy metal shutters. At breakfast, a stewardette explained that while his shift was sleeping the passenger capsule had risen into the lowermost zone of magnetospheric radiation. The shielding would remain in place, she assured, until passing through the upper, stronger radiation belt during the third day of transit.

Adapting readily to the attitude and outlook of a former multimillionaire accustomed to throwing his weight around, Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura had used his clout to arrange for periodic, temporary use of the recreation area. In late morning of the third day of transit, after preparatory bending and stretching warm-up exercises, the bogus ex-stevedore and supposed former industrial magnate bowed politely to the circle of onlookers, faced one another, bowed a second time and commenced their hand-to-hand combat drills.

Even before breaking a sweat, Rudy had to block one of Matsuda's lightning moves, and countered with a *hittsui-geri* to the other's knee, but for some reason failed to adequately pull the kick. Embarrassed by what he considered his own clumsiness, he stepped back and held up a cautionary hand. "Apologies, sir. Something not right. My timing off."

Matsuda rubbed his kneecap. "I too notice the difference. Something has changed."

"Something has indeed changed." A conspiratorial twinkle illuminating his dark eyes, General Yee stood beside Sulin in the forefront of onlookers. "Physics, gentlemen," he said. "You no longer weigh what you did on the ground. Your heads do not yet sense it, but your reflexes acknowledge it as fact."

“Gravity, sir . . . ?”

“Gravity, Mr. Roxas,” confirmed the general. “The higher our conveyance climbs, the greater its radius from Earth’s center, hence the greater its sub-orbital velocity. Upon docking at Artsutanov we shall become semi-weightless, under microgravity.”

At first negligible, the sense of physical disorientation persisted, and grew steadily stronger. Shortly after breakfast on the fourth morning of transit, Rudy and his shift mates busied themselves helping the stewardettes rig safety lines. As the radius of their diurnal swing about the globe lengthened, the reciprocal gravitational attraction of the ascending capsule, and the planet receding beneath them, became additionally nulled by the increasing velocity of their semi-orbital “fall” around the equator. The “lightfooted” sensation increased and became more pronounced, affecting everyone’s inner-ear sense of balance; it made walking, sitting down or standing up something of an adventure. Familiar actions required a degree of premeditation, with what had once been automatic demanding forethought.

Individual reactions to the lessening pressure on one’s feet varied. Several passengers complained of dizziness and took to their bunks. Hardier specimens found the sensation exhilarating. Rudy and Miura tried one last time, then conceded to the inevitable and agreed to postpone further exertions until coming under pseudo-gee spin aboard the satellite.

After a skimpy lunch of tea, war won ton, and protein-flavored plankton crackers, Rudy climbed the stair to the observation lounge, where he hoped to find Sulin. Disappointed, as well as bored with the prolonged inactivity, he stared wide-eyed at the vivid diorama framed in either viewport.

The radiation shields had retracted along the capsule’s outer skin, and the perspective had undergone a major change. The shrunken limb of Earth no longer appeared to be “beneath” them; now it looked like the periphery of a dazzling blue-and-white globe suspended thousands of kilometers distant in space. The circumambient sky was flawless dark velvet. Minutes later, as earthspin swung the elevator system, and the capsule, into the planet’s dense conical umbra, the diamond glint of more stars than Rudy had believed existed were scattered haphazardly against infinity’s sable backdrop.

A light touch on his arm broke his trance. “Ever see anything half so enchanting?” asked Sulin Quong.

Tearing his gaze away from the starshot depths, he gazed at her fondly. “Yes.”

“Flatterer!” Sulin flushed. “Second cubicle from the end,” she said softly. “Try not to make it too obvious.”

Cateel smiled.

* * *

Murray Kapps swore a fulminant oath. “Heart failure, hah! The perp was hit with a dollop of hydrocyanic acid gas, or something very similar.”

“Come on, Murray,” objected Watson. “No trace of anything like that showed up in the analysis. The hospital staffers reported no whiff of anything unusual.”

“Use your head, Tim!” Kapps said indignantly. “How could they sniff anything? Minutes passed before the resuscitation team rushed into Blasco’s room, and he’d been on pure oxygen ever since they rolled his gurney out of the OR. The oxy probably flushed away any and all residual contamination.”

Watson said uncertainly, “Don’t be so sure. The coroner tabbed it plain vanilla cardiac arrest. That’s how the death certificate reads.”

“Horsepocky!” Kapps slapped the desk with the flat of his hand. “Your heart shuts up shop no matter what way you die. That young cop told us a nurse seen by no one else, a gorgeous head-turner by his account, showed up right before the suspect bagged it. A delicious blonde “nurse” pops out of nowhere, plays nursie-nurse for the bluesuit’s benefit, does her thing, and vanishes like smoke. Pure coincidence, right? No way!”

Watson said defensively. “Okay, let’s take for granted that cop told it exactly like it was. Why would a looker like the one he described be interested in —”

“Tim,” interrupted Kapps, “your mindset is stalled on ordinary, every day occurrences. You still seem to think we’re investigating a straightforward do-it-yourself kidnapping. Dump that notion once and for all. We’re dealing with a team of organized pros, not a collection of greedy-fingered dimwits out to inherit big bucks by beating the Beddington Enactment. Here, read this.” Kapps tossed a stapled two-page document across his desk.

Watson picked the preliminary lab report. “Saw it already, Murray. The lab’s conclusion is ‘No Definite Conclusion can be drawn’.”

“Don’t poor-mouth the report over the lack of a conclusion,” suggested Kapps. “Gaseous cyanide in the respiratory tract slams the door on cellular oxidation now, now, now, simulating simple cardiac arrest perfectly. What’s more, it’s virtually undetectable, forever and a day the favorite kiss-off gimmick of spooks.”

“Spooks . . . ?” The unexpected reference brought Watson up short. His brows contracted. “You think intel clowns are stirring this pan of worms?”

“It’s a distinct possibility.”

“But, who?”

A shrug. “Could be the Brits, EuroEast Bloc, any of the CIS flavors, Red Chinese CIC, United Korea, UNIA’s pack of do-gooders, or for that matter our own made in America cloak-and-dagger geniuses. Your guess is as good as anyone’s, maybe better. I’ve no real basis for thinking a spook show is behind the Saunders case, but one known fact keeps cropping up over and over again. The late Leonard Blasco, may he rest in Hell, was a U.N. employee. We’ve banged the ear of every United Nations directorate from New York to New South Wales, and gotten zilch in the way of a comeback. Zero, nothing but a ration of double-talk dusted with cholesterol-rich, unadulterated bullshit.”

Watson scratched behind his ear. “So where do we go from here?”

“Sure wish I knew,” said Murray Kapps.

* * *

Confined to their bunks one hundred and sixty-six hours after lifting from the elevator system’s ground station, the passengers endured a brief yet spirited surge of deceleration. Interested in the undocking procedure, Rudy tugged himself from the bunk when he felt snubbers absorb the conveyance’s residual momentum. He came to grips with microgravity quickly, having experienced it previously, pulled himself hand-over-hand along the freefall safety line and up the spiral stair’s curlicue rail to the observation lounge.

At first glance, the handling of on-orbit arrivals was an almost exact duplicate of what he’d grown accustomed to serving on the Team Orange load gang. Spaceside launch and retrieval

operations were facilitated by the bonus of all but nonexistent gravity, yet conversely complicated by the need for the load and offload gangs to work in vacuum. A towerlike, spiderweb structure of webbed, deceptively slender members extended half a kilometer “below” Artsutanov’s immense, counter-rotating island in the sky. Electrically driven accelerator and decelerator platforms simultaneously pitched and caught capsules just as they did at Mt. Beteran, but inside the docking terminus any similarity ceased.

Unlike the circular “roundhouse” chamber deep within the ground station’s volcanic substructure, each radial spoke of the standby passages terminated in a large airlock chamber. Clad in sun-faded blue vacuum gear, he watched the offload gang uncouple the newly arrived capsule from the decelerator platform and reattached it to the flexible shackles of a telescoping ram. In freefall, rather than servicing arrivals with a traveling crane the ram extended like an impudent finger, plucked the capsule from its tethers, and retracted with it into the airlock’s open maw. Absorbed in watching the process, he lost all track of time.

“Tony,” called Sulin, “planning to stay aboard?”

Floating at right angles to one another, General Yee and his executive assistant were clinging to the freefall safety rigging outside their upper-deck VIP quarters.

His grin sheepish, Rudy shoved away from the viewport and drifted to join them, catching the safety line on the fly. “I curious to see docking.”

“A postman’s holiday,” was the general’s droll comment.

“Much interesting, sir.”

Despite the absence of “up” and “down,” Yee retained his inborn air of dignity. “We have better things in store than sightseeing, Mr. Roxas.”

“Eager to learn new duties, sir.”

“You’re taking your first bout with weightlessness in stride,” remarked Sulin. “Everyone reacts differently. I was badly disoriented my first time.”

Having inadvertently given himself away, Rudy thought fast. “Is . . . fun to fly free.”

His expression unreadable, the general gave away nothing by saying, “Sulin and I will be tied up preparing for the trade conference. It would be wise for you to take advantage of the free time, visit the ‘G’ Quadrant technical library and bone up on electronic manufacturing.”

“‘G’ Quadrant. Yes, sir; I do that.”

“It will be very beneficial,” added Sulin.

Trailing the pair, he disembarked in a pressurized, pie-shaped gallery equipped with fixed handrails. At the apex, a small airlock open on both ends led into Artsutanov’s central hub, where a few stragglers among their fellow travelers had difficulty coping with the physical and emotional chaos of their first prolonged grapple with microgravity. Clutching the webbing of a net extending “upward,” they disappeared one by one into a tubular opening. Yee and Sulin paid no heed to either the confused dignitaries, or the frustration of attendants trying to assist them. Swarming along the safety rigging close on the heels of the pair, he pulled his way into the hub of an octagonal chamber slowly turning clockwise, carousel-fashion. Following his companions’ example, he tugged, cast loose and arrested his flight by grasping a section of freefall line, and joined them in one of eight alcoves interspersed around the slowly rotating compartment.

Sulin punched buttons. The sliding door she had commanded open was labeled QUAD D; inside, it resembled a moderately sized lift compartment.

“Feet this way, Tony,” advised Sulin, indicating prominently displayed Day-glo arrows. “The wall you’re facing turns into the floor.”

“Another ride?” he said, twisting about to comply.

Radial “descent” slowed until the compartment came to a smooth stop. Rudy felt gentle pressure on the soles of his feet as the doors slid apart. Confronting them were two tan-uniformed Russians wearing holstered sidearms and crimson brassards bearing Cyrillic text as well as ideographs.

Businesslike, a guard dipped his head to Yee, according the general a large measure of deference. His partner eyed Cateel suspiciously, murmured something to Yee.

“Ah, of cours. Thank you for the reminder.” Yee turned to Rudy. “We part company here, Mr. Roxas. The arriving foreign nationals are a matter of some concern to Colonel Vlassikov's security detail. Since lunar emigrant shipments are curtailed, transportation will not be available until the conference concludes. In the meantime you will be quartered with the delegates. The guards will escort you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Sulin smiled, touched his hand in parting. Trailing the general, she tugged herself along the freefall safety lines into a gently curving corridor of the satellite.

* * *

Officer Charles Brandt did not enjoy the paid administrative leave foisted on him by Internal Affairs. Although absolved of any wrongdoing, an overworked IAD had nevertheless put him on the shelf for what had to be political reasons. His petition for immediate reinstatement had been “taken under advisement” — in plain language squelched.

Thoroughly ticked off at the turn of events, he had given serious thought to resigning from the force, deterred by his older brother, a Long Beach PD detective, and his uncle, no less a lawman than chief of detectives up north in San Luis Obispo. Both, he knew, would have come down on him like the hammers of hell if he had tossed his badge over what his uncle termed, “The sort of candy-ass brouhaha that crosses every cop’s path,” in his case a mish-mash with the Fibbies only because the dead perp had been the primary suspect in a federal kidnapping case, and would blow over soon.

Idled through no fault of his own, Brandt had been staying with a cousin in Santa Monica, spending his days girl watching and body surfing at the beach, and mooning over his temporary loss of status. Late one balmy afternoon, he was getting set to pack it in when a curvaceous dazzler clad in the stringiest of string bikinis spread a flowered beach towel on the sand, flopped down, slipped a pair of shades over her dainty ears, and cracked open a book.

Brandt smiled his most debonaire, rakish smile. “Some knockout of a swimsuit you’re almost wearing.”

“Thanks loads, Cop.”

Taken aback, Chuck said, “How’d you make me as a cop?”

“Might as well be stamped on your forehead.”

“You don’t admire virtuous, hardworking policemen?”

“Know any?” she quipped, her sultry once-over speaking volumes. “At least,” she added, “I won’t need to yell ‘Cop!’ if things go sour here on the beach.”

Brandt laughed. “There’s compensation for you.”

One exchange of repartee led to another. Marcia, it developed, was a hungry UCLA coed leery at first about jumping at favors from cops. They ended up dining at Gregoire's, a pretentious, toney Beverly Hills watering hole catering to the pretentiously rich and famous. While Brandt could not afford Gregoire's, or any other aspect of a pretentiously rich and famous lifestyle, he had craftily calculated that a credit card gamble might end up netting another sort of gambol. Hunger for more than Gregoire's cuisine seemed to dwell in Marcia's warm, coeducated brown eyes.

Tête-à-tête at a small table in a cozy alcove of the restaurant, Brandt was fully occupied by Marcia's cleavage as she showed off by translating the menu's French delicacies. Listening with half an ear, a whiff of a hint of roses made him catch his breath, and look up.

Marcia fell silent. Following his gaze with curious eyes, she asked drily, "Someone you know, or are you Freddie Fickle?"

Tongue-tied, Brandt could not help staring at the blonde vision passing their table on the arm of an older, well dressed man with a thick crop of gray hair. The maître d' seated the couple in a banquette on the far side of the expansive dining room. Although her back was turned, the woman's long, silky calves, ending in high-heeled black pumps halfway convinced him, and his first glimpse of her profile was the clincher.

Officer Brandt pushed back his chair.

"Call of nature?" drawled Marcia.

"Back in a minute," he said breathlessly, and left the table. "Police emergency," he told the maître d'. Fishing out his wallet, he flashed his buzzer. "I have to use your phone."

The maître d' wordlessly indicated an unmarked door. "In the office, sir."

Brandt had Special Agent Watson's card in his wallet. He ignored the man seated at a desk in the office, lifted the handset and punched the number.

Finishing the call, he was wary of letting the blonde get a look at him. Instead of returning to the table, he made a nuisance of himself fretting in the office doorway, peeking at the banquette from time to time.

Behind him, the man at the desk said, "Heard some of that, Officer. There a story in it?"

About to say never mind, Brandt thought better of it. "You a reporter?"

"No, I'm with *Stage & Screen*, here to maybe catch a shot of celebrities if any —

"A shot. You're a photographer?"

"Among other things, yeah."

On inspiration, Brandt said, "Can you get a shot of the couple in a rear booth?"

"Yeah, guess so. Where?"

"Second banquette from the left against the far wall. See the blonde dazzler?"

The photog nodded. "She'd be hard to miss." He dithered with his camera. "Depth of field might be a problem if I shoot from —"

"Trash the foreground," said Brandt. "Tell the four guests at the nearest table they've won a free picture, compliments of the management, whatever. It's really important."

"Okay, but I doubt if —"

"Just do it!"

Cracking the door an inch wider, Chuck watched eagerly, cringing slightly when the flashbulb went off and a startled expression tightened the lovely blonde's features. She and her

companion both froze, seemed to evaluate what had taken place, and resumed their conversation, yet glanced at their surroundings more often than before.

Eighteen minutes after Brandt placed the call, Special Agent Watson and another FBI agent pushed through Gregoire's leaded-glass double doors.

Brandt hurried to intercept them.

"You sure?" asked Watson.

"Dead certain," insisted Chuck.

But when he led the federal agents through the restaurant's dining room, the leather banquette was deserted. Brandt snatched up a digital printout made by the photographer. In it, the woman's head was partially turned, but he insisted she was the nurse who had gone into the patient's intensive care room at the Antelope Valley Medcenter.

Citing the anonymous blonde as a most wanted suspect, Kapps had GLAPD and the L.A. County Sheriff's Office put out all-points bulletins.

By the time the digital photo had been scanned, enlarged, cropped and distributed, Magda was in the air bound for Mexico City, on the first leg of a return to Tokyo. She wore a dark fall matching another woman's hairdo in a validated British passport selected for her by local UNIA Chief of Station Augustus Franke.

ELEVEN

The lieutenant general made an effort, but he was unable to hold back his strenuous objection. "Mr. President, targeting Mt. Beturan hypothetically or otherwise is a purely political decision. From a military standpoint, knocking out the ground station would be child's play, and the PRC knows it. A lone cruise missile or smart bomb would cut the legs out from under their damned elevator system."

"Bilge Artsutanov," observed a fleet admiral, "and God help us! We might earn points elsewhere for causing a bloody mess, but when it comes to the, uh . . ."

"Hellfire and brimstone to follow," supplied SecDef, "as everything goes into the toilet. That scenario is more than scary, Mr. President. It's terrifying."

"It terrifies me every bit as much." America's Chief Executive looked haggard. "Despite the potential consequences, I'm also economically terrified of where we are today, and where we're headed." Sweeping the convened JCS brass with world-weary eyes, he said, "I want each of you to take a another long, hard look at the current situation, but not simply from a military perspective. We have economic stagnation, or worse, with soup kitchens beginning to appear in the major cities as well as many smaller ones. The unemployment statistics are staggering; they hark back to the last century's Great Depression. Worse, rioting in the streets is starting to take on the rancid odor of armed insurrection. Believe me, with a national election fourteen months away we'd sure as hell better take positive action soon or someone else will be sitting in this chair, and probably yours as well.

"Lord knows," pursued POTUS, falling into the well known habit of debating with himself, "I would be the very last to advocate a preemptive strike. We've come together this morning to review our options, which are pretty damned narrow. The bottom line is that we can either sit on our hands and admire the PRC's commercial stranglehold on these United States —

on most of the global economy, for that matter — or do something about it. And I know, not guess but *know*, that if this administration fails to come up with a viable solution of some kind our friends across the Atlantic are almost certain to seize the initiative. The net result will be identical in either case: some unwholesome degree of Armageddon.”

“On the face of it, Mr. President,” declared the JCS chairman, a gruff Georgian soon due to retire, “trashing Artsutanov would amount to a form of national suicide. Nor am I convinced your evaluation is entirely correct, sir. We are being steadily shoved toward an economic precipice, and digging in our heels, trying to tough it out simply won’t cut it. For the sake of argument, let’s forget the threat of massive retaliation. I sincerely believe public reaction to taking out the elevator with a wild west move would only make matters worse. Why not hold off and see what comes of this tomato-in-the-face surprise trade conference the PRC’s hosting? Last night the feed from Beijing made it sound promising.”

“I myself make it the usual artfully filtered news,” supplied SecState. “Xinhua releases are micromanaged to the last syllable and every nuance of meaning. Everything, so say the Chinese, is rosy. We’re told that worldwide economic problems are in the process of being resolved, and economic disparities will soon vanish, become a thing of the past.”

SecDef spoke up. “Mr. President, whether or not China is the ‘enlightened’ Communist regime it advertises, or a reprised ‘Evil Empire,’ the newscasts of totalitarian government always remind me of Stalin’s famous quip.”

“Which was . . . ?”

“He announced that a sheet of blank paper,” enlightened the other, “would willingly accept anything written on it, or words to that effect.”

After a brief introspective silence, a Marine Corps general inquired about the status of the prospective U.N. space elevator project that had been in the works since day one.

A disgusted snort. “We,” said the President, “are exactly where we were then, camped on square one, counting the hours on day one. U.N. diplomats have begged, badgered, cajoled and pleaded to be granted access to an acceptable site in this hemisphere. Every equatorial government in Latin America, Africa and Madagascar has been petitioned repeatedly. All such talks unhappily stalemated shortly after day one.”

“In essence,” summarized SecState, “only three options remain. We can keep our heads buried in the sand, take it on the chin, then somehow, some way, contrive to build our own elevator system. Or we can level the playing field — and suffer what could easily become the doomsday consequences — by eliminating the elevator system.”

The President pursed his lips, leaned on his elbows and patted his fingertips together. “A fourth option also exists,” he announced quietly. “A radical one, granted. I haven’t mentioned it because . . . Well, in some respects it’s a corollary of our second option. It concerns Ecuador.”

“I thought the U.N. had given up in Ecuador.”

“So it has, and so has Ecuador.” The President seemed reluctant to divulge the details pertaining to his phantom option. After a brief silence, he said, “U.N. Intelligence Director Daniel broached the issue months ago in a communique I’ve kept under wraps for reasons I’m sure all of you will appreciate. During the abortive U.N. efforts to kick off an elevator project of our own, research teams were dispatched to every applicable national government, but not until every linear kilometer of the planet’s equatorial land mass had been scoured, surveyed and

cataloged. The reports agreed unanimously: the peak of a dormant volcano in Ecuador offered the most ideal site for elevator construction in our hemisphere.”

“But,” objected SecDef, “their government shot down every U.N. overture.”

“True,” admitted POTUS. “It’s Ecuador’s contention that the area is not merely volcanic in nature, but that ‘dormant’ does not necessarily infer extinct. The volcanic site in question, so they tell us, also rises too near Quito for the comfort and safety of the capital’s inhabitants.”

The President pointedly cleared his throat and adopted a more deliberate manner. “Months ago, Daniel sent over the white paper I just mentioned, but it didn’t arrive through diplomatic channels. Hand-delivered, and in effect an unofficial document submitted in total secrecy, the ‘delicately worded’ UNIA proposal went so far as to suggest concrete action on our part, describing in typically oblique spook terms what Daniel and his henchmen chose to call ‘a socio-economic fact of life,’ to wit, that any facility or territory deemed crucial to national survival, and unavailable for purchase or lease, must by necessity be acquired by other means.”

The national security adviser had no difficulty reading between the lines. He leaned forward, the picture of earnest concern. “Mr. President, are you suggesting a military action?”

“I’m suggesting nothing. I merely related the inference forwarded by a prominent member of the U.N. hierarchy.”

Sudden quiet gripped the White House situation room. The field and flag officers seated around the long table exchanged disquiet glances.

SecState was speechless.

“Mr. President,” the JCS Chairman said, “mounting a military action against a friendly sovereign state is not exactly the American way.”

Murmurs of concurrence rattled around the table, although a false note was also evident. No one’s heart seemed to be in any of the low-voiced acknowledgments.

The President had earned his reputation for tough-minded pragmatism and worked hard to live up to it. Neither hemming and hawing was his style. “Be that as it may,” he said firmly, “I want an integrated scenario and an outline of prospective tri-service combat personnel, transport and materiel deployment on my desk before the coming weekend. Each of you will regard his individual work-up, as well as the integrated scenario, as codeword classified. Each of you will also be held responsible for personal oversight of the activities undertaken by your staffers and subordinates. I warn you, gentlemen; should one breath of what we’ve discussed today leave this room, heads will roll. That is a *promise*. We are going to take an extremely careful, in-depth look at our options, and I do mean *all* of our options.”

Long faces were the order of the day. A sober atmosphere pervaded the situation room when the meeting adjourned. Even the crusty Secretary of Defense, a gentleman renowned for his hawkish posture, left wearing an expression indicating a severe case of heartburn.

* * *

Stranded in the doldrums, Cateel resented the yellow armband he’d been directed to wear at all times. Wearing it restricted his movement within Artsutanov, effectively confining him to the quadrant dormitory wing reserved for conference delegates. Determined to hide his impatience and not make waves, he was determined to sweat out the indeterminate period of idleness. But as the hours wore on into days his determination keep quiet began to falter.

Other than inviting him into the quadrant's small gymnasium for hand-to-hand workouts made peculiar by the satellite's pseudo-gravity spin, his close-mouthed Japanese accomplice made it a point to ignore him. What with multinational delegates always about in the dormitory wing, any one of whom might be acting as the eyes and ears of Yee or his stiff-necked Russian security counterpart, Colonel Vlassikov, it seemed wise for he and Matsuda to display no familiarity beyond the karate workouts.

Lonely in a crowd, his temperament in conflict with his intellect, Cateel chafed through hour after hour of prolonged inactivity. Driven by an urge to get the explosives in hand, finish the job ASAP and depart the scene with an intact skin, it was the uncertainty factor enhanced by letting the hours to slip away in meaningless, day-to-day existence that frayed his nerves. He held himself in check, knowing it would be idiotic to do anything he might later regret.

Among the trade conference delegates, mostly prominent economists or elite members of their respective nation's diplomatic corps, word spread quickly that the nondescript person quartered in their midst was apparently a Filipino cargo-handler, possibly a spy inserted in their midst to ferret out reactions to subjects cropping up on various trade conference agendas. Others — aloof Asian economists, educators and government officials — were unhappily aware that “face” could be damaged if one were to consort with a lowly Filipino laborer. Therefore Cateel's conversational overtures, or the few polite inquiries he made regarding conference progress, were met with stony silence, or a less than subtle brush-off.

Artsutanov's arbitrary circadian cycle had been adjusted to that of Beijing's meridian. Most “mornings” he idled away in the lounge adjacent to his quarters, sipping tea and watching newscasts piped up from China's northern capital. Recognizing the propaganda-rich stories and commentaries for what they were, he paid scant heed to content, instead trying to interpret the rationale underlying each artfully slanted, government-managed news item. Every “afternoon,” per the general's parting suggestion, he visited the satellite's technical library. At first, a suspicious librarian noted the yellow armband he wore, and denied him the use of a computer terminal. Insisting that she check with Yee's office, he'd been gratified when the middle-aged Chinese woman, unable to mask her surprise at the response she had received, offered a profuse apology, and begged Cateel to forgive her for doubting him.

He spent hours in the library, first pretending to rummage through the computer database related to lunar electronic mass production methods and techniques, finding it an exceptionally dull subject. Between times, he browsed at random, intrigued to learn how engineering and scientific files, many labeled CONFIDENTIAL, or in specific instances MOST SECRET, could be accessed at will. Surfing the master index, he punched up one voluminous file after another, and eventually stumbled across a treasure trove of esoteric data Pastoria and every other Western technical expert would have drooled over. Files comprehensively defined the elevator's provenance and pedigree, providing a cumulative, all-inclusive roadmap into the sky. A surfeit of engineering drawings and specifications described in voluminous detail the keys to the kingdom of space.

Frustrated because he lacked the technical background necessary to acquire an in-depth understanding of the data he reviewed, he gleaned what he could from mechanical and electrical data, diagrams, drawings and skipped endless pages of esoteric formulae, portions of which were handwritten transcripts enumerating tensile strengths, complex forcing functions, parameters of

usage, and so forth. One whole section delineated the diverse conceptual studies leading to the elevator's final design, plus a subsection devoted to cataloging and critiquing the blind paths and oversights which had spurred further studies and corrective actions.

He skimmed frame after frame of detailed assembly and maintenance instructions, page after page of cautionary notes and comments, failure analysis reports, dissertations pro and con regarding specific design features, as well as comprehensive detail drawings of Artsutanov's structural elements. Bewildered by the snowstorm of heretofore confidential information, most of which admittedly went far over his head, he settled down, searched for and eventually found what he'd been looking for: an index that provided a keyed guide-path to discrete segments and elements of the complex elevator system.

He studied the material, learning as much as he was able to digest. But when he tried to punch up information about satellite operations, an error message flashing in the flat-panel display requested his password and thumbprint, denying him access.

While reading and taking notes, he had sensed the suspicious head librarian keeping a discreet eye on his activities. The woman finally gathered the courage to dare a second call to General Yee's office, relating that "the Filipino person" was not researching lunar electronic production, but spending hours digging into the elevator data, some of it highly classified.

Yee's aide, Major Woo, informed the general of the call. Amused, Yee said, "Tell the librarian she is not to concern herself, or interfere with the 'Filipino person's' activities in any way. We shall allow Daniel's asset free rein to do as he pleases."

"Give him sufficient rope?" suggested Woo.

"Just so." Yee smiled. His chief aide was one of very few individuals with full knowledge of Operation Quench. "More than enough, and then some."

* * *

"Whoever she is," reported Murray Kapps, speaking to the FBI Deputy Director over the agency's secure satellite uplink, "that blonde beauty has to be some tough cookie. We grilled Gus Franke, UNIA's SoCal chief of station for hours. Couldn't shake his ridiculous story, or make a dent in it. He's a pro. Stuck to the incredible tale, insisting that the blonde he dragged into the restaurant that evening was a pickup he happened to score with."

"You didn't buy that."

"No way," replied Kapps without hesitation.

"Hmm-m-m, she's long gone."

"A virtual certainty," said Murray. "No reason to doubt that young Lancaster cop's tale. I had the photo scanned and you've seen the blow-up. Catch is, our computer search of every known intel op and moonlighter in either hemisphere turned up zero in the way of a match, nor did the set of prints our forensic lab dusted off the restaurant wineglass."

"Which makes her . . . out of bounds." The deputy director's vidicom image wore a thoughtful expression.

"That was my conclusion," said Kapps. "But maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of Far East spooks we have on record are either Asian or Eurasian," said Kapps. "The pretty lady in that photo is Caucasian to the nines. She was dining with Gus, and the obvious conclusion is that UNIA runs her."

The deputy director sounded indecently perturbed. "Sweet Jesus! Don't tell me we've run into a political circus."

"Could very well be," admitted Kapps. "Here's the clincher. We learned early on that the deceased suspect was a U.N. employee and . . . Now, get this: the kidnap victim's older brother is *also* employed by some U.N. root, branch or twig. We've queried every office pole-to-pole, including UNIA HQ in London headquarters, where I spoke directly he head man's snotty aide, someone named Stephens. He clammed up tight as a drumhead. Wouldn't say boo."

The deputy director asked how long the victim's brother had been with the U.N.

"Years. Five, at least, probably more according to the husband."

The senior FBI executive was silent for a number of heartbeats. "Murray, your franchise in a nutshell is to stay on top of this case all the way to the end of the road. Chase down every lead, no matter how thin or off-base. The Bureau sure as hell doesn't need to get mired in U.N. political sewage, but politics or no politics we need this one cleared and filed away. Follow it no matter where it leads, no matter how long it takes."

"We'll get it done," assured Kapps.

* * *

Still at loose ends, stricken with a strong impulse to take action while quarantined, Cateel wondered how long the static situation would persist. He was picking at a solitary meal in the all but deserted refectory when the now-familiar accomplice he knew as Hideko Matsuda selected a plastic tray, slid it along the counter, and wordlessly pointed to this or that item under the lexan partition, and watched the servers dole out items from the luncheon menu. He approached carrying the tray and a squeezebottle of tea designed for easy consumption under microgravity, or in the present case pseudo-gravity spin. "May I join you, Roxas?"

"Is pleasure," gargled Rudy, surprised to see the other while the trade conference was in session. Less than careful about swallowing a mouthful of *Chai*, he coughed, cleared his throat. "Excuse, please. Eating, drinking different here."

With a laconic nod, the other chose a seat across the table. Unheralded contact by the distinguished former business magnate made Rudy feel uneasy. Except when being summoned to the quadrant's small gymnasium under spin in, Matsuda had kept his distance.

Matsuda laid the plastic utensils supplied by the servers on a rice paper napkin, and with precise movements used chopsticks to begin eating. Consuming victuals at a steady, machine-like pace, he curtly grunted monosyllabic responses when Cateel tried to make conversation.

The supposed delegate finished his lunch, dabbed his lips with a rice paper napkin and swiveled left, swiveled right, appraising the scattered diners at other tables. Covering his lips, he spoke through the napkin. "*Señor Roxas*," he said in oddly accented Spanish, "I have for you a package ready for delivery. We must invent some safe way to make the hand off."

Cateel stiffened, his pulse quickening. He let the squeezebottle's nipple slipped from his lips. "*Seguro*. Yet wouldit be wise to . . . ?"

"No idle chatter," insisted the other sharply. "One supposes few here know a word of Spanish, but we cannot be sure. Our mutual acquaintances drilled me on a specific method of making delivery. I intend to carry out their instructions verbatim."

Rudy forced a grin for the benefit of onlookers, not to mention the likelihood of remote surveillance. Pushing aside his dinner tray, he waved his hands as if to emphasize the point he

was supposedly making, and said in a monotone, “I was shown a flat photo of you. It assures me you are indeed who you say, and yet —”

“We all look alike, eh?” Favoring Cateel with a toothy shark’s grin, Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura nodded as if agreeing with whatever had been said. Again touching the rice paper napkin to his lips, he said, “Suspicion is prudent. Shall I confirm my bona fides, *Señor* Cateel?”

Rudy flinched.

“Relax,” advised the other. “I was told that you served with the 33rd U.N. High Rangers, Lunar Command, under a Captain Preminger. The platoon sergeant who recommended you for a field commission was a career non-commissioned officer named Blount. You have been in Daniel’s Asian Section more than five years. Is that sufficient?”

Sufficient, thought Rudy, still in shock, *to hang me out to dry.* “How and where,” he asked woodenly, “will the exchange take place?”

“Kilos of the goods in question, plus detonators and timers, are in a safe place now, but would not have passed metal or explosives detection at Narita International. The hand-over took place in Pontianak. Juggling the goods between my person and luggage has been unsettling.”

“The end-game scenario,” declared Cateel, “was still fluid when I left Tokyo. Teamwork will double our chances, so I assume you will be —”

“No, no,” interjected the other quickly. “I will make the agreed-upon delivery, period. I am here to attend the conference and investigate any side sessions of interest to my government or our mutual friends. I plan to return to the ground with the other delegates.”

“Understood.”

“Your primary target was only loosely described,” continued Matsuda in a stage whisper, “as Artsutanov’s power distribution complex. The timers can be set for up to forty-eight hours.”

“That’s it, just two days?”

“A slender getaway margin, granted,” conceded the other. “With luck, you should be in space, en route to the Moon, when power terminates. A dead drop in Aristarchus will furnish details of your rendezvous in the open mare south of Procellarum Space Terminal. Securing vacuum gear and finding an exit path from the Aristarchus complex should pose only a minor problem. You will be dropped off at Sinus Iridum, and from thence take ship for home.” He flashed a second sharklike grin. “Once back in Tokyo, we shall investigate your tolerance for geishas and sake, eh?”

His thoughts gyrating wildly, Rudy chewed over the ramifications of what he’d learned, and in no time became aware of loopholes and lacunae in the other’s statement. Outwardly the man had nothing to sell except genuineness, yet a false note of some kind had obtruded during the discourse in Spanish that was at a sharp contrast with his air of glib self-assurance. Rudy could not help but wonder where and why a once wealthy Japanese industrialist had taken the trouble to become fluent in any of the Latin languages. In another way, however, it was reassured him to learn his accomplice knew far too much, in far too great a detail, to have obtained the information from anywhere except UNIA. He tried to pin down a basis for the intuitive feeling of misplaced confidence that had overcome him, and came up empty. “Are you familiar with the power complex layout?” he asked to draw out the other.

A negative headshake. "Not yet, no. A conducted tour of the satellite has been arranged for groups of delegates. It will presumably include the power distribution center, and I will be happy to relay whatever information I'm able to gather."

"Is your group scheduled for the tour?"

"Tomorrow, yes."

"I've been digging into the satellite's technical library," said Rudy, "trying to learn what little I'm able to understand. But the operational data is highly classified. I assume you were informed of the backup target."

Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura dismissed the notion. Urging Cateel to forget about the radioactive waste disposal system, he described the handling of "hot" material as totally automated. In his opinion, any attempt to tamper with sealed, shielded containers filled with depleted isotope fuel would be not only impractical, but potentially suicidal. "Also," he concluded, "I am certain ultra-tight security prevails out at the spacecraft launch terminus. Neither of us would be given a chance to accomplish anything of value out there."

Much as he detested being talked down to, Rudy sublimated his irritation and absorbed the input, concentrating on facts. It all sounded plausible, feeling more or less right, yet did nothing to alleviate his subliminal qualms. Matsuda seemed far too self-assured and knowledgeable for his message to be swallowed without salt. His manner alone tended to reinforce that undefined doubt, though on the surface such suspicion seemed groundless.

What troubled him most was that Matsuda possessed information which, if revealed, would destroy him instantly. However, should the other's revelation prove as advertised, it meant the Artsutanov dragon might be more susceptible to a surprise thrust than he had imagined.

Trapped in quarantine, he was in no position to quibble about the data, or for that matter about the man himself, and decided to carry on exactly as had been suggested.

His accomplice had been studying him with an air of cool, detached condescension. "The optimum time to act," he said, "will be immediately after the trade conference concludes. You will hold yourself in readiness until then, eh?"

Lost in thought, Rudy did not respond.

"Stay prepared!" said the other forcefully. "*¿Comprende, Señor Roxas?*"

"*Si, Señor Matsuda. Estaré listo.*"

* * *

The audio-only bedside telephone rang twice before Arthur Saunders managed to rouse himself from fitful, medication-induced slumber. After thrashing and twisting about for more than a sleepless hour, he had risen, stumbled into the bathroom and choked down yet another sleepy pill. The only rest he seemed able to get was by downing the damned pills, but he had taken so many during recent weeks the damn things no longer did their job.

Switching on a table lamp, he knuckled burning eyes, squinted at the digital clock's amber readout — ten minutes to four. The phone had rung a third time, and now a fourth. He hesitated, half-afraid to answer it. The caller had to be that FBI man, Kapps. Who else would ring him in the middle of the night? Lifting the receiver gingerly, dreading to hear the bad news intuition told him was inevitable, he mumbled, "Yes?"

"Art, it's me."

“Maggie!” Saunders’ brain exploded into full wakefulness, and his bare feet hit the carpet. Clutching the receiver with white knuckles, he cried, “My God! Where are you? Is Little Rudy with you? Are both of you all right?”

“Rudy’s fine. We’re both fine.” Magdalena sounded breathless, harried. “Listen carefully, Art, and do as I say. Go to a public phone and call this number.” She read off a string of digits.

“Phone booth, hell! Where are you? What’s going on?”

“Don’t ask,” she said. “Have you the number?”

“Yes, but you have to —”

She interrupted by repeating the number he was to call, then disconnected without a farewell or another word.

Saunders uttered a jubilant curse, jammed his feet into bedroom slippers, grabbed his wallet and keychain from the atop the bureau, and as an afterthought scooped a handful of coins from the pseudo-Mayan pot he and Maggie had picked up on vacation in Cozumel. Dumping the loose change into the breast pocket of his pajamas, he dashed into the hall, seized a windbreaker from the entry closet’s autovalet, wrenched open the front door, and swore luridly.

The rain-slick driveway and street reflected shattered slivers of streetlight brilliance. Too impatient to back Maggie’s electric SUV out of the garage, he exchanged the jacket for a topcoat, hurriedly threw it over his shoulders and splashed three blocks in his slippers to an all-night convenience store a few blocks from Sunset Boulevard, and shoved his way through the glass door so hard it banged against the stop.

A bearded young man behind the counter glanced up from his *Racing Form* and watched Art stuff coins into the pay phone. Frantically punching the number Maggie had supplied, he waited for a “Hello.” Instead, a delicately accented male voice said, “Mr. Saunders, you are to call the following number at once. Do not delay for any reason.”

“Who is this? Look, I’ll promise anything you say! Just tell me how to get Maggie back.”

“Please,” urged the fragile voice, “we have only seconds. You may speak to your wife directly if you call the following number.” He read off the digits again more slowly. “It would be wise of you to use a different pay phone.”

“That area code is, uh,” said Art uncertainly.

“Do it now, Mr Saunders.” A faint click ended the conversation.

Like hell another pay phone! Wired as he was, Art was not about to slop off in search of a different public phone when a perfectly good one was in front of him. He yanked the plastic calling card from his wallet, ran the magnetic stripe through the slot with trembling fingers, and punched buttons with frantic haste.

Answering on the first ring, Maggie wasted no words. “Art, recall our last vacation?”

“Our what . . . ?”

“Vacation, darling. Think!”

“You mean when we drove up to —”

“Don’t say it,” she snapped. “Remember where we went for espresso after the play?”

“Uh, yeah. The coffee shop a few blocks from that theater-in-the-round we —”

“Right! Meet me there tomorrow night between nine and nine-thirty.”

“Wait, Mag,” he said in desperation. “If you’re free to call, why not let me come and —”

“Don’t argue; it has to be this way. Can you get there?”

"Sure, but tell me what this nightmare's all about. You're sure Little Rudy's okay?"

"He's fine," she said, "and can't wait to see his daddy. It's big Rudy who's in trouble."

"Your *brother's* mixed up in this?"

"To his eyebrows. I promise you'll hear all the details tomorrow night. Be extra careful not to let anyone follow you when you leave town. I love you, Art."

"Love you, Mag . . ."

Saunders stared at the dead phone for seconds. Dropping the receiver, he left it dangling by the cord, whooped in triumph and dashed out of the convenience store into the rain.

The clerk behind the counter shrugged and returned to his *Racing form*.

* * *

In the office, Murray Kapps had barely removed his jacket and was stirring his mug of morning mug of coffee, ready to take the first sip, when the door burst open without benefit of a knock. Special Agent Tim Watson poked his head inside. "Saunders is on the move, Murray."

Kapps set down the mug. "A ransom call?"

"Uh-uh," said Watson, "I don't think so; we don't monitor directly before six o'clock. Fred's going over last night's tapes right now. The surveillance team called in to say a taxi picked up Saunders up in Brentwood less than an hour ago. The team tailed him to LAX. He bought a one-way ticket to San Francisco on the eight o'clock commuter special."

"Strange." Murray sounded disconcerted. "He promised faithfully to . . . Never mind. Alert the San Francisco office to cover him at the airport, find out where he goes, who he meets."

"Right."

The office door closed, leaving Kapps in a speculative frame of mind.

TWELVE

Pastoria said, "That narrows our scratch-off list to four possibles."

"Only," amended Ops Chief Howard Baste, "if the witch-hunt Daniel ordered turns up a staffer hiding in our bailiwick."

With Asian Section's chief of station recuperating from an appendectomy, the senior officers were acting in his stead. Closeted for hours, Baste and Pastoria had been going over the asset and collateral employee rosters, exhaustively logging the missions, whereabouts, comings, goings, and liaisons of anyone and everyone remotely able to ferret information from the Asian Section's encrypted files. Twenty-eight names had thus far fallen by the wayside, twenty-seven through the straightforward process of elimination, the twenty-eighth after interrogating and terminating a junior analyst suspected of egregious though unrelated faults. During the grueling process of winnowing a prime suspect from the list of names in a computer printout, all but four had been lined out — two lines for positive eliminations, a single line for possibles.

The physicist blinked tiredly. "Howard, I thought we'd decided to . . . I mean, if the leak *is* here in Tokyo, doesn't a postulated mole have to be one of these four?"

Baste yawned. "Likely as not."

Disgruntled, Pastoria ticked off the remaining quartet of names. "The only remaining ones with even a remote chance of accessing the secure files," he argued, "are your man, Denby,

a pair of casuals who lack the smarts, the headquarters night watchman, his daytime alter ego, and your dimwitted pet Neanderthal.”

“The Keeper?” Baste feigned incredulity. “Putting me on, are you, Professor? That klutz reasons with his biceps. Talk about lacking the smarts, he’s way too lame-brained to pull off a stunt that slick. Might as well strike his name on general principles.” Candidly appraising his discouraged colleague, the field ops manager judged him out of his element. It had become obvious that Pastoria was running scared; his self-confidence, never outstanding to begin with, severely shaken by the director’s indictment of Asian Section for harboring a mole.

“Strike him off?” Pastoria demanded to know how they could dare overlook the Keeper. “Everyone takes that gorilla for granted. He’s always *there*, loafing about with his mouth hanging open, often within earshot of one conversation or another. Not only that, the clod has the free run of both safe houses as well as headquarters.”

Baiting his colleague, Baste said in apparent dismissal, “A true statement, Professor. But you have to admit he’s a damned unlikely suspect.”

The other flushed. “I repeat, can we afford to ignore anyone who could’ve sneaked access to the sensitive files? The more I think about that muscle-bound moron, the more I appreciate how well he blends into the woodwork. Invisible as a stick of furniture, yet he’s . . .” Noting the other’s baleful grin, Pastoria broke off.

“You’re learning,” complimented Baste. “Apologies for leading you on. Rule One-A-Prime in the cockamamie intel world is to never, *ever* take for granted any living individual, no matter how outwardly inconsequential. Universal suspicion’s a way of life in this ditsy racket.”

Pastoria swallowed his annoyance over the other’s superior, know-it-all manner. “Then you think the Keeper might be the, er . . .”

“Whups! Didn’t say that, no.” Baste held up a cautionary hand. “Suspicion is dirt cheap. Unfortunately, expensive or cheap it won’t earn one centime of payoff unless it’s backed by hard evidence. Think of groundless suspicion as quicksand; it mires you, forces you into conclusion-jumping, suckers you into making iffy judgments, tends to smother effective reasoning.” The older man twiddled a pencil. “Subjectively speaking, the crew of geniuses in L.A. gets my vote for letting the air out of the balloon. But that’s surmise, too. We have to be painfully objective about this witch-hunt, concern ourselves only with what might or might not have come down here in Tokyo. Much as I deplore guesswork, my money’s on Denby.”

“You’ve run him for years, Howard.”

Baste nodded. “Including a good many as his control agent, which could be the root of the problem. Lately Den’s developed a case of collywobbles. Been hitting the sauce more than usual, too. Field assets come in all sizes, shapes, and stripes. As a breed, they’re all odd duck in his or her own way. I do more than oversee their fieldwork. I play mother hen when they turn hard to handle, snoop into their personal problems, check their underwear so to speak.”

“Assessing progress,” suggested Pastoria.

“Yeah, except ‘progress’ can be in either a positive or negative direction. When a field asset cracks it rarely happens gradually, sort of slowly coming apart at the seams. I’ve been holding Denby on a short leash for a while, keeping him away from hairier stuff, handing him cushier assignments closer to home. Tell me, Professor; why do you think a proven asset like Denby, who’s done exemplary work in the past, all of a sudden begins turning rancid?”

Pastoria thought it over. “Pressure,” was his conclusion, “resulting in loss of nerve.”

“Bingo!” applauded Baste. “Den’s downhill slide is most likely a function of the threat constantly hanging over his head. He’s either grown antsy about getting scragged by the opposition, or scared of being caught out by us teammates? Good field assets need certain talents, but they’re still and all human beings, and wear out same as appliances, cars or whatever. Hardcases like Den, or a hotshot like, Cateel, learn to thrive under the gun day after day, by the week and month after month. It’s a grueling life: long sieges of boredom piled atop a mountain of ennui and salted with dollops of lethargy, yet intermittently punctuated by spurts of panic. Wear and tear makes for erosion, and eventually leads to a short, steep slide.”

“You were once a field asset yourself.”

“Guilty as charged,” said Baste, “and therefore I know whereof I speak. Oh, anomalies crop up. Magda, for instance; that gorgeous pussywillow is all cutesy dimples and mankilling curves, but she literally pisses ice water when things turn dicey. Did you read the report on that business in California? No? Give it a whirl; it’s highly instructive. Except for your Filipino favorite, I’d rather have her at my back than any stud in our stable, including Denby.”

“You think he may be our man.”

“Whoa! Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Baste paused to reflect. “Put yourself in the mole’s shoes, if a mole there be. He’s been inhaling and exhaling for some time with his head on the block, not knowing from one second to the next when the axe might come down. By this time the pressure cooker has likely as not turned him into a jambalaya of raw nerve endings. How else? Being caught in that tight a bind would give an iron man ulcers.”

Pastoria frowned. “What shall we do? I can’t stomach the prospect of calmly going through the motions with a suspected pipeline built into the heart of our operation.”

“Calmly going through the motions?” Baste snapped his fingers. “That’s as neatly put as I’ve ever heard it. You’ve tabbed our tactic in a nutshell, Professor.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our fearless leader indicted Asian Section for harboring an infestation. I don’t buy it, but no harm will come of making sure. What say we bait a little deadfall, then keep close tabs on the four suspects, see if any so much as twitches, including at peabrain mass of muscle. Between us, we’ll catalog every off-hours move they make.”

“Bait a trap,” Pastoria said, “with phony data?”

“Uh-uh, wouldn’t be very smart,” denied Baste. “If a mole *is* tucked in here, he’s has to be the genuine article, and burrowed in deep. Unless the cheese rings like solid, twenty-four karat gold, the trap won’t be more than sniffed by a pro as competent as our mole has to be.”

“If not phony data, what?”

“Hmm-m-m, what say we sleep on that, Professor. You mull it over, and I’ll kick it around. We’ll put our heads together in the morning, come up with a juicy tidbit. Nothing world-shaking, just very interesting. What’s important is that it has to taste, smell and feel authentic.”

“Or he won’t bite,” supplied Pastoria.

“Not even a nibble,” said Baste. “We also have to do some playacting — first-order, top-of-the line thespian performances — to sustain the look and feel of calmly going about business as usual. If a rotten apple *is* in our barrel, he’ll go to ground the instant a whiff of suspicion hits

his olfactory nerve. And God help us if we allow him to bolt! Daniel would have our heads, count on it. If he is here, with a little bit o' luck we'll nail one of the five possibles."

"Four," corrected Pastoria.

The other grinned. "Haven't been in this line of work very long, right, Professor?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"A lot. Four candidates for the guillotine are still with us, plus one unlisted."

"Who?"

"You, *Signor* Pastoria, pee-atch-dee. In this tail chasing, back-biting racket *everyone* still breathing automatically comes under the gun — wives, mistresses, children, parents, near relatives and casual acquaintances. You should be looking closely at the four primes in addition to me. Oh, I *know* I'm straight arrow, but whether or not I really and truly am is something you have to figure out for yourself."

With a sinking feeling, Pastoria realized his colleague wasn't speaking rhetorically. Not long divorced from the groves of *academe*, he did not yet wallow in the slough of suspicion and duplicity and dread that was Baste's natural environment. The off-the-wall notion of suspecting Howard had not occurred to him, nor would it have except for the other's sarcastic warning. "You're correct, Howard. I haven't been in this line of work very long."

Or maybe, he thought, too long.

* * *

"Damned sea wall screws up the view," complained FBI Special Agent Watson. "Janet and I honeymooned here in Frisco. Back then, you could stand on the esplanade and watch sailboats tack back and forth across the bay."

Not lifting his eyes from the coffee shop's glassed-in entrance, Kapps said, "It was either build the wall, or abandon the waterfront. If the oceans' mean level rises much farther, San Francisco won't be at the end of a peninsula. It'll be a island with wet feet."

"The climate change glitch?"

"That, and a dozen other environmental glitches. We've worked hard to trash the planet. Emissions still poke holes in the ozone layer way up high. The ultraviolet index makes people afraid to go out in the sun."

"Read a lot, keep up on things, don't you, Murray?"

"Some of it scares me. The world is still coming out of the last ice age — a warming trend added to man-made changes. The first warnings came nearly a century ago, but those doing the warning were accused of crying wolf, and scared the politicos of that era so badly that they conscientiously looked the other way in unison."

Unable to think of a cogent rejoinder, Watson released nervous energy by drumming paradiddles on the arcade's parapet with his fingernails, and following his superior's gaze, looking down into the coffee shop. "Saunders," he remarked, "is on his second cuppa. Wish to hell whoever he's meeting would get a leg on. With fog rolling in, it's getting chilly up here."

Their coign of vantage atop the third level of Ghirardelli Square's converted chocolate factory, long the abode of chic boutiques, specialty restaurants and assorted tourist traps, allowed a direct view into the glass-fronted coffee shop on the red brick arcade's lower tier. Seated at a small table near the front, Arthur Saunders kept shooting a stream of glances at the entrance.

Turning away, Murray searched the murky distance. Beyond the seawall's utilitarian buttresses, a searchlight atop the Alcatraz Penal Museum swept across San Francisco Bay. Half a block distant, at street level, a gaggle of tourists queued up at the turnaround carousel, waiting to board the antiquated Hyde-Powell Cablecar. Diehard San Franciscans refused to abandon the quirky urban transit system despite a propensity for accidents, believing it a nostalgic link to the Good Old Days. Kapps wondered if there had ever been any good old days.

The secure phone in Watson's pocket began to vibrate insistently. When he keyed it, a crackling male voice said, "A live one just made the scene down here. Asian specimen, treetop tall, decked out fashion plate style. Yellow Cab one-nine-six just dumped him on the sidewalk."

"Alone?" asked Watson.

"Solo. He's now squatting on a lower tier bench, looking conspicuously inconspicuous by pretending to read a newspaper. Only a hunch, but he could be here covering the target."

Kapps keyed his own phone. "Stay close, but keep your men well back, Lou."

"Check."

"Sonofabitch!" Watson punched his superior's shoulder lightly. "Coming upstairs on your left, Murray."

Kapps had difficulty believing his eyes. Wearing light tan slacks and a delightfully upholstered sea-green sweater, Mrs. Magdalena Saunders glanced casually around the concourse. She strolled toward the coffee shop, holding her youngster by the hand.

"Ooh-la-la!" exclaimed Watson. "Some looker!"

"Get down there, Tim," said Kapps. "Have the team cover all stairways and elevators."

Walking into the coffee shop a minute later, Murry found Little Rudy Saunders perched on his father's lap. Oblivious to the FBI presence, Magdalena and her husband had their heads together in hushed conversation.

"May I join you?" Murray drew out a chair.

Art Saunders' face fell. He pushed back his chair, slowly came to his feet.

"Who are you?" Maggie wanted to know.

"He's FBI," said Art, weak-voiced. "How'd . . . you find us?"

Kapps performed a searching inspection of Mrs. Saunders before returning his attention to her husband. "Does it matter? You'll have to come with me now."

"Why?" demanded Art. "We haven't committed any crime."

"That may not be entirely accurate, Mr. Saunders," contradicted Murray. "Withholding evidence of a felony is a serious offense. You would really be wise to save your legal expertise for the office. We have no intention of detaining either of you, but you're both wanted for questioning as the victim and accessory in the commission of a federal crime."

An uneasy silence ensued. Kapps asked Mrs. Saunders why she hadn't taken the boy home when she was free to do so.

"I can . . . explain," faltered Maggie.

His eyes round with dark-eyed wonder, alarmed without knowing why, young Rudy stared apprehensively at the federal agent.

Kapps said, "I'm looking forward to hearing your explanation, Mrs. Saunders. You can dictate to a recorder so you won't have to repeat the —"

"Those men," blurted Magdalena. "That monster, Lenny."

“I assume you refer to Leonard Blasco, who is no longer with us.”

Maggie’s hand flew to her throat. “Dead . . . ?”

An affirmative nod. “We have no reason to believe you were responsible.”

“I . . . hit him,” she admitted, “with a heavy table lamp.”

“*You* did that? If so, you no doubt performed a creditable service, but that wasn’t what killed him.” Kapps rose, a wordless invitation for the Saunders Family to do likewise. “We can untangle this affair more comfortably at the local office. Please come with me now.”

Outwardly engrossed in a facsimile edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the tall Asian gentleman whose arrival had piqued the interest of the surveillance team was seated on a ground-level bench beneath an overhead light. When the last federal agent had descended the red brick steps, he rolled up the computer-generated hardcopy of the newspaper, chucked it in a waste bin and lifted a satellite phone from his inner topcoat pocket.

* * *

General Yee finished writing a communique in the series designed to keep Chairman Li Qin privately informed of conference progress. He handed it to his aide. “Double the special encryption, Woo. I want to observe the side session as it concludes.”

The only member of Yee’s staff fully briefed on Operation Quench, the major looked at his superior apace. “You still mean to confront him now, sir?”

“Yes, and eager to witness his reaction.”

Jointly and separately, Yee and Artsutanov’s Security Director, Colonel Vlassikov, had been sitting in on specific side sessions as well as attending the major conclaves. Rather than “ironing out” balance of trade problems afflicting the economies of Russia and the other CIS states, United Korea, Japan, and other Pacific Rim nations, Europe and the Americas, most conclaves had inevitable degenerated into heated exchanges and denunciations, doing nothing to resolve trade issue disparities, but becoming shouting matches rife with catcalls and plaintive hoots directed at the moderator, keynote speaker, whoever had dared mount the rostrum and make himself or herself the subject of continual harassment and abuse.

Falling neatly in line with clandestine objective of Operation Quench, these disruptions had been a source of genuine pleasure to General Yee. The advertised trade conference goal — bringing together selected multinational experts in order to “win friends and influence people” — was merely window dressing, staged gatherings designed to conceal Quench’s true purpose, nor had the various agendas duped the majority of delegates, since most considered the conference an occasion for nothing more than gloating by the Peoples Republic of China.

“First we waggle the stick in a threatening way,” had been Yee’s summation to Chairman Li Qin, “then smile and dangle a fat carrot.”

“The outcome, Comrade General,” had been Li Qin’s response, “is your responsibility. My earnest advice is not to allow the carrot’s premature appearance too early in the game.”

Nor had it, thought Yee. During the course of the fifth turbulent session, the confused babble of shouts and denunciations had been in total in accord with the ideal Quench scenario. Not a single delegate had gotten the slightest whiff of the carefully withheld carrot.

The general slipped into the side session unobtrusively, and chose a seat at the rear of the compartment. Few attendees reacted to his arrival other than Colonel Vlassikov and the double-

agent posing as the official Nipponese delegate. Yee tried not to frown when the colonel rose, crossed the aisle and lodged his bulk in the adjacent seat. “It goes exceptionally well, General.”

Vlassikov’s comment drew an enigmatic sidelong glance from Yee. Marxist-Leninist dialectic had been passé in the colonel’s homeland for many decades, and the general was acutely conscious of how Moscow felt about Vlassikov’s “defection.” What the good colonel had no way of knowing was how much it pleased Yee to witness the outburst of the middle-aged man at the lectern, once a Russian associate of Vlassikov’s, who now held the colonel in abject contempt as a renegade for offering his services to the PRC’s “enlightened” Communist regime.

Vlassikov could not conceal his own fiendish delight in the delegate’s distress as he roundly condemned China for engaging in “arrant economic warfare” so destructive to the balance of trade within the CIS states and most other world marketplaces. Pressing his case with theatrical vehemence, the Russian delegate demonstrated a degree of showmanship by paraphrasing a Western poet whose works were popular in his homeland. “No,” he denied on a note of bitterness, “we shall not go gently into the everlasting night. We shall rage against the dying of the light.”

Chuckling, Vlassikov whispered, “Let him rage to his heart’s content.”

Outwardly unmoved by the theatrics, the general sensed that the time had come to conclude the preparatory drubbing, then put aside the figurative stick. Judging by what he had seen and heard lately, reactions to the conference often verged on hysteria, forcing those who represented one faltering economy or another to discuss with various Chinese fat cats the “hideous disparities” affecting global commerce. The heated debates served Quench’s purpose to a tee, iterating and reiterating the singular one-sidedness of current international trade conditions. None of the delegates could be termed naïve, yet the bait had been swallowed, and that mattered.

* * *

Bored with the third variation of a diatribe he had listened to over and again, the general’s mind wandered. Tuning out Colonel Vlassikov’s whispered remarks, he reflected upon not only where Quench was in the here and now, but how it had come about, where it would hopefully lead. Piqued by equal measures of curiosity and resentment, each government invited to attend the trade conference had hastily screened delegate candidates, eager to cash in on a totally unprecedented opportunity to open heretofore locked economic doors, and perhaps even more so to take advantage of the off chance that one or more heavily veiled space elevator technical mysteries might be brought into the light. Yee estimated that thus far the conference had seemed an organized incitement to riot, not a session devoted to salving raw economic wounds.

Other than his fellow schemers, Caesescu père and his talented son, Erik, who had somehow managed to burrow deeply into UNIA’s Asian Section, plus his grandniece and trusted aide, Major Woo, only Chairman Li Qin and whomsoever he’d confided in knew summit-level approval to hold the on-orbit conference derived exclusively from the seven socio-economic scenarios he himself was responsible for generating in total secrecy. The conference, a vital corollary to the delicate operation devised by Yee and his confederate, was a vital preamble to the third, most ticklish phase of Quench about to be set in motion designed to initiate the artificially induced hiatus in elevator operations deemed mandatory if the looming threat of military confrontation by the West was to be alleviated, or at minimum postponed. The frosting

on the CPR's cake was that the suspension to come would not have the appearance of resulting weakness and "loss of face."

Yee's seven prognosticative computer models had collectively and independently led to a terrifying conclusion: the prominent Western powers meant to expire, if expire they must, with a bang, not a whimper. Chairman Li Qin and certain Politburo cohorts sympathetic to his worldview had repeatedly probed for soft spots, weaknesses and non-relevance in the chains of logic espoused by the models, and ultimately conceded the stark reality deftly illustrated by the cascade of progressively frightening scenarios. The major powers, apparently reaching unspoken accord, had revived a dynamic version of the Cold War's fatalistic "Better dead than Red" philosophy, and were preparing to go to extreme lengths, up to and including the deployment of thermonuclear weaponry, to avert a peaceful economic catastrophe.

While chary of initiating doomsday panic, Li Qin had been equally leery of his nation's advertised bellicose reaction if the news of Western preparations were to leak. With typical farsighted wisdom, Li Qin had chosen to keep all but his most trusted confidants in the dark about tentative first-strike plans even then being formulated by one or more Western powers. The extensive intel network enhanced decades earlier by EuroEast Bloc espionage genius Wladislaw Caesescu had furnished firm, if in many cases sketchy indications that China's "enemies" were also contemplating a military takeover of some equatorial site in Latin America upon which to construct their own space elevator system, plus a preemptive strike against Artsutanov's base.

Partially confirmed through secondary and tertiary sources, the information had chilled Yee to the marrow, and would have done so even if the elder Caesescu had not been able to support with hard evidence the word-of-mouth data laboriously gathered by skilled operatives. The general considered Western intentions precisely the brand of "rational insanity" he feared most, despite the fact that a dearth of hard, verifiable evidence leading to that conclusion had nearly channeled him before a firing squad rather than a trade conference. Working behind the scenes, he had masterminded an enormous portfolio of covert data. Even so, it had taken every iota of persuasive salesmanship he had to convince Chairman Li of the threat's authenticity.

Labeled "A disruptive influence bent upon damaging China's Great Leap Upward," the trade conference had become a target of vituperative denunciation by dissident elements within the Central Committee and especially the Politburo, forcing Yee to literally lay his career and life on the line by stubbornly persisting in, and insisting upon, the authenticity of the caveats he had quietly passed along. Overtly dismissed in disgrace, yet covertly cupped in the protective palm of Li Qin's liver-spotted hand, he'd been roused from sleep on several occasions and hustled to Beijing, certain the end had come at last. Instead, courting lethal peril on each occasion, he had been spirited to a private audience with China's canny elder potentate.

Although he and the chairman had been associated for many years — "friends" in the narrowest sense of the term — time and again Li Qin had listened attentively, but summarily dismissed the unorthodox countermeasures proposed by Yee. Attempting to break down the general's resolve with thinly veiled threats about the serious consequences of inaction, Li Qin had remained impassive while listening to his "friend" pour out his heart and soul in impassioned pleas aimed at substantiating the doomsday clouds gathering on China's horizon. Partially convinced, yet wavering, the Chairman had ordered parallel research done very, very quickly, and very, very quietly. Afterward, his stance on Yee's proposals had swung about head to toe, and

Yee had been directed to refine, categorize, meld and further rationalize the raw data. Shortly thereafter had come the final, imperious, dead-of-night summons to Beijing, and a “go-ahead” had been forthcoming, accompanied by a low-voiced commandment to be absolutely circumspect about the manner in which the delicate affair would to be handled. Should the least suspicion of China’s subtle, potentially lethal game plan reach Western ears, the Chairman had warned, Yee would by default find himself thrown under the bus, with no alternative remotely possible. In a typically forthright statement, Li Qin said he would be forced to disavow any knowledge of, or involvement in, a “counter-revolutionary” conspiracy of Quench’s proportions. Any other course, the potentate had further warned, could not help but hasten the downfall of his régime, plus of course the downfall of Yee himself.

An avid student of history, the general had thrust aside the specter of his own demise and concentrated his entire being on the task at hand. Succeeding events had strengthened his resolve, encouraging him to curb his impatience and await the next coded report from his star field asset in Tokyo. He had in fact dared to set up a dangerous face-to-face encounter with Erik Caesescu who, once cued, had wheedled and begged his boss, Howard Baste, for a long-overdue holiday. Their chancy rendezvous in a grubby Macao hotel room had given birth to Quench, which fraught with dreadful uncertainty had almost been stillborn. Knowing it would be their once chance to formulate and finalize solutions to multiple knotty problems and complications besetting China, he and Erik had spent twenty sleepless hours sketching and revising the complicated operation’s architecture. After defining known elements, they had sorted, discarded and reinserted prospective courses of action, then dissected and analyzed them bit by bit pursuant to concocting schemes piecemeal, shredded and revised them, and then further revised the revisions. In the end, they had chunked the whole scrambled mess and started over. Detailed portions of the game plan had been thrashed out, modified, re-modified, augmented, re-thrashed and modified again and again in order to include in the scenario the most competent, experienced and resourceful tool employed by UNIA’s Asian Section.

“We can’t be certain he’ll be assigned,” Yee had objected.

“Who else?” had been Erik’s response. “Things in Tokyo are up in the air, what with the chief of station on extended medical leave. London’s fat-ass-in-charge has never even heard of Cateel, but a senior stand-in co-acting with Baste as chief of station, praises him to the skies with damned good reason. Don’t fret, General; they’re certain to sprinkle holy water on Cateel.”

Yee recalled wearily bowing to Erik’s wisdom and expertise.

Red-eyed, dead on his feet from lack of sleep as the total scheme wound down, Erik had remarked that the only glitch in the scheme he hadn’t been unable figure out was the need for a trade conference penciled in by Yee. “Why bother? Elevator maintenance and refurbishment can be taken care of without going through all the iffy hooraw you’ve cooked up. Sure, an “accidental” shut down via sabotage makes sense, but why bother hosting an on-orbit seance and mass-meeting with the Nips, Russkies, Koreans and bunches of other down ‘n outers?”

“Because their respective temperaments and tempers have to be gauged beforehand, Erik. We must learn precisely where each nation’s leadership stands.”

“You mean ordinary, everyday *feedback*? That’s it, the whole enchilada?”

“Umm-m-m, not entirely, no. Economic baselines also must be drawn. We shall have to learn to what degree economic matters have deteriorated in each respective prominent society. An aggregate estimate of Western conditions is something I consider absolutely vital.”

“Okay, guess I sort of begin seeing it your way. But why the rush?”

“Because the doomsday clock is ticking close to midnight, so your father believes.”

Visibly shaken, yet forever his father’s son, Erik had blanched. “You saying they’re already talking timetable, setting the wheels in motion?”

“That is Wladislaw’s assumption, not mine. But whether assumed or presumed, I tend to agree with his conclusion. How often have you known him to be wrong?”

“Not very damned often, if ever.”

“Now do you begin to appreciate my sense of panic, why I struggled so desperately for approval to forward the endeavor at the earliest possible moment? If Daniel’s Asian Section had not subverted the Ministry of Justice asset they believe to be former industrialist Hideko Matsuda, neither Wladislaw nor I would have given our campaign more than the slimmest of slim chances for success. As it is, merely a handful of astute, extremely powerful individuals in Beijing know of the prospective operation, whatever we end up calling it.”

“Whew! You’ve made your point twice over, General. Keeping a tight, hermetic lid on it is mandatory, keeping everything strictly between ourselves, and Siu Lan since you’re planning to use her. How about we codeword it Operation Shortstop?”

“Shortstop . . . ? The term is unfamiliar.”

Erik’s lopsided grin had been warped by exhaustion. “Score one for my years in the States. A shortstop’s a baseball player who . . . Okay, let’s tab it Quench.”

“Ah, Quench! Most appropriate. We shall pray that it quenches the fire before ignition.”

“Amen! I’ll pray as loud . . . *louder* than anyone else.”

* * *

Voices raised in anger recaptured Yee’s attention. He listened to a heated one-on-one exchange between Nippon’s “official delegate,” the faux Hideko Matsuda, and a white-haired gentleman introduced only as “a prominent economist.” In company with a dozen other spectators, the general grew doubly attentive as the back-and-forth dialogue grew more animated. He became negatively impressed with the intel asset’s lack of self-containment and finesse. The stocky, distinguished looking double-agent was not acting when he espoused sullen, defensive statements, creating an impression of being deeply incensed by the moderator’s queries pertaining to Japan’s decimated balance of trade. His nettling retorts and defiant rebuttals began to sound insufferably abusive.

“Please forgive my bluntness,” soothed other, one of Yee’s veteran intel analysts. “I fear what you just said is patently ridiculous. Historically, ever since the Second World War your nation has aligned itself with Western business interests, that is to say with so-called ‘free enterprise’ Japan’s guiding principle. How can you honestly condemn China’s modern efforts to actively compete in the commercial sphere? How is it possible to blame the People’s Republic for practicing what Nippon has preached and practiced decade after decade?”

“Compete, no!” cried Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura. “China is anything but competitive. It is monopolistic, bent upon subverting all competition.”

“Come now,” the other knowingly. “Isn’t that rather self-serving? For more than a century your government has actively subsidized Japanese industry by sponsoring businesses, a policy designed to proactively imbalance worldwide trade and commerce. Most colleagues agree that it was Japanese tinder which ignited the Crash of 2023, serving to undermine . . .”

Colonel Vlassikov yawn noisily. Leaning toward Yee, he whispered, “Comrade General, “I have heard enough hot air for one session. I mean to do something productive, and take a nap.”

Yee favored the other with a thin smile, watched him depart. He sat patiently through the remainder of the debate as, here and there, members of the audience realized the side session was going nowhere, rose one by one, in pairs and trios, and left the compartment.

The adversaries finally exchanged mutually frigid head dips, and abandoned the podium. General Yee remained seated until the purported Nipponese delegate had stuffed papers into his briefcase and was preparing to follow the last straggler from the compartment, then came down the aisle and to the delegate’s face said, “Do not be alarmed, Matsuda-sama,” he said in Japanese. “Or would you prefer to be addressed as Miura-san?”

Rooted to the deck, the double-agent tendered a jerky half-bow. Instinctively realizing who it was that confronted him, he nevertheless played the game. “In truth, sir, your meaning is not clear.”

“Feigning ignorance is unworthy of you,” declared Yee. “Relax and listen carefully. I have no intention of hindering the contemplated actions of you yourself, or your accomplice. I want that fully understood now, at the beginning.”

Despite the climate-controlled compartment, a film of perspiration sheened the bogus delegate’s brow. “May I ask how you learned of my —?”

“No, you may not. It has no bearing on your further activities.”

“But do you think it wise, sir,” asked Miura warily, “to discuss weighty matters here? Partitions often grow ears.”

“Not these,” assured the general. Moving a half-step closer to his victim, he asked, “Your opinion, please. Do you consider your Filipino associate trustworthy, competent?”

The question produced a minor seismic reaction in Miura. He nodded affirmatively.

“For our purposes,” said Yee, “it will be imperative for you and he to offer identical reports to your respective masters in Tokyo and Kobe. Dual sources of confirmation are not merely necessary, but essential. It is mandatory for UNIA and your Ministry of Justice to be thoroughly convinced that actual destruction has taken place. Do you understand why?”

“N-no,” faltered Miura.

“Then I shall explain,” said Yee pointedly, his cold stare fixed on the other. “Coincident with the trade conference’s conclusion, disruption of elevator service will strand the delegates, genuine and otherwise, wherever they happen to be at the moment of power outage. The delegates descending to Kalimantan will remain aboard the capsules suspended in mid-tether by integral fail-safe restraints. There will no doubt be panic among the passengers — an added bonus.”

Miura’s bewildered expression induced Yee to continue in the same droll, conversational monotone. “Once the timed explosive charges have been set in the satellite’s power distribution center, a path will be cleared for you and Cateel to rush directly to the satellite’s zenith dock area

and board the first spaceward-bound passenger capsule, and the purported power outage will be timed to coincide with your arrival at the spacecraft inertial launch complex, thus assuring you both that detonation has taken place. Upon arriving in Aristarchus, you and Cateel will make your exits as planned, meet the spacecraft awaiting you in Mare Procellarum, and transit homeward by way of the prearranged route. Any questions?"

"But . . . why all of this, er . . . ?" No longer his stolid, unemotional self, the intelligence officer's bobble head had been weaving from side to side as if his neck muscles had lost their strength and gone limp. "May this poor individual humbly ask why you have —?"

"No, he may not," said Yee flatly. "He would be well-advised in the strongest terms possible to wipe this brief encounter from all memory, and equally wise to follow the script to the letter. In fact, should he choose to do otherwise, it will quite lethally jeopardize his continued existence.

"In the morning," drawled Yee in conclusion, "Cateel is due to be released from quarantine. You will conduct him on a tour of pertinent portions of the zero-gee facility, but you will *not* make him aware of this, our private conversation. Do we understand one another on all counts, Miura-san?"

The other bowed. "Understood, sir."

"For your sake, one hopes so."

The double-agent flinched. "But how did you —?"

"This is unimportant. Your identity and actions on behalf of UNIA and Nippon have been known to us for some time. Dare to follow your own dictates instead of my instructions, and you will do well to keep one pertinent fact in mind. The organization I have the honor to lead has an extremely long arm."

General Yee turned on his heel, commanded the door to slide open. He exited the compartment without a backward glance.

* * *

A picture of defeat, his ego demolished, not to mention being uncharacteristically afraid of what was to come, Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura returned to his quarters in an apprehensive semi-trance. Though his appetite had fled, he nevertheless went through the ritual of doffing his jumpsuit, washing up and changing for dinner. When he came out of the cramped lavatory cubicle, a sealed Japanese diplomatic pouch was resting on the small cantilevered writing shelf. Breaking the official government seal, he leafed through the contents, all the while so distracted by the recent happening that his mind leap-frogged from one shocking Yee disclosure to another.

The encrypted note Howard Baste had sweet-talked an acquaintance among the Japanese officials into inserting in the pouch was clipped to the sheaf of documents. Quickly decoding the encrypted ideographs, his head lifted sharply, and a small sound escaped from his throat.

Staring in abject disbelief at a framed serigraph on the partition above foldout bunk — a cloud of snowy chrysanthemums in a polished silver bowl — his lips curved in a humorless, predatory smile. He stepped back into the lavatory, clicked the cigarette lighter and touch flame to the slip of flash paper, then flushed the powdery residue down the commode. It was apparent that his overt as well as covert employers were in unanimous agreement on one score.

Both Tokyo and Kobe now insisted that he dispose of Catee, and he meant to oblige them. His composure restored, Miura reprised his sharklike smile. His “accomplice” and China’s counterintelligence director were in for a major surprise.

No, *two* major surprises.

THIRTEEN

Magdalena Saunders tried to shake off her despondency. “Mr. Kapps,” she said, her voice quavering, “if by now you don’t believe me, I doubt if you ever will.”

“It’s not a question of disbelief,” said Murray, “but the quandary raises its head every time I ask what conceivable reason you might have had to place any trust in your . . . ‘rescuers’ as you insist on calling them.”

Having spent hours of repeated grillings on the FBI carpet since being reunited with her family, Maggie pleaded for Kapps to lift the surveillance on the Saunders’ home? “All I’m asking is that you to look the other way for a half-hour, and I’ll promise to —”

“What you insist on requesting isn’t possible,” said Kapps. “You must understand that a capital crime has been committed, in fact two. One suspected perpetrator, a known U.N. employee, was slyly murdered with the presumptive motive of shutting him up. His accomplices will eventually be apprehended, indicted and convicted, crime proven beyond reasonable doubt in federal court, and they will face the grim consequences. The circumstances surrounding the abduction of you and your son make a death sentence mandatory.”

Maggie slumped in the chair, averted her gaze.

Kapps had purposely held something back during previous interviews. Evaluating the woman’s dispirited condition, he sensed it time to play a potential ace in the hole. “Mrs. Saunders, time after time you’ve asked us to back off on watching your home and family. Has it ever occurred to you,” he said in an exasperated tone of voice, “that if U.N. Intelligence Agency spooks grabbed you and your boy once, mightn’t they try to do it again?”

Maggie’s sharply indrawn breath announced a score. “H-how did you know —?”

Awarding himself a mental pat on the back, Murray prepared a second shot in the dark. “Learning things we’re not supposed to know about is what the government pays us to do. We learned of your brother’s UNIA employment early on.”

Her expression wary, Maggie said, “My brother’s . . . He’s in a terrible jam. They said he would be lucky to —”

“They . . . ?”

“The people who rescued Little Rudy and me, took us to San Francisco.”

“Who are they?”

“I don’t have the . . . I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve explained over and over, Mr. Kapps. It would betray a trust. Worse, it could put my brother in even greater danger.”

The distraught woman’s body language gave her away. She kept touching the edge of the desk as if to reassure herself of her whereabouts.

“Do you honestly believe it a very smart thing to do?” asked Murray in a monotone. “In effect, you’re shielding whoever kidnapped you and your little boy a second time?”

“Rescued,” amended Maggie.

“Very well, rescued. Do you know how to get in touch with the mysterious ‘rescuers’?”

“A memorized phone number.”

“May we have it?”

“N-no, it would —”

“Yes, I know; betray a trust. I’m certain of it.” Kapps grimaced, his frustration no longer entirely feigned. “Round and round we go, but where we stop . . . Listen, you’ve placed your trust in the oddest people I can imagine. After all the fruitless interviews we’ve been through, the net progress is zero. Why do you keep refusing to help yourself by refusing to help us?”

“My brother’s safety — no, his life — mean much more to me than helping you catch the kidnappers. I was told . . . I mean, I can tell you this much. They said we were abducted to coerce my brother into performing some all-but-impossible task his superiors had supposedly blackmailed him into undertaking an incredibly dangerous assignment he’d turned down. But because of what they did, holding me and my son hostages, he —”

“What kind of assignment?”

“I didn’t . . . I don’t know the details.”

Sensing dissimulation, Kapps shook his head. “Tell me whatever you can.”

“It was described as . . . I hate to say it. They called it a suicide mission.”

“So your ‘rescuers’ told you UNIA pressured your brother into accepting an extremely dangerous assignment by holding over his head the safety of you and your son?”

“That’s it exactly.”

“It’s very difficult to reconcile what you’re willing to tell me with the statements of U.N. officials here, there, everywhere. The U.N. has roundly denied any involvement . . . More than one official has denied employing any individual named Rodolfo Cateel. Do you really believe what ‘they’ told you is actually the case?”

Magdalena responded with a sober affirmative nod.

“How long has your brother been with the U.N.?”

“Five years, and maybe some months longer, since not long after he left the service.” A long tear rolled down Maggie’s cheek. “Sorry, but I’m losing it. I’ve been a nervous wreck ever since we came home. At first it was such a relief to have the nightmare over. I tried hard to forget the whole thing, but lately there’ve been ugly nightmares. I wake up five, six times every night in a cold sweat, and my family’s falling to pieces. Art’s taken to sleeping in the guest bedroom, and Little Rudy can’t bear to be alone. He hasn’t spoken twenty words since we brought him home.”

“You’d be wise to talk with a therapist,” advised Kapps. “It would help you recognize the problem, which is far from unusual. It’s the result of the terror, humiliation, uncertainty and guilt feelings associated with being abducted and held against your will. Traditionally, many kidnap victims fortunate enough to survive the experience go through a similar ordeal after release. It will pass, but that may take a while. If the nightmares and fits of depression persist, you should consider looking into professional counseling for yourself and your son.”

“A psychiatrist?”

“Or psychologist,” said Kapps. “Seeking professional help could prove invaluable.

“You mention guilt feelings.” Maggie reflected on the term, repeating it as a question. “Why should I feel guilt . . . ?” Perplexed and surprised at the FBI agent’s understanding of a condition she herself found beyond understanding, she said, “Humiliation, uncertainty and fear, yes, of course. But how can you possibly know I felt guilty? I didn’t kidnap us.”

“I’m neither a psychologist nor medic,” said Kapps, “but I know something about what’s known as the Stockholm Syndrome. For whatever reason, people who’ve been abducted often blame themselves for letting such an awful thing happen. Kidnap victims and hostages held by terrorists often cosy up to their abductors, ingratiate themselves, try to make themselves likable in hope of being treated less harshly, even being allowed to go free. I know it may sound peculiar, but a guilt reaction is every bit as common as fear and humiliation.”

Rising behind his desk, Murray said, “Enough for now, Mrs. Saunders. I hope you’ll give serious thought to unburdening yourself about the . . . ‘rescuers.’ Actually, they are also guilty of kidnapping in a different sense. All I can say is that placing your trust in strangers with unknown intentions is nonsense. Instead, why not practice a little trust in the Bureau? By withholding information you consider confidential, you are protecting the identities of people liable for arrest and prosecution for obstruction of justice. Persist in your present attitude, and it could make a great deal of trouble for you yourself. Promise to give some thought to what you are doing.”

“I will.” Maggie rose, willowy in a pale blue dress.

Holding the office door, Kapps found the penetrating gaze of her dark, troubled eyes disconcerting, and hesitated. “Is there something else?”

“What you just said . . .” Magdalena broke off and pursed her lips. “I know it will sound wild and crazy, but an off-the-wall idea popped into my head.”

Sensing an opening, Murray prodded. “Come back and sit down. I’m open to all wild and crazy ideas within reason.”

“The phone number, uh . . . I was asked to call and arrange a meeting. Just Art and me, you understand. No one else. Our rescuers think we may be able to do something to help Rudy. What came to mind was . . . Oh, God! It’s such a ridiculous notion.”

“May I be the judge of that?”

Regarding him levelly, she said, “Murray,” using his given name for the first time, you aren’t that much older than Art. You could pose as my husband, come with me to meet them.”

“As your . . .” Kapps flinched, feeling a distinct flutter in his midsection. “You’re right, Mrs. Saunders. That is perhaps the wildest, craziest notion I’ve heard yet.”

Looking even more troubled, Maggie said, “I can’t afford to ignore any chance, however slim, to help my brother. I do trust you, trust the FBI. Even if I go to jail, it has to be wild and crazy, or . . . nothing.”

Murray frowned. “Mrs. Saunders, if what you suggest were permissible, which it is not, I’m afraid posing as your husband wouldn’t wash. We’re fairly sure your ‘rescuers’ sent someone to cover the rendezvous in San Francisco — an exceptionally tall Asian gentleman.”

“Tall . . . ?” Maggie perked up. “That sounds like the one who gave orders.”

“If so,” continued Murray, “unless he was blind he would have recognized me and the other federal agents when we picked you up there in the coffee shop.”

Magdalena leaned toward the desk, her eyes luminous, sincere. "That was after nine in the evening, and Ghirardelli Square was crowded. Sure he knew of an FBI presence, but so what? Doing it would give you a chance to talk to them, learn what you need to know."

Although too amazed by her "wild 'n crazy" notion to respond immediately, the FBI Deputy Director's words rang hollowly in Kapps' mind: "Follow this case, Murray, wherever it leads, however long it takes." *But, Jesus!* he thought, *limits had to apply to such a directive.*

Passing himself off as the victim's husband would be an act of outright insanity. He knew without asking what his superiors in Washington would think of the "wild 'n crazy" notion.

"Doing as you suggest," he told Magdalena Saunders after further reflection, "will require some very deep thought, a *great* deal of deep thought."

* * *

Dr. Pastoria tapped lightly on the open door to Howard Baste's office.

The field ops chief glanced at his colleague, then looked again, studying him with sanguine interest. "What's biting you, John? Your eyeballs look like two piss holes in the snow."

"I didn't sleep well," confessed Pastoria. "Listen, Howard, a hot flash woke me up in the middle of the night."

A grin leavened Baste's square-cut features. "First symptom of middle-age, right?"

Preoccupied with his errand, Pastoria let the quip go by. He closed the door. "The message regarding Cateel, I assume you left a copy in the secure file."

"The garbled tidbit my diplomat pal sent to Matsuda? No, matter of fact there's zip in the secure file. I wined and dined Okimoto and his current squeeze at an overpriced joint near the Ginza. Had to sweet-talk the bloodthirsty old buzzard into including our cryptic note in the next diplomatic pouch his office dispatched to the satellite. What about it?"

"There's no record of it in the secure file?"

"Nada. I've known Oki for donkey's years, and his favor went down informally, on the QT. I scratched my version of Daniel's have Cateel drop dead scenario on a restaurant napkin. Oki folded it, tucked it away and promised to deliver. The next morning, his number one boy called to say the news flash had gone up in the sky to the Nip's *ichi-bon* economic expert."

"Mightn't a copy," asked Pastoria, sounding tentative, "be the brand of ripe cheese we're been looking for to bait the deadfall?"

Baste mulled the proposal. He stroked his cheek, eyes half-closed. "Hmm-m-m, a hot flash it could be, Professor. It has the right flavor, the right . . . Whups, hold on! Why would it excite a predicated mole hidden in our woodwork to learn a once wealthy asset on our temp payroll has been ordered to zotz a regular? Sort of immaterial now any way, isn't it. By this time, your favored Filipino op has probably bought the farm."

Pastoria fluttered his hands. "You miss the point, Howard. It would let the opposition know we've sent in a backup. Surely they're clever enough to read between the lines."

"Aw, f'Chrissake, Professor!" objected Baste. "Don't go soft-headed on me. If Asian Section *is* infested, the ringer's fed Cateel's whole pedigree to his employers. Don't you get it? Tomono and his minions *have* got to already know about the one time big-bucks tycoon on our payroll. They could care less, so long as he runs our errand in parallel with theirs."

Pastoria subsided sheepishly. "Just a thought."

Baste pursed his lips, his mind working overtime. "Yet all things considered," he said slowly and deliberately, "it isn't an altogether bad idea. Just for the sake of kicking it around, let's say we plant a facsimile of my note's wording in the secure file, plus the sort of scribbled addendum I always jot down to remind myself about the who, what, how, when, where and why of it. Then we take turns sleeping with one eye open. That how you pegged doing the job?"

"Not quite," said Pastoria. "Rather than putting it in the secure computer files, why not leave a xerograph copy mixed in with the papers on your desk?"

"*On* my desk? Like I'd forgotten to file the important thing, or drop it in the burn box?"

"Right. Date it today; that way, the mole will think it's freshly minted."

"And hustle his ass to pass it along," reasoned Baste.

"Exactly."

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary!" The ops chief frowned. "You talk as if I'd make a habit of leaving sensitive paperwork laying around loose amidst stray papers. If he's here, the ringer would right smartly smell a gaffe as blatant as what you're suggesting."

With overtones of exasperation clouding his diction, Pastoria said, "There is such a thing as the exception that proves the rule, Howard. I'm positing that the mole, if he exists, will risk dipping into the secure, alarmed computer files only now and then. Daring an act that time consuming and risky has to be a now-and-then thing, an opportunistic hit when he's a thousand percent certain no one's there peeking over his shoulder. My way, if we get any kind of break at all, there won't be a wait of days, weeks or months to nail him."

"Got to admit that makes sense," said Baste, "but there's a catch."

The physicist sighed. "Isn't there always?"

"Always." Baste nodded. "We'll have to stay on our tippy toes and make damn certain to nab a ringer in the act, if one appears, before he transmits, 'cause we'll be meddling in a game already in progress, and worse, a game where the groundrules are downright iffy."

"Iffy? I don't understand."

"Think about it," advised Baste, displaying a measure of impatience. "Isn't it safe to assume the Nips think we recruited their official delegate just to gain a pipeline into the trade conference? That had sure as hell better be our one and only rationale. Matsuda-sama may be a down-at-the-heels former also ran now, but he's also a big bucks magnate willing to risk his neck playing both sides of the street. His homecoming will be greeted with a king-sized ransom for smuggling the goods aboard Artsutanov, and earn more brownie points for zotzing Cateel once the semtex gets planted and detonated. But he'll damn sure go tits-up if Yee's people finger him and stand him against the nearest wall. Tomono probably thought more than twice before deciding to let a former multimillionaire of his stature run an errand on our behalf. We'll be spinning our wheels if we don't . . ."

Howard broke off to award his colleague a searching look. "Wait, now I'm tuning in on your wavelength, Professor. Yeah, now your message loud 'n clear. If Cateel isn't already kaput, no way can we presume Matsuda has the brains or balls to pull the trigger on his own. You're thinking a hot flash that we want our guy trashed will confuse the mole, throw him a curve. Yeah, I surely do like that angle. Digging up a turd that smelly could goose the ringer hard, drive him to spread the word chop-chop, with zero delay."

Uncertain where a “curve” fit the discussion, Pastoria deliberated. “That’s more or less how I theorized it, but serious repercussions could ensue if for some reason we miss connections, let the mole transmit and Daniel finds out we set it up and then sprung the trap carelessly.”

“Ouch!” Baste’s nostrils flared. “No argument. Wouldn’t be a matter of just getting our *cojones* whacked, either. Bollix a move Daniel ordered, and it’d mean our scalps. But, what the hell! Now we’ve come full circle on your ploy. We’ll have to do a watch-on-watch around the clock to be on the safe side, and grab whoever jumps out of the woodwork, nibbles the cheese.”

“Then you’re for it?”

“Yeah, why not? We’ll give it a twirl, see what comes down.”

“You’re serious?”

“Couldn’t be more so, Professor.”

Pastoria choked back the lump in his throat. Inventing tasty, potentially lethal bait for Baste’s proposed deadfall was one thing, but actually going through with it, *doing* it, was another matter entirely. “I’m with you,” he said, not at all sure he meant it.

* * *

“¡Holá, Roxas!”

The hail in Spanish arrested Cateel in the act of entering the “G” Quadrant spin elevator. He stepped aside, giving way to a tall, mustachioed Sikh delegate fairly radiating dignity.

When his accomplice caught up with him, Rudy announced in Spanish that he had been turned loose. “After stagnating forever in quarantine,” he said, “it feels like a jailbreak.”

Taking Cateel’s arm with untoward familiarity, Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura lowered his voice. “We wear yellow armbands, barring us from off-limits sectors of the satellite.”

“I was warned more than once never to take it off,” Rudy said.

“We foreign devils come under suspicion automatically.” The other’s ivoryed predator’s grin flashed briefly. “Ways to circumvent the proscription exist. Where were you off to?”

“E” Quadrant. General Yee’s executive assistant is taking me on a grand a tour. The directory shows that getting there involves either riding all the way to the hub and transferring to one of the radial lifts, or hiking a few clicks around the peripheral corridor. I knew Artsutanov was huge, but until now not *how* huge.”

“Indeed,” said the other impatiently. “The conference is winding down. Very little time remains for me to catch you up on the power center’s layout.”

“You’ve seen the power distribution complex?”

Rudy’s arm was squeezed. “Talking here is unwise. One can never know which walls may overhear us. Let’s go into the hub. Between capsule arrivals and departures, the outlying dock area should provide a quiet corner in which to talk.”

Alone with his accomplice in the spin elevator compartment, Rudy asked why he had skipped the conference session.

Miura bristled. “There is an asinine aspect to their so-called ‘trade conference.’ Our Chinese friends have gone to enormous bother and expense hosting the representatives of many nations, but to what purpose? In my view, all they have done is heap insults on myself and the rest of their captive audience. I’ve heard only outrageous statements, provocative questions, and constant, pernicious needling. The delegates I have spoken with share my bewilderment.”

Rudy pondered the revelation as the compartment slowed to a stop, and microgravity took over, relieving the pressure on the Velcro-shod sneakers he wore. "Arrogance may account for their attitude. China's indecently proud of its stranglehold on world commerce. The rulers enjoy reminding everyone they're masters of the universe."

Miura pushed off, caught a freefall safety line on the fly and swarmed hand-over-hand into the branching passageway. "There is truth in what you say," he told Rudy over his shoulder. "You must be a mindreader. Nippon's Trade Minister responded to my first report with an identical observation. What arrogance! But I also sense an undercurrent that runs deeper, too. Having demonstrated its mercantile superiority many times over, why would China jeopardize Artsutanov's formerly tight security by convening this purposeless sideshow way out here in space? To flaunt their Great Leap Upward, to rub it in? I think not. Something devious lies at the root of this affair, something more significant than simple arrogance."

Cateel admitted to having no idea what it might be.

"Nor do I," assured the other. "Yet the moderator who went out of his way to try making a fool of me at yesterday's side session was no 'economist.' He could not have been more transparent if he'd worn a badge bearing a picture of China's counterintelligence director."

"Devious," said Rudy knowingly, "would be an apt tag for their counterintel network. I fully expected to see Yee's people out here."

"Ah, good! You are aware of who he is; I was briefed in Kobe. Obviously, they are here not in their customary shadow roles, but posturing as academics or business experts. Why try to pass off intelligence vermin as high-ranking executives of one stripe or another? Where is the logic in such pointless charades? More importantly, where the gain? The rat-faced 'economist' who tortured me during yesterday's side session made no attempt at diplomacy, or even civility. I had an urge to chop him and his holier-than-thou attitude right there at the lectern."

"Perhaps," said Cateel, "that may have been his aim."

"What do you mean?"

"To provoke you, make you lose your temper. Sounds like you think he purposely twisted your tail, played on the dignity of your official status. When angry, people often blurt truths they wouldn't dream of revealing in polite discussion."

Miura let go the freefall safety line and twisted his neck, searching in both directions along the stark connecting passageway, satisfying himself no one was within earshot. "*Señor* Roxas, there is more to you than meets the eye. Your observation is astute; I intend to ponder it. Quickly, now; let me run through what I've learned of the power center and explain how I think you should proceed, although how you choose to do so is of course your decision."

* * *

An enormous island in the sky, Artsutanov's counter-rotating cylindrical structures spun slowly about the axis of the satellite's stationary zenith and nadir hubs, the anchor points of immensely long descending tether pairs, and a shorter quadrate of tethers extending spaceward to the out-orbit spacecraft inertial launch and retrieval complex. Under ponderous clockwise spin, the administrative offices, living quarters, refectories and recreation facilities occupied four pie-slice quadrants of the earthward assemblage labeled "E" through "H." In the spaceward half, mostly comprised of a vastly expanded hub within which existed a labyrinth of microgravity manufacturing facilities devoted to using raw materials dispatched to the lunar factories for end-

item fabrication and assembly. The swollen industrial hub, ringed by a drumlike torus equally divided into Quadrants “A” through “D,” formed the counterclockwise-rotating “flywheel” mass required for station-keeping stability. Continuous feedback from redundant, computerized sensor systems maintained Artsutanov in automatic balance and trim by virtue of multiple low-energy thrusters.

Outnumbered during the sightseeing excursion by Colonel Vlassikov’s hovering security personnel, Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura and a dozen fellow delegates had been conducted through “showcase” portions of the microgravity hub. Ordered to bypass off-limits sectors, the highlight of the tour had been the installation the double-agent himself found most fascinating: a zero-gee foundry where ferrous metals suspended in midair by ingenious magnetic “slings” were alloyed and manipulated during fully automated “hands-off” processes. Sustained in microgravity, various end items were also produced undistorted, without the possibility of contamination by containers or molds, bugaboos familiar in earthly mills and foundries since the Industrial Revolution’s birth. In this manner a broad spectrum of metallic alloys featuring perfectly aligned crystalline lattices were produced in quantity.

His group of visiting dignitaries, it was explained, had been shown through the engineering and production facilities, where the emphasis was on laboratories devoted to capitalizing on idealized processes either unknown or impractical on the ground. Absent all but a minute fraction of the planet’s rumbling, inescapable gravity, these processes included the growth of perfect, nonmetallic crystals and production of normally immiscible composites — unlike substances such as oil and water that refused to blend uniformly on the ground, but mixed readily under microgravity within the hub’s manufacturing complex, where “light” and “heavy” were relatively meaningless terms.

He described the hard-sell propaganda lecture accompanying each phase of the tour, with the guide boasting repeatedly of quantum advances in microgravity materials and processes research and development, including nanotechnological mass production of ultra-light-weight, high-tensile-strength “foamed” steel alloys, one of the innovations similar to that which had given the PRC its fantastic tethers, and enabled China’s “Great Leap Upward.” In typical staccato fashion, he cherry-picked his way through the remainder of the tour, dismissing as incidental the microgravity pharmaceutical and bioengineering “wonders” he and his colleagues had been encouraged to admire, not to mention the collateral, orchestrated propaganda messages, and had concentrated on learning as much as possible about his accomplice’s objective.

“There is good news,” he concluded succinctly, “and some of the other sort.”

“How bad?” Rudy wanted to know.

“Dreadful. At first glance, penetrating the power distribution complex struck me as an overt impossibility. Our group was ushered into an observation booth overlooking the power gallery floor, although under microgravity it might also be thought of as a wall.”

“The center’s well protected?”

“That can be said,” the other responded drily. “Judging from the number of security personnel on the premises, the power gallery’s guarded around the clock; engineers and technicians also roam the floor. Our mutual acquaintances in Tokyo, and my friends in Kobe, universally consider the power complex the most vulnerable link in undercutting elevator operations, so it hardly surpriss me to learn the proprietors feel exactly the same way.

“Our guide’s running commentaries,” continued Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura, “amounted to more a continuous series of gee whiz! lectures than a source of information. The main power buses were described as solid silver superconductors immersed in troughs filled with cryogenic dry nitrogen that carry megawattage from the external microwave rectennas to —”

“Rectennas . . . ?” interrupted Rudy.

“Gigantic dishes the guide referred to as dipoles,” said the other. “A large exterior rectenna installed in each quadrant of Artsutanov acts as a receptor for high-energy microwave energy beamed from the co-orbiting solar arrays, but that isn’t news; orbital reconnaissance long ago opened the book on all external satellite features. The rectennas are installed atop flimsy, derrick-style towers cantilevered a distance from the zenith hub to avoid accidentally blasting the satellite with raw microwave energy.”

“An accident,” suggested Rudy, “like the one we have in mind?”

“No, no. Their thinking is more basic: the danger of a meteor strike, for example, which could damage, shear off or deflect a rectenna, and allow a power beam to damage Artsutanov.”

“I studied the pix,” said Cateel, “I remember the rectennas, but don’t recall what they look like, and had no idea what they’re called.”

“My inclination prior to taking the tour,” said his accomplice earnestly, “was to advise following your directive to the letter, but my firm conclusion is that going after the internal power complex would not only be impractical, but overtly impossible. From a distance, what appear to be removable access panels cover the gallery’s cryogenic troughs, and spanner wrenches are racked on the bulkhead behind every four access panels. But after viewing the layout and security provisions, I renounced all thought of advising you to take that approach — a purely personal judgment, you understand.”

His manner didactic, the other leaned close. “For any stranger to get near a power conduit is out of the question. Every square meter of the long power gallery is under direct human scrutiny, and doubtless also video-monitored. Even were a sufficient number of guards to be distracted or subdued, an intruder could never hope to open a power trough, set the charges and timers, and make his way out of the gallery.”

Cateel reflected on the summation. “You’re saying the operation’s stymied?”

“Not entirely, except in that venue. The relatively good news is that you should be able to conduct business externally.”

“In vacuum?”

“How else? Think back to the orbital reconnaissance photos you studied. What unusual configuration comes to mind?”

“You mentioned spindly rectenna support structures.”

“Exactly, Roxas. Four identical rectenna towers radiate symmetrically from each quadrant of the stationary spaceward hub. Symmetrical balance was described as essential for maintaining satellite stability.”

“An entire section of the library database,” said Rudy, “described to station-keeping.”

“Ah, yes; stability is crucial, and typical of all vacuum structures,” said Miura. “The rectenna support frameworks may look flimsy in photos, but I was told the structural members had been fabricated of tough, vacuum-hardened composites of sufficient integrity to be not much

more than superficially damaged by the limited supply of, uh . . . goods we have available. Yet a main power bus is within each open truss section?"

"Exposed?"

"Yes, of course; in *vacuo*," assured the other. "Shielded and insulated, but fully exposed. Facility maintenance technicians apparently subject the rectennas to regular inspection and service. According to the photos, safety-line padeyes installed across the hull facilitate the maintenance activity — handholds leading directly to each rectenna tower. The spaceward manufacturing hub is stationary, remember, not rotating."

Dubious about the prospect of going EVA, Cateel wanted to know how plastique would react to hard vacuum and raw sunlight.

"A good question. In Tokyo I was told the specially prepared rolls were covered with reflective sealant, and assured that the explosive gel would expand in vacuum without undue adverse effect." Covering his lips, the other whispered, "What you did not know is that a facile exchange of goods in Pontianak provided me with Semtex H, an extremely brisant form of gelignite composed of sixty-five percent nitroglycerin, thirty percent potassium nitrate, plus nitrocellulose and filler compounds. It detonates at nearly eight thousand meters per second."

Cateel whistled softly, sorting and digesting the information. "Sounds good, but doing business in vacuum won't be easy. It means stealing, activating and checking-out unfamiliar vacuum gear, and the timing will be critical sneaking out of an airlock at the right moment."

"Leave the problem of obtaining vacuum gear to me," was the other's surprising response. "You will rig the charges, Roxas, while I secure your line of retreat to the airlock."

The statement earned Rudy's full attention. "You're becoming directly involved?"

"No choice," said the other, his steady gaze meant to be reassuring. "My government's objective, added to that of your superiors, make my assistance mandatory."

"You want me to do the EVA work, while you stand guard over the road back?"

Miura's sharklike grin came and went swiftly. "A reasonable division of labor, isn't it? During lunar combat, you had extensive pressure-suit experience, while I have ventured out into vacuum but once, a short stroll at the Mare Procellarum Space Terminal, awarded to tourists wishing to brag about the feat. But I have never done so under microgravity. How many hours of pressure-suit drill did you see in during lunar service?"

"A few hundred," admitted Cateel.

"Despite that, the notion of going outside apparently does not sit well with you."

"EVA I can handle," said Rudy. "What's will be tough is finding a pressure-suit."

"Ah, yet if everything is arranged beforehand, you feel able to do what is necessary?"

"Running through a strange checklist on an unfamiliar suit," said Rudy, "can get hairy. Vacuum work in freefall involves much more than donning a suit, zipping out of an airlock."

Cateel's shoulder was patted in a patronizing way he found irksome, not encouraging.

His manner ingratiating, Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura beamed. He said with an air of sublime confidence, "I will guarantee to provide ample time to acquaint yourself with Chinese vacuum gear. As a delegate, I enjoy sufficient freedom of movement to revisit the dock area, circulate there and research the pressure-suit situation, perhaps observe the technicians and stevedores who routinely work in vacuum. If that aspect of your mission is taken care of, does our joint venture seem more reasonable?"

“I suppose so.” Hesitant to accept the other’s facile dismissal of a knotty problem, Rudy could not suppress his reluctance to accept the impromptu, half-conceived plan proposed by a stranger. He supposed the other’s lordly “take charge” attitude carried over from his career as a corporate tycoon, and talked the talk glibly, yet it was he himself who would have to walk the walk — a space walk at that, under microgravity — and his demeanor subtly undermined whatever confidence Cateel might once have felt in a scheme lacking detailed substance.

The mice, thought Cateel with mordant irony, *have again voted to bell the cat*. Except in this case the “cat” amounted to an immense, armored, fire breathing Chinese dragon. And, yes; it was he alone, not the oh-so-wise-and-confident bearer of explosives, who would be venturing out into the airless, starshot great darkness carrying the figurative “bell.”

In every waking moment since UNIA’s backstabbing director had coerced him into accepting the suicidal “challenge,” he had thought of the mission as a contest of championship proportions, a classic go-for-the-throat, devil-take-the-hindmost game with no rules whatever, no quarter asked and none given, or any distant possibility of a tie. Now, with the stage set to play a role in the game’s main event, he wondered why he felt reluctant to wholeheartedly commit himself to his accomplice’s proposed scenario. Was it because he felt certain vital elements slipping out of his control, or was it due to feeling unsure about the elements themselves?

Either way, the game had to be played to a finish, and *won*. He had always considered himself a dedicated gamer. Suddenly flushed with renewed optimism, he said, “It’s a go!”

The other flashed a toothy grin that was only marginally reassuring.

FOURTEEN

The Keeper nodded agreeably. “*Ichii bon*. Finish up downstairs, Mama-san, then trot on home. Ready to leave, give a holler and either me or the night watchman’ll come let you out.”

“*Hai!*” The stooped cleaning woman shuffled away, muttering to herself.

A bemused expression softened Erik Caesescu’s craggy features. He waited until the crone had padded down stairstairs, then moved slowly along the carpeted second-floor hallway of Asian Section headquarters, testing the knob of each locked door he passed.

During recent weeks, his after-hours prowlings had failed to reap anything that resembled a tantalizing dividend. He’d looked forward to the current stint of dusk-to-dawn duty, hoping to learn about the as yet unreported efforts of Cateel and his accomplice. Quench’s penultimate phase was due to kick off very shortly, making him eager to unearth any final developments that might affect the operation’s success. Miura, the hastily recruited premiere Nipponese intel asset, had apparently succeeded in posing as former multimillionaire Hideko Matsuda, who was actually under guard, and kept out of circulation at home in Kobe. But the Ministry of Justice’s prize op was far from the only question mark appended to Operation Quench. Of chief concern was the success or failure of the joint mission in which the assets were purportedly engaged.

Reaching the door to Howard Baste’s office, he paused and listened intently. The building was silent around him. When last seen, the churlish Japanese night watchman had finished his hourly walkabout and was brewing chai in his ground floor cubicle. The surly fellow probably wouldn’t stir for forty-five or fifty minutes. A pair of between assignment field assets, one of whom was recuperating from injuries acquired during a dustup in United Korea, were asleep in

third-floor bedrooms. Other than the night watchman and soon-to-depart cleaning woman, he had headquarters to himself.

Erik fished a plastic pouch from the slash pocket of the loose-fitting, tentlike jumpsuit he wore. Selecting a small steel pick, he was in the act of inserting the pick in the lock, and grasped the knob, thinking to hold the door steady, and felt it turn in his hand.

Red flags shot up at once. Finding Operations Chief Baste's door unlocked struck him like finding Britain's royal jewels unguarded in The Tower, giving him serious pause. An always-locked door that for some reason now unlocked made him reconsider his urge to snoop. Using a tentative forefinger, he pushed the door inward, peered guardedly into the dark office.

Baste, a conscientious belt, suspenders, both hands and prayer professional, was the sort of person who invariably counted his change. It was unheard of for him to walk away and leave his office unsecured. It had never happened before, and would probably never happen again.

Sublimating his reluctance to invade the premises, Erik gave in to gnawing curiosity. He stood poised in the open doorway, his thoughts racing, revolving the subtle, all but undetectable change in the emotional climate of headquarters, a subtle difference of late he had found it very difficult to interpret. Baste had been his usual bluff self, but overdoing the jocular facade that ordinarily masked his serious, diamond-hard personality. It was even harder to put a finger on the change in Pastoria's demeanor. Rather than his usual air of lofty disdain mixed with obligatory politeness, he no longer looked through Erik instead of at him, as if he'd decided to treat the slovenly slob he knew as "The Keeper" as an equal who deserved minimal tolerance.

Torn between a resolve for caution at all times, and a pressing need to dig into the sensitive files, he withdrew a penlight, flicked the narrow beam across Baste's computer terminal. Five, six or more precious minutes would be taken up bypassing the alarm circuitry, inputting this week's filched access code, before he could tap into whatever happened to be recently stored in the secure database. Indecision was not one of his weaknesses, but in this singular instance he stood unmoving, ruminated. A sixth sense loudly shouted "menace," yet offered no hint from what quarter it might come. The danger sign localized on Baste's unlocked office door, once again setting off jangling alarm bells he refused to ignore.

Another time, he thought, deciding to quickly sample the always innocuous paperwork cluttering Baste's desk, and call it a night. A veritable certainty existed that Howard would never, under any circumstances leave pay dirt exposed. But as long as he was already inside . . .

Catlike for all his bulk, Erik glided across the carpet, briefly shined the penlight into Baste's private lavatory to assure himself he was alone, then stepped behind the desk. Laying the glowing penlight atop Howard's overflowing IN-OUT trays, he pulled on a pair of latex surgical gloves and began flipping through piles of communiques, notes and assorted correspondence, carefully replacing each sheet and folder exactly where he'd found it. The snowstorm of memos, schedules, internal briefs and dispatches forever passing across Howard's desk were of little or no interest. An accomplished speed reader, Erik scanned a few words of each, and put it aside.

He'd been sifting through the paperwork for no more than two minutes, ears pricked for any sound from the hallway, when he came across the xerographic copy of the covert transmittal to the gentleman Baste had become convinced was Hideko Matsuda. Clipped to the sheet was a scrawled note written by Howard, a brief reminder of the transmittal's provenance, plus a notation describing the venue of its dispatch.

The huge man expelled breath explosively, then uttered a wheezing, “Jesus-my-beads!”

Carleton Daniel, pompous, two-faced egomaniac that he was, had ordered Cateel offed in a blow so far below the belt Erik had difficulty accepting it as authentic. Tossing his head half in anger, half in fear of the potential repercussions, he read the note again. It was dated the previous day, so there might be time, accent on *might*, to get word to Yee in order for the problem to be dealt with before it was too late. He realized doing so would be possible only if he ignored all risk, threw caution to the winds and acted now, now, now.

He had always felt a strong personal affinity for the cool, ultra-resourceful field asset he had successfully goaded into assaulting and kicking downstairs the numbskull “Keeper” who, unbeknownst to him, was actually a team player on his side. Yet saving Cateel’s derriere was far back, a distant second, and had nothing whatever to do with igniting his resolve to act swiftly to salvage Quench;. The complex operation he, his father and Yee had cooked up between themselves made it imperative for both assets, not just one, to return to Tokyo in the wake of a successful “sabotage” mission to separately and independently corroborate Artsutanov’s putative power outage, a culmination the general was counting on to tip the scales in China’s favor.

Sliding the damning flimsy sheets back in a folder, and busied himself rearranging the various stacks exactly the way he’d found them. Concentrating on the task, he failed to notice the office door swing open a few millimeters, and flinched involuntarily when the overhead light burst into brilliance.

“Hey, lookee here who’s come calling,” drawled Howard Baste. “It’s old slug-nutty himself, nabbed cold with both mitts in the cookie jar.”

The Keeper stared at Baste, open-mouthed. An antique nine-millimeter Beretta Model 92 was clutched in the professional, two-handed isosceles grip of Baste’s hairy, rock-steady fists.

The round, unwavering “eye” of the old-fashioned semi-automatic pistol returned Erik’s stare, a subconscious reflex causing him to lift his arms chest high. Realizing too late that it had been a gesture of submission, he let his hands dangle helplessly at his side. His gaze locked on the pistol’s unwavering round eye, he asked in an injured tone, “Why the heat, Howard? Found your door unlocked and was jus neatening up your stuff, is all. No harm done.”

Baste chuckled. “Never try ’n kid a kidder, Big Fella. So it was you all along, not my boy, Denby. Surprise, surprise! Hat’s off! You play dumb better ’n anyone I’ve yet run across.”

“Say what?” mumbled Erik.

“Aw, knock it off!” Baste tilted his head, a malicious grin in evidence. “There’s damned little profit in wasting breath. You don’t have many seconds left, so use ‘em, or lose ‘em.”

“What the hell you saying, Howard? Listen, I was just cleanin’ up your . . .”

“Save it! See the extra knob on the overhead light fixture? So happens its a video eye. I’ve been watching you do good work ever since you bungled in here.”

Cornered behind the desk, Erik tore his gaze from the antique weapon’s muzzle. “Chrissakes, Howard! Don’t I even get a hearing?” he asked humbly.

“Uh-uh, not this century,” said Baste, busy screwing a silencer into the Beretta’s muzzle. “A tiny bonus might come from quizzing you, but who you work for is plain as your schnozz, and that’s pretty goddamn plain. Sayonara!”

Baste’s forefinger tightened on the handgun’s trigger. The silenced weapon emitted an overly loud *pfhut-t-ft!*

The nine millimeter slug slammed Erik backward into a framed Japanese watercolor on the wall behind the desk. Sliding butt-first to the carpet, his massive legs spraddled outward at odd angles, one flailing arm knocked over a leather-bound wastebasket. He slumped on his side, his head thumping the carpet.

Baste edged around the desk. He lowered the silenced Beretta, intending to administer the kiss-off bullet considered *de rigeur* in what he always called, "This cockamamie intel racket."

* * *

Despite persistent misgivings about voluntarily becoming some variety of semi-kidnap victim, FBI Special Agent Murray Kapps was in an introspective mood. For the past hour he had occasionally turned to regard the lovely young woman beside him, her delicately seductive features peaceful in repose. Breathing shallowly, Magdalena Saunders looked fresh and innocent, without a care in the world. When her eyelids fluttered, he looked away quickly.

Maggie roused, rolled her head to the side and peered at Kapps obliquely from beneath long, silken lashes. She closed her eyes again, lolled back against the headrest of the hypersonic airliner's reclining seat, and murmured, "Morning, Artie."

Artie yet! thought Kapps. "Welcome back to the real world, Mrs. Saunders." He tried unsuccessfully to keep his voice level, and realized the quip made him sound aggrieved.

"What's . . . wrong?" she asked, sitting up straight.

"Several things," he said. "In fact, a tidal wave of wrongheaded wrongdoings. How in God's name did you ever persuade me to go along with this idiotic charade?"

She stirred, stifled a yawn and reached under the armrest, feeling for the lever that would bring the seat to an upright position. "Not too much of a hard sell, was, it?" She accompanied the question with a piquant smile. "You wanted to come, insisted on coming, and know it."

"As for 'wanting' to go through with it, I plead not guilty. And please stop calling me Artie. I'm here because of the mess you got into because of your brother, then got out of through the good offices of nameless 'rescuers.' The only reason I'm here is that the strangers who 'rescued' you piqued the curiosity of the Bureau's big brass. But the whoppers and half-truths I had to tell may do me out of a pension if I live that long. This escapade you dreamed up has probably ruined an extremely promising career, Mrs. Saunders. Doesn't that bother you at all?"

"Not at all, Mr Saunders." Magdalena offered a reprise of her piquant smile. "You knew it was the only way to learn what you were determined to learn. Otherwise, you wouldn't have conned your big boss into falling for my wild and crazy scheme."

"Wild and crazy me, you should've said."

"At heart," she told him, "I do believe you're a wild and crazy guy." She glanced out the window into inky darkness. "There are lights ahead in the distance. We may be coming in."

"About time, too. This stub-winged needle bounced back through the sound barrier while you were snoozing. The shiver-shake was mild, and you didn't budge. I'm sure you have a remarkably clear conscience, Mrs. Saunders."

"I do, Mr. Saunders."

Murray pouted. "I pray that our connubial bliss portrayal flies as well as this plane."

"Oh, it will."

He met her amused gaze squarely. "And what if I were to take it upon myself to exercise connubial privileges?"

“You won’t.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Maggie hid a grin behind slender, manicured fingers. “Husbandly privileges,” she said lightly, “are reserved for authentic, real-life husbands. But I’m delighted to hear a sense of humor emerge beneath all that G-man authority and dignity.”

“Think I’m joking?”

“You’d better be. Tell me, how is it an attractive man like you has never married? And don’t feed me any guff about never finding the right woman.”

“Silly to buy a cow,” said Kapps, “when milk’s so cheap.”

Magdalena’s grin segued into a despairing head shake. “That’s exactly the sort cliché I expected to hear from a federal cop. Your remark, if you’ll excuse the pun, was a cop out.”

It was Murray’s turn to grin. “There’s a young lady I see regularly.”

“But she isn’t Miss Right?”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. Could be I miss her Mr. Right target.”

“I’d have trouble believing that, Mr. Saunders.”

If she smiles at me like that again, he thought, his pulse rate climbing from a canter to a full gallop, *husbandly privileges might be brought into play after all.*

The hypersonic jet banked shallowly. Through the small, thermally protected window, a canted panorama appeared — Kowloon’s myriad lights surrounding the inky waters of Hong Kong’s bustling harbor. Since reverting to Chinese rule at the end of the second millennium, Britain’s former Crown Colony had blossomed into China’s foremost international trade center. Steel and glass edifices dotted the New Territories, and the vast metropolitan sprawl had amalgamated itself with the inland city of Shenzhen, forming a megalopolis stretching greedy fingers toward Guangzhou, the former Canton.

A clear chime sounded in the cabin; the FASTEN SEAT BELT sign lighted, initiating a babble of Chinese, plus a smattering of English and other languages from the adjoining rows of seats. Flight attendants busied themselves stowing pillows and blankets. Minutes later, the cabin canted backward as the hypersonic jetliner flared into a nose-high landing attitude more elevated than normal. Muffled barks announced the landing gear trucks biting the unyielding concrete of the runway at the Chek Lap Kok International Airport.

Maggie unbelted during rollout clutching her handbag. “They said we’d be met.”

Waiting with outward patience until the other first-class passengers had disembarked, Murray rose and followed “his wife” up the aisle, filing past a raven-haired flight attendant who accompanied her farewells with a tired smile. Disgorging through the boarding tunnel, they entered the airport’s crowded main concourse.

An unusually tall Chinese gentleman stepped forward, inclined his head gravely.

“It’s you,” Maggie said. “Art, this gentleman led rescuers. I never learned his name.”

“Names are unimportant, Mrs. Saunders.” The dapper gentleman’s manner was smooth, his English barely accented. “I wish we had time to offer you Hong Kong’s hospitality; there is much to see, much to do. Unfortunately, we are overdue at Shitang, the mainland launch site. Arrangements have been made to speed you out to Artsutanov’s spacecraft terminus.”

“Space!” Murray blanched. “No mention was made of going into space.”

The treetop-tall greeter's gesture was meant to be placatory. "It's a genuine pleasure to have you as our unexpected guest, Mr. Kapps. This is neither the time nor place to clarify matters. Please come with me. Your luggage is being taken care of as we speak."

Stunned, Murray could not resist looking daggers at his counterfeit spouse. "So much for your wild and crazy scheme, dear 'wife' in name only."

Magdalena's only response was a gentle pat on the hand.

* * *

Hanging back, torn between apprehension and admiration for his confederate's unsuspected acting ability, Rudy did his best sustain a nulled expression for the benefit of the security guards, looking puzzled, as if he did not understand a syllable of Chinese.

Rendered in purposely mangled Cantonese, the pleas and entreaties of his accomplice, though obviously wrung straight from the heart, were having a less than negligible effect on the pair of guards. Playing the part of a tyro in the difficult language, Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura was explaining how he and his friend, vigorous men both, were in desperate need of feminine solace. All they wanted to do, he insisted, was spend a brief hour or two in Artsutanov's spaceward hub and visit the professional ladies of Joy Street, all of whom, he had been assured, were delectable virgin goddesses begging to be deflowered.

The smaller security guard uttered a falsetto titter. "Not even close, Brother! But if you have yet to enjoy the rite of passion in zero-gee, you've ever enjoyed it, period."

"Go inside now, hey?" asked Miura eagerly.

"Yellow armbands are not supposed to even know about Joy Street," pointed out the second guard, "let alone beg to visit there. You would have to pass through several classified sectors, most of them off-limits unless special access privileges were obtained."

"One short hour," begged Miura brokenly. "That all we ask. Take off armbands, leave with you, hey? Who know difference?"

The taller guard rolled his eyes, glanced at his comrade with lifted brows and made a lewd gesture. "These horny foreign devils look harmless," he said in gutter Cantonese, certain his words would sail over the heads of the foreign devils in question. "What say you, Chen?"

"I say," responded his companion, "if a reasonable amount of squeeze were to change hands we might consider looking the other way for one or two passion-filled hours."

It was difficult to tell which guard was more surprised when a roll of banknotes appeared in the vocal supplicant's clenched fist. "You understood?" the one called Chen wanted to know.

Flashing his ivory-laden shark's grin, Miura rocked his monied fist meaningfully. "We talk universal language understood all places, Brother. My friend and I both speak it."

They had to wait while the guards turned aside to scan the armbands and shoulder patches of a gaggle of chattering workers who flitted past the checkpoint. The wad of bills abruptly vanished from Miura's hand. "No more than two hours," warned the smaller guard. "Wear the temporary armbands at all times, and drop them here on your way out. If you are not back in exactly two hours, you will be very sorry."

Gesturing for Rudy to slip off his yellow armband, Miura peeled back the Velcro closure strip securing his own and removed it. "Two short hours," he promised, exuding infinite sincerity. "When we exit, you will hear another phrase in the universal language, hey?"

Chen looked pleased. His companion grinned and waved them on.

Rudy trailed his accomplice along tautly strung freefall safety lines. Despite his air of casual confidence, Miura was apparently having difficulty finding his way through the quadrant's maze of passageways, blind alcoves, and restricted sectors. Twisting and turning, doubling-back through one corridor after another in what Cateel considered haphazard fashion, he stopped now and again to solicit directions from the infrequent, stenciled bulkhead signs. On several occasions they had to dodge aside as coveys and squadrons of hub regulars, indifferent to the uncertainties of microgravity, zoomed to and fro with nonchalant abandon, disdaining the use of safety rigging except to stop, start, or turn a corner. Most passers-by, Rudy noted, wore ill-fitting crimson coveralls; their hurried flight and vivid garb gave him the impression of being in the confines of an aviary harboring flocks of birds with scarlet plumage.

In his Matsuda persona, the Japanese intel agent had been conducted through selected portions of the spaceward hub during the guided tour. After aimlessly changing the route several times, he confessed to disorientation, blaming it on the passageways' profusion and visual iniformity. Another quarter-hour was squandered in erratic back-and-forthings before they encountered a major trunk corridor.

"Ah," breathed the other, "familiar turf. You once worked as a cargo handler, Roxas. Recognize the arrow and color-coded ideographs on the far bulkhead?"

"Orange and blue, capsule load gang colors."

"Right. We follow this corridor all the way to the spaceward dock area."

Tagging his accomplice, Rudy couldn't shake off subliminal misgivings about the other's intentions, trying more than once to dismiss his uneasiness. His acquiescence to the scheme calling for destroying one or more external power rectennas was spurred by a mental *presque vu* image of he and his accomplice clad in vacuum gear, boarding a spacecraft in the open mare near Procellarum Space Terminal and heading home. But the other's callous act of bribery, followed by an erratic passage through the zero-gee hub they had been repeatedly warned to avoid, struck him as a needless flirtations with disaster.

"Stop here." Miura clung to the safety line, waiting for human traffic to pass by. "I see a method of making ourselves less conspicuous." When the way was clear, he dove across the passageway, arrested his plunge in an alcove housing a bank of vending machines. After reading the ideographs on several decals, he tapped lighted buttons. Two packages of, one-size-fits-all jumpsuits ashioned of crinkly recycled crimson paper popped out of the chute.

"Now, Roxas, we just two more faces in the crowd. Our tour guide told me workers wear a fresh pair of coveralls daily to eliminate laundering." Donning the garments in a nearby lavatory by pulling them on over their jumpsuits, they re-affixed the temporary blue-green armbands. Mirua led the way hand-over-hand along the main corridor, where now and again stenciled ideographs and arrows defined their direction of travel as ZENITH.

"If I recall correctly," said Miura, "we turn left at the junction jusa ahead." They passed through a set of hefty, rolled-back pressure hatches, the nesting halves of which had been left standing a bare meter apart. On the far side, the passageway gave way to an expansive airlock service compartment. Row after row of sun-faded orange and blue pressure suits were racked on opposite bulkheads. Oriented every which way, a sardine-like school of Team Blue Load Gang personnel drifted at all angles, undergoing a change of shift during the lull between arrivals and departures to and from the out-orbit spacecraft inertial launch retrieval complex. Half of the

workers were divesting themselves of pale blue, sun-faded pressure suits, while the other half contorted themselves, wriggling and squirming in midair to don the vacuum gear discarded by their fellow workers going off duty.

Miura said in Spanish, "See now why we went to all this trouble."

Absorbed in reading the posted columns of ideographs making up vacuum gear checklists, Rudy nodded. Flush-mounted on every square meter of bulkhead space not taken up by racked equipment, flat-panel video displays featured green, amber and blue texts consisting of trilingual pressure-suit instructions. He readily interpreted the air bottle recharge and exchange directions, instructions for detecting abrasive suit wear, allowable time-of-usage limitations, and emergency procedures to be followed in the event of an accident, or during infrequent solar flares. Mating air hose bayonet connections were graphically depicted, plus standard suit-to-suit radio frequencies, and an exhaustive GO, NO-GO checklist of suit operational parameters.

"This data should suffice," remarked Miura.

"The, uh checklist . . . ?" said Rudy, preoccupied with his study of the information. "Yes, it's fine. Other than size differences, most all EVA suits are standardized." He continued to assimilate the data, pulling himself forward for a closer look. "The load-gang drill," he said, "is familiar. I can exit through the main lock, use the handholds to go over the hull —"

"No, no," denied the other. "Go that way and you'd be spotted. Maintenance personnel use smaller airlocks in each quadrant of the spaceward hub, an exit path much less liable to detection. As service technicians, we can take the goods to one of the maintenance service compartments, wring out your pressure-suit using the checklist there, when we are alone."

Cateel thought it over. For the first time he began to feel more than a smidgen of confidence in the proposed venture.

"A word of caution," added Miura. "When the time comes to act, we must be prepared to neutralize anyone who might interfere. If the task falls to you, keep in mind how fatal it might be to hold back. Out here, a body can easily be disposed of in one of the stowage lockers."

Cateel sensed that his change of expression must have betrayed his distaste for the other's casual instruction to kill. "We'd better head back. More than one hour's gone. If those guards blow the whistle, we'll be hunted down."

"It's plain that you haven't guessed?" said the other.

"Guessed what?"

"That there is no time like the present time."

"You mean, go *now*?"

"*Si, Señor* Roxas, at once. The trade conference is in its final hours. The first groups of delegates are due to depart for the ground this evening."

A flush of nervous excitement washed through Cateel. "Fine, but something is missing. We need the, uh, goods."

Matsuda patted his thighs, touched what might have been the middle-aged spare tire encircling his waist. "The 'goods' are with us, my friend. The instant our work is finished, we will board the first outbound capsule and spend every second of the journey praying we reach the spacecraft launch and retrieval terminus before the lights go out."

* * *

With a fire raging in Erik Caesescu's chest, he uttered an anguished groan. The nine-millimeter slug had taken him flush in the sternum, above the heart. The flak vest he habitually wore beneath a sloppy, ill-fitting jumpsuit had stopped the bullet, but he knew the localized impact must have cracked or broken his sternum, possibly his ribs.

With the pain approaching the unbearable stage, he steeled himself, remained motionless, tending to magnify the agony. Letting his jaw hang slackly, he breathed in shallow gasps, his unblinking stare focused on infinity.

Peripheral vision alerted him to Howard Baste's approach. An ardent collector of antique and old-fashioned firearms, the field operations chief sidled around the desk, the extended silencer's muzzle half a meter from The Keeper's forehead.

A leg the size of a tree limb whipped around, swept Baste's feet out from under him. The silenced Beretta discharged twice into the wall as he crashed down heavily atop Erik, who rolled to his left, leveraged the other aside with his body mass, seized the other's gun hand in a vise grip, and twisted as hard as he could.

Baste loosed a crimson roar of pain. The Beretta thudded to the carpet.

Erik stretched, scooped up the fallen weapon by the silencer's hot barrel, raised it taking careful aim and clipped Baste hard at the base of the skull.

The ops chief's mouth opened in a silent yell and he sagged backward. Erik hit him again, this time not quite as hard, and struggled to his knees. Studying the prone figure through a roseate haze of agony that permeated his chest. Sensing how fuzzy and disorganized his reasoning ability was, he gingerly massaged his burning sternum, tried to weigh the pros and cons of finishing Baste. He was debating the issue in a fog of pain, trying to imagine the consequences either way, when a downstairs commotion made him forget all about Howard.

Racked with a degree of pain, he fought to gain his feet, hastily unscrewed the silencer's still warm cylinder and tossed it in the kneehole beneath Baste's desk, then jammed the weapon into his jumpsuit's deep slash pocket and staggered out into the second floor hallway.

The night watchman came bounding up the stairs clutching an explosive-pellet automatic pistol. Erik met him stumbling downward.

"Did I hear gunshots . . . ?" demanded the the middle-aged Japanese.

His features contorted, Erik kept his forefinger curled around the trigger of the pocketed Beretta, and clutched the bannister for support. "Baste . . . shot. Denby heading for . . . roof."

Ignoring Caesescu, the night watchman thundered up to the third floor landing. Mentally kicking himself for not having had enough presence of mind to lock the door to Baste's office behind him, Erik lurched downstairs like a drunken sailor. When she saw him, the elderly cleaning woman dropped the mop she was using and shrank against the wall.

Fumbling to undo the double-locks on the blast-resistant front door of headquarters, he snapped back the twin deadbolts and fled into the night. Go to ground, or run? Those were the only options available. His chest hurt like the very devil; he suspected internal bleeding. After twenty or thirty wobbly steps, the physical act of trotting became too much of an ordeal to bear. But getting word to Yee was imperative; time enough later to worry about how to do a fade.

His head swimming, his mental processes still enervated by the painful trial he was putting himself through, a condition worrishing him more than thoughts of immediate pursuit. The first order of business would be to find a telephone. At the wee hour of three o'clock, the

circadian rhythms of most humans were at their lowest ebb. The neighborhood in western Nakano-Ku lay still and shadowy under the streetlights. The residential district sprinkled with small shops, eateries, and older multi-story office buildings had been selected as the perfect, anonymous locale for UNIA Asian Section headquarters. Other than a single distant pedestrian, and the red taillights of a lone vehicle blocks away, he had the street to himself.

His worst nightmare, Erik realized, would be to encounter a patrol car. Fanatically street-smart Tokyo cops wouldn't hesitate to stop and interrogate a jog-trotting Caucasian. With Baste's damn Beretta bouncing around in the pocket of his jumpsuit, he simply couldn't let that happen.

Slowing his pace, he rubbed his chest hard and peered warily around the corner of a building. His faltering steps had taken him toward a pair of public phones outside the Nakamura Fish Market. *Proves*, came the wry thought, *part of my brain's still working*.

An overhead fluorescent fixture cast too much light for his uses over an old, voice-only, wall-mounted pay phone. He used the Beretta's barrel to smash both fluorescent tubes, dropped coins in the slot and punched up long distance. When a squeaky-voiced Japanese operator came on the line, he used his calling card, requested to be put through to an unlisted number in Prague.

While waiting for the call to go through, he sank to the cold sidewalk, sitting in the shadows to make himself less conspicuous, using his free hand to massaging his injured chest.

A duty officer answered the phone in Czech with a noncommittal, "Hello." He quickly switched to flawed English and accepted the call upon hearing the operator spell out the name of a "Mr. Kuiper" who was calling. It was early evening in Prague. Erik was not surprised to learn his father was still at his desk.

"Calling in the *clear*?" the aged spymaster complained hoarsely. "I always knew you were an idiot. Carelessness will be the end of you."

"No choice, Pop. The shit just hit the fan." Switching to rapidfire Czech, Erik sketched recent events. He did not minimize his own stupidity for stumbling into a trap baited with a possibly spurious document ordering Cateel's betrayal. He explained how the lesson had come the hard way, by getting shot, then told his father he intuitively believed in the bait's authenticity, and concluded by saying, "Best let the right folks know before you take another breath, Pop."

"Interesting." As usual, Wladislaw Casesecu sounded totally unruffled. "I'll take care of this end. Where are you?"

Erik explained his situation.

"I see. In your dazed, befuddled state are you able to recall this month's trysting place?"

"Hell yes!"

"Be there in exactly four hours. A skimmer will pick you up."

"Great! See you soon."

The elder Casesecu snorted in disgust. "We shall hope that it is so. I think perhaps the time has come for us to go up in the sky and gauge events for ourselves."

"Mean it?"

"We could both use a holiday, no?"

Erik chuckled, and nearly choked because it made his chest hurt even more. "I can damn sure use a vacation. On my way."

He was reaching up to cage the phone when a burst of explosive pellets splattered like monster firecrackers across the fish market's brick-and-glass façade.

He crawled away under a rain of brick fragments and shards of broken glass.

FIFTEEN

Detesting the language he considered barbaric, Yee spoke Russian only when it was necessary, and politely asked his security colleague when he planned to depart for the ground.

Perspiring for no apparent reason, Colonel Vlassikov did not relax his death grip on the freefall safety line. Coping with microgravity in the satellite's zenith hub never failed to unnerve the corpulent officer, and as usual the current bout with weightlessness had brought on an anxiety attack. "Shortly, Comrade General. I mean to board the first available capsule. And you?"

"I have need to stay aboard a while longer."

Sounding put upon, Vlassikov wanted to know why Yee had instructed him to assign all but a handful of guardsmen to escort duty, accompanying capsule loads of homeward-bound delegates. "A wise course, I grant you, Comrade General."

"Seeing that the foreigners created no mischief en route struck me as essential."

"True, but it leaves my satellite security contingent woefully undermanned."

"It did seem the wisest course."

The vague response answered nothing, earning dissatisfied frown. "And afterward, Comrade General, are you bound for Aristarchus?"

"At the moment, yes. My plans may change, however," replied Yee's in Russian. More than once had the colonel been "invited" to undergo a hypnotic course in conversational Chinese. Thus far, the obtuse, stiff-necked Russian had invented one excuse after another for failing to honor Yee's request. Floating at right angles to one another in front of a flat-panel vidicom terminal, the officials watched the winking countdown numerals dwindle until goose eggs appeared coincident with the image of a white passenger capsule shooting earthward from the spindly launch and retrieval tower; simultaneously, a freight module flashed up into the tower to be captured by the unseen decelerator platform.

"That makes only three groups of delegates still aboard," remarked Vlassikov. "Soon we shall be rid of all the foreigners."

Yee, who invariably thought of the colonel as a "foreigner," chose not to reply although he knew the self-important Russian was not to be sloughed off. Vlassikov was certain to demonstrate his maddening flair for stating the obvious. "Comrade General, departure of the final group will mark finis to this unprecedented affair. In my view, the so-called 'trade conference' has been a colossal humbug, and nothing more."

"Was that your impression?" inquired Yee, suppressing an impulse to tell the colonel what a humbug *he* was.

Vlassikov uttered a self-congratulatory. "Despite the bombast and hand-wringing we heard over and over, I believe we learned what we needed to know. Is that not so? The moneygrubbing imperialists gave notice of being on their last legs."

"I'm forced to agree, Comrade Colonel."

"At the risk of boring you with a question you've already answered, I still do not understand why you insisted on having only my people escort the homeward bound foreigners."

Why not assign some of your operatives as escorts? Other than a few officers, my guards staff is not merely depleted in number, but entirely absent of rankers.”

Yee explained for the third or fourth time how most members of his own staff had rotated to the ground months ago, whereas Vlassikov’s security contingent had been in space for nearly the entire past quarter. “I should think,” he concluded, “you would be eager to let your men and women recreate themselves, reaccustom themselves to normal life.”

“Umm-m-m, yes. Most considerate of you.” A glint of suspicion lurking in his dark Slavic eyes, the colonel added, “I appreciate the gesture, and will return the favor at the first opportunity. As for becoming reaccustomed to a more or less normal life, perhaps we shall go back inside, where a tad of weight is better than an absence of up and down.”

Yee politely declined the invitation. “There are several matters I must attend to first. Why not join me for dinner this evening, Comrade Colonel? We can discuss the upshot of the trade conference, make tentative plans on how to best capitalize on the lessons learned.”

“Excellent.” The other’s features crinkled with sly merriment. “I’ll be delighted to, so long as you promise not to serve that boiled grass, or the sweet-and-sour monkey brains favored by your chef.”

Yee responded to the lame witticism with a shadow smile. “You have my pledge, Comrade Colonel. No boiled grass or monkey brains. Seven o’clock, my quarters?”

His reply lacking enthusiasm, Vlassikov said I will look forward to it,” and departed.

Boiled grass indeed! Noting with disdain how clumsily the overweight Russian boosted himself into the spin elevator, Yee thought, *When this is over, my fat piglet, you’ll be fortunate to dine on anything.* He punched the bulkhead-mounted vidicom terminal; the stern visage of his aide, Major Woo, congealed in the display.

“I assume all is as it should be.”

“To the letter, sir. The power sector is under tight security. We await the arrival of the . . . strangers.”

Sudden concern tightened Yee’s Sinic features. “They have not put in an appearance?”

“No, sir. A coded Eyes Only transmittal came off the secure uplink a minute ago. Shall I have it brought to you?”

Yee pushed aside a strong urge to rush directly to the power distribution center. A missive coded Eyes Only meant Beijing, Prague or Tokyo was clamoring for his immediate attention, nor could decoding take place without a certain leather-bound volume he kept under lock and key. “Stay where you are, Major. I’m on my way down.”

“As you wish, sir.”

In his his “G” Quadrant office, Yee wordlessly accepted the sealed message his aide handed him. Diddling the double cipher locks, he opened the safe, withdrew an annotated Chinese translation of the *Qur’an*, Islam’s holy book perversely chosen by Wladislaw Caesescu as the one-time-pad key required to decode encrypted communications. The unbreakable codification, based upon a printed text unknown to anyone other than sender and recipient, was infinitely superior to any other type of sophisticated encryption. Yee let the computer laser-scan the Eyes Only message in parallel with the calendar date’s specified page. Less than ten seconds passed before the high-speed printer began issuing a spate of ideographs. The general tore off the hardcopy.

Major Woo's eyes narrowed when his superior blanched, muttered something foul under his breath.

"Read it," directed Yee, biting the words short.

"Sir, it's codeword Eyes Only."

"Do it!" snapped the general.

Woo accepted the flimsy sheet gingerly. His brows knitted. "UNIA is ordering their man's disposal? That makes no sense whatever, sir."

"Less than none." His manner deliberately subdued, Yee declared common sense a commendable attribute, but one with which their worthy British adversaries were not richly endowed. "Is your squad in readiness, Major?"

"Fully prepared, standing by in position, sir."

"What of the colonel's remaining guardsmen?"

"Hand-picked men are assigned to shadow the five junior officers. Lieutenant Li himself picked up Vlassikov when he parted from you in the dock area."

A brisk nod. "There may still be time to deal with this insanity. Come with me, Major."

Arriving in the annex adjacent to the main power center, the general and his aide found preparations were in their final stages. "Bloodied" tunics and realistic looking burns disfigured a dozen or more active participants. Scattered others were receiving the attentions of women administering simulated gore. One of Woo's junior officers provided assurance that the smoke bombs and noisemakers were well concealed at the base of specific power gallery bulkheads.

Yee asked if any engineers or technicians were still inside.

"No, sir. All were told to return to their quarters."

"Are you sure the strangers haven't hidden themselves somewhere in there?"

"Positive, Comrade General." The major indicated a cluster of video monitors. "The gallery can be accessed only from here in the annex, through one of the video-monitored personnel hatches."

Minutes passed. Increasing as the second dribbling away, Yee's uneasiness blossomed into outright anxiety. "Open up," he directed. "I mean to see for myself."

"At once, sir. But if they arrive while you're inside it might —"

"Order the hatch opened!"

"At once, sir. Shall I accompany you?"

"Stay here, Woo. Lend me your sidearm. Be prepared to initiate events exactly as rehearsed." His perplexity mounting, Yee pulled himself along the freefall safety rigging, peeked through the slowly opening hatch as it swung wide.

The long, softly lit metal cavern lay exposed throughout its length and breadth. Glinting with metallic highlights, the rounded covers of the superconductor troughs diminished in perspective to a far bulkhead walling off the high-voltage switching compartment. Major Woo had been correct in saying there was no place for a single individual to hide, let alone a pair. The power distribution center lay deserted.

Yet it shouldn't be! shrieked the warning in Yee's mind.

By now the "saboteurs" should be hastily opening power trough access panels, packing what they believed to be explosive plastique around the insulated, supercooled silver bus bars. At one point, he remembered giving serious thought to using doubles in order to eliminate the

complicated dual saboteur charade, and thus vastly simplifying Quench's penultimate phase. But both Caesescu *père* and his amazingly capable son had unanimously vetoed the notion as self-defeating, vociferously insisting that while doubles might suffice for a "record" of purported sabotage, video close-ups were mandatory — visual, undeniable evidence that a Japanese and UNIA intel asset had collaborated in bringing down the satellite's power system. Equally vital, they declared, was the necessity of obtaining evidentiary proof that the responsibility for pushing the world to the brink of thermonuclear holocaust be laid at the feet of not just the U.N. intel organization, but that of Japan as well. Most important of all was that both "saboteurs" *had* to return to their respective masters and confirm the success of their joint venture by filing identical reports.

However, the principals needed to conduct and showcase the purported sabotage were nowhere to be seen. Yee's instincts screamed an even louder warning of duplicity. Whirling about, he grasped the safety line, exited the power gallery on the fly.

* * *

Erik Caesescu crouched low, his ears ringing from multiple pellet explosions too close for comfort. His violated sternum threatened to explode when he dodged away from the fish market's chipped brick wall on hands and knees, dove across the sidewalk and rolled into the protective lee of a parked delivery van, actions redoubling the agony in his chest. *Stupid ass!* he chided himself. Being cornered was his own bloody fault for not keeping one eye on the street.

A second spray of explosive pellets shattered the van's side windows, peppering him with pellets of safety-glass. The attackers were trying to drive him from cover with a fusillade designed to make him break, make a run for it, but his professionally honed survival instincts dictated an offensive, not a retreat.

Freeing the antique Beretta from the slash pocket of his jumpsuit, he staggered to his feet and made as if to take off up the sidewalk, then quickly ducked back and went down again. He found it a tight fit for someone as large-boned and hefty as he was to squeeze his bulk beneath the parked van. Misdirected pellets did further damage, raking and chewing up both the parked van and the fish market's frontage. The rapid-fire crack of detonating pellets was deafening.

Erik peered between the van's rear wheels. An electric jitney had halted in the center of the street, headlights ablaze. Silhouetted against the glare, he could see shoes and trouser cuffs doubtless belonging to either Howard Baste of the night watchman. Then his assailants parted company, stalking him from either side of the van, bracketing him for the kill.

Hands appeared clutching a semi-automatic pellet rifle aimed to indiscriminately spray the van's underside. Slewed the Beretta around, Erik got off a snap shot, then two more quick rounds.

Howard Baste howled once and hopped about, clutching his ruined ankle, then crumpled to the pavement alongside the clattering pellet rifle. Erik heard footsteps receding in a fast patter, and hoped he was correct in thinking the night watchman had seen and heard enough to decide on abandoning the downed operation's chief in the interest of prospective longevity.

Twisting his bulk around, Erik painfully wriggled out from beneath the pellet-riddled van. In the street, he dropped the automatic pistol, seized Baste's pellet rifle and sprayed the departing jitney. Explosions peppered the vehicle's quarter panel and blew out both rear tires. The runabout

careened, sideswiped a car parked farther down the block, and rolled to a stop against the curb in a tinkle of broken glass.

“Bastard!” gritted Howard, using both hands to staunch the flow of blood from his shattered ankle. “Go on, run you sumbitch! You won’t get far.”

Not listening, Erik swung the pellet rifle by the barrel, throwing it as far as he could down the street. Bent over double, he ignored the searing pain, scooped up the fallen Beretta and hobbled toward the stalled jitney. Snatching open the driver’s door, he yanked the dazed, uninjured night watchman to the pavement with one hand and vaulted into the seat.

Lights had been popping on in any number of windows. People cautiously ventured out of doorways, peering at the street scene from every quarter. Although still far off, Erik heard the ululating ding-dong! of an approaching police car. His booted foot mashed down the jitney’s accelerator. The electric-powered vehicle leaped forward, swaying in counterpoint to grinding sounds and thumps from the flat rear tires.

Four blocks from the fish market, he swung the jitney into an alley, parked it between two large trucks backed up to a warehouse loading dock. Unzipping the jumpsuit, he struggled to remove and discard the damaged flak vest. In the dim light, the skin did not appear to be broken over his sternum, although a swollen, angry welt had risen. He zipped up the jumpsuit and, clumsily bent over, legged it to a nearby bus stop, thankful that Tokyo’s computer-coordinated mass transit systems ran at all hours, twenty-four-seven.

Ten minutes later, slumped low on the rear bench of a bus, he pretended to read a crumpled day-old newspaper someone had left there. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision to lose himself among a double handful of early commuters and glassy-eyed salarymen heading to work. The bus surged and stopped, plodding eastward. Several noisy patrol cars sped past in the opposite direction, emergency lights flashing.

He stepped off the bus beneath a street light at the Yamate Dori intersection, waited eleven or twelve fretful, nervewracking minutes for a connecting bus, and rode south along the thoroughfare. Faking a doze all the way to Shibuya Station, he joined the swelling queue of commuters awaiting the Yokohama train. His size and aggressive manner allowed him to elbow his way aboard a jam-packed car.

A few minutes after seven o’clock, the lone Caucasian in a working class Yokohama eaterie hosting mainly seamen and dock workers, he finished a breakfast of strong tea and rice cakes. Feeling nakedly conspicuous, he limped to the cash register and paid the tab, scanned the street in both directions, absently rubbing his sternum, and walked toward the wharf, purposely keeping his gait erratic as if afflicted by what a cherished Texas acquaintance would have described as, “a hitch in yer git-along.”

At seven-twenty on the dot, a sleek white hovercraft threw back a rooster tail of spray churning landward from the far reaches of Tokyo Bay. The airboat slowed, dipped it’s hull in the water and circled to slide alongside the wharf.

Nodding casually to the boat’s only occupant, racked with pain, he lowered himself gingerly down the rungs of a creaking wooden ladder and stepped into the bobbing craft. Massaging his burning chest with one hand, he dropped Baste’s antique Beretta in gray-green water roiling around the barnacled pilings.

* * *

“How long till we get there?” Murray Kapps did his best to make the query sound casual. The Chinese steward hesitated, stared blankly at the FBI agent for an instant, and continued cinching one broad strap after another, securing the FBI man in the acceleration couch.

“When ... do ... we ... a-rrive?” Kapps spoke loudly, extra-distinctly.

“He has no English,” said Magdalena, supine in an acceleration couch across the aisle.

Distinctly unhappy, Kapps viewed his surroundings with a jaundice eye. Running vertically up the cramped “walkway” between rows of powered seats convertible into acceleration couches, the rungs of a flimsy ladder had extruded from the “floor” of the spacecraft, “Inconsiderate of him,” he grouched, “but you could be right. Doubt if he’s literate in his own language.”

“No point getting mean-spirited,” said Maggie.

“Me, mean-spirited? You can’t be serious. I’m the kindest man alive, except when *I’m* being kidnaped.”

“You mustn’t think of it that way.”

“How must I think of it?”

“As a grand and glorious opportunity.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that? If this skybuggy doesn’t do what it was supposedly designed to do, we will have a grand and glorious opportunity to avoid nasty nuisances like undertakers, caskets, flowers, and so on. One big, noisy splat will solve all our problems.”

“It’s as a grand and glorious opportunity,” suggested Maggie, “to help my brother.”

“Really? Like fine wine, Mrs. Saunders, I don’t travel well.” His imagination rampant with vivid catastrophic scenarios, Kapps contorted against the acceleration couch’s restricting harness. “*Morituri te salutamus*,” he murmured, earning a sidelong glance from the steward.

Magdalena squinted suspiciously. “Latin . . . ?”

“Blame my parochial schooling.” Kapps withdrew into frustrated silence. Vague rumblings and muted, unnatural scraping sounds added to his more tangible worries. Minor creaks and groans, whirrings and clicks low on the threshold of audibility were conducted through the hull of the vertically erected, launch-ready Chinese shuttle. The countdown clock’s digits in a repeater display on the flight deck bulkhead directly above them, diminished with metronomic precision. According to the countdown clock, six minutes and eleven seconds remained until they would be blasted into space.

Or just blasted, Kapps thought darkly. He had never ventured into space, nor ever contemplated doing so. He also loathed traveling in commercial jetliners, where if things went wrong at least a hint of something breathable lurked outside the pressurized cabin.

Their dignified, inordinately tall Chinese escort had come along in the jetcopter flying them to Zhejiang, where they had disembarked at a helipad in the semi-abandoned Shitang Space Center on the tip of a promontory jutting into the East China Sea. For most of its history, had informed the tall man, a provincial town like neighboring Songmen, Wehling and Shitang had blossomed during the century’s early decades in a phenomenal build-up paralleling the advent of manned Chinese space programs. Ironically, after transforming itself into a small, prosperous city inaugurating space elevator operations had caused Shitang to lapse back into relative obscurity. Nowadays, they’d been told, Chinese spacecraft launches were all but passé.

One aspect of imminent departure puzzled Kapps. Of the dozen seats cum acceleration couches, only two were occupied. It was ridiculous to think the PRC would go to all the trouble and expense of sending up a nearly empty bird merely to cart him and his lovely, wild ‘n crazy “wife-in-name-only” into high orbit. Congenitally suspicious, an outlook fostered and reinforced by a professional career in federal law enforcement, Murray had searched for hidden motives. None had come to light, unless of course it was a matter of . . . No, it was foolish to think their “hosts” might wish to rid themselves of unwanted guests in such spectacular fashion. If that was their intent, dozens of economical means and methods were at their disposal.

The hatch above them leading to the flight deck slid open. A pilot peering down over his shoulder and rattled a phrase in Chinese for their benefit.

“What’s that all about?” wondered Kapps.

“Hard to say.” Maggie tried to question the speaker in English, Spanish, and finally Tagalog, and got nowhere. As a long shot, she repeated the query in broken French.

The pilot eased back his headphones, turned and jabbered. The co-pilot’s head came in view. “Fli-lay,” he called, smiled and bobbed his head, looking pleased with himself.

“Gibberish,” said Kapps.

“No understand,” Magdalena told co-pilot.

Exasperated, the man held out four splayed fingers and a thumb, and repeated the gesture, then repeated it a second time.

“I make it a fifteen count,” said Kapps.

“Yes, but fifteen whats?”

The FBI agent grimaced. “Dactyl digits.”

“Fli-lay, fli-lay,” cried the first officer. Again he went through the demonstrative fifteen count, then reached around the bulkhead to point meaningfully at the countdown display.

“Ah, now I get it,” said Murray. “See there, the countdown’s stopped. A liberal translation of ‘fli-lay’ could be flight delay. I make it a fifteen-minute hold.”

Maggie was noncommittal.

“Being graced with another quarter-hour of life suits me fine,” said Kapps. “A fifteen-year hold would be even better. What say we climb out of this tin skyrocket and go home?”

Looking unconcerned, his “wife in name only” did not respond.

* * *

The guards Matsuda had bribed were becoming angrier and more fearful by the minute. When no one was within earshot, they argued hotly.

“How stupid of us to let them pass.”

“They own a fat purse, Chen. They promised to reopen it when they came back.”

“But the lying foreign dogs have not *come* back,” pointed out Chen.

“Maybe Joy Street,” sneered his partner, “was too much of a strain. They’re probably weak in the poop, like all foreign devils.”

“Two-faced slime worms!” was Chen’s sober indictment. “I think visiting Joy Street was a children’s tale. That pair, they’re up to no good. I feel it. We’d be wise to alert the supervisor.”

“Admit to that putrefying hunk of stale garbage we allowed yellow armbands into the hub? How wise are you, Chen! Think again!”

“We have to do something,” insisted Chen.

“Our relief is due in an hour. We’ll go run them to ground, hey?” proposed the other.

“Too long a wait,” argued Chen. “Listen, you hold station here while I go find Pei. I trust him. He’ll find them, then we’ll see how well their lying foreign devil mouths chew vacuum.”

“What if the super comes by on a miserable spot check? What do I tell him?”

“Say I took sick, had to go to the infirmary.”

“Bah! Our standing orders are to call in if that happens.”

“Say it slipped your mind,” urged Chen, “and join the hunt after you’re relieved.”

Desperately unhappy at the prospect of trying to bamboozle their foul-mouthed supervisor, the smaller guard watched Chen leave wearing an apprehensive expression.

* * *

The metallic grate of an opening hatch elicited a subtle reaction from Matsuda-Ishikawa-Miura. “Someone comes,” he said casually, as if announcing the time of day.

The access hatch at the far end of a short passageway leading to the airlock service compartment was used primarily by maintenance crews who worked in vacuum. With the able assistance of his accomplice, Rudy had all but finished checking-out a Chinese pressure-suit. “Act natural,” he advised. “We can try bluffing whoever it is.” Encumbered in bulky vacuum gear, he closed his suit’s faceplate, thinking even a clear lens would help mask his features.

His accomplice opted for a different tactic. He pushed off, sailed across the compartment, checked his plunge with hands and feet, and put his back against the bulkhead and held himself in readiness, effectively hidden from whoever came through the hatchway.

Rudy was glad his suggestion had gone unheeded. A uniformed Chinese security guard vectored along the passageway, nimbly arrested his flight. “Ho, there, seen anyone who . . . ?”

The guard broke off, peered intently at Cateel. “Who are you?” he demanded, dropping one hand to a holstered sidearm.

The Nipponese asset demonstrated classic professional judgment by waiting until the weapon cleared the holster before he clubbed the youthful guard’s gun hand a punishing blow.

Rudy stretched out the right gauntlet of his pressure-suit, snagged the tumbling pellet pistol in midair. Stuffing the weapon into an empty thigh pouch of the pressure suit, he pressed closed the flap’s Velcro closure strip.

The guard cried out once, grasped the safety line and struggled to pull away from Miura, who seized a handful of uniform blouse, yanked the smaller man close and whipped an arm across his throat in a hammerlock, stifling any further outcries. The dry stick crack of snapping vertebrae sounded overloud in the enclosed compartment.

Miura shoved the guard away. The body spasmed once drifting to the opposite bulkhead, rebounded gently, a loose-limbed mannequin.

A prickly sensation tightened Cateel’s scalp. Deep misgivings again flooded through him. His accomplice had handled the intruder far too quickly and easily for a formerly deskbound executive. Opening the suit’s faceplate, he asked woodenly, “Was that necessary?”

“Do not go soft on me,” chided his accomplice. “Quickly now, we must finish up. He will be missed. Is your checklist complete?”

“Almost. We were going through the hose connections.”

“All tight,” assured Miura minutes later. He moved backward, studying Cateel’s pressure-suited figure with expressionless solemnity. “Time is short,” he warned, and started stripping off

his crimson coverall. Beneath the jumpsuit, when he removed it, were rolls of Semtex wound around his thighs, shins and torso. "With four towers to visit, we must divide the labor."

"You're also going EVA?"

"No choice, but not quite yet." Tight-lipped, Miura said, "We have to get the body out of sight. Here, help me stuff him into one of these racked suits. Take a length of this bungee cord with you, and when you're outside lash the suit to an external handhold before vectoring over to inspect the nearest rectenna tower. I'll suit up the instant I finish preparing the Semtex and timers. Stay close to the hull," he warned. "Go too high jetting to the tower, and satellite radar could pick you up. We'll run through my checklist when you return."

Rudy had listened closely. "You," he told the other flatly, "are not Hideko Matsuda."

The other's toothy shark's grin came and went swiftly. "No more than are you who call yourself Antonio Roxas. Katsugi Miura, at your service, like you one who spends his life in the shadows. Hurry into the lock chamber. The time for posing and posturing has passed us by. We must now direct our energies and skills toward performing in a professional manner."

* * *

The quarter-hour launch hold stretched to twenty-three minutes. Kapps kept glancing at Magdalena, who was apparently dozing. How anyone could nod off when what was about to happen was about to happen confounded the FBI agent. He sulked until hearing a slithering mechanical noise overhead, and saw the access ladder rungs once again extrude from the cabin's vertical floor panels. Voices in a language other than Chinese filtered through the open hatchway, and a pair of oversized boots appeared. An enormous, bearlike figure slowly descended the ladder, stopping to assist a shaven-headed older man almost as strapping in stature as himself.

The younger newcomer helped his elderly look-alike buckle into one of the gimbaled acceleration couches. "Hiya, folks," greeted the giant in a resonant baritone, reclining in the acceleration couch above Kapps, and making it sag dangerously. "Sorry for causing a holdup."

The sound of voices revived Magdalena Saunders. "Early or late," she said, "all English speakers are welcome."

The huge man's carefree laugh boomed through the cabin's confines. "Name's Erik, and this here is Wladislaw, my Pop. His English isn't first class, but he can match the best of 'em in Czech, German, Dutch, French, Russian, a few other gabbles. You, pretty lady, have to be Cateel's sister."

Startled, Maggie said, "You . . . know Rudy?"

"That I do, better than well. Best grab on tight now. They're getting set to light a fire under this schnortenzoomer."

The access ladder had retracted flush with the cabin floor. A series of penetrating beeps accompanied the countdown clock's final ticks. Murray's heart tried to pound a hole in his chest in time with the regularity of the beeping countdown. When the display reached minus thirty seconds, his apprehensions ballooned.

A muted deluge of crackling, low-frequency white noise shredded the cabin. Kapps felt his teeth chatter as the vehicle vibrated beneath him.

Then a mature bull elephant came and sat on his chest. His mouth open in a silent yell, he was shoved deep into the foam-padded acceleration couch.

* * *

Noisier than it should have been, the unfamiliar Chinese pressure-suit amplified every inhalation and exhalation. Rudy also thought it clumsy to wear, a far cry from the well-designed, efficient military vacuum gear he had been issued during the stint of lunar combat. Worst of all was the legacy bequeathed by previous wearers: a ghostly odor of machine oil tainted by a whiff of stale perspiration.

Clutching a handhold inside the airlock chamber, he punched the control panel. The whine of pumps scavenging air diminished, gradually died. The outer hatch cycled open automatically, admitting a dazzle of raw sunlight sharply dividing the hull's reflective expanse into eye-searing brilliance truncated by stark, impenetrable shadow.

Reaching his right gauntlet around the edge of the hatch opening, he felt for and took hold of an external handhold, and waited for the polarized lens of his headpiece to automatically compensate for the raw, intense solar bath. Off to his right, the nearest rectenna tower protruded above the satellite's gently curving hull, half its huge dish chopped in two by inky shadow.

Microgravity made handling the unfortunate guard's pressure-suited body easier than he had anticipated. Gripping the handhold firmly, he swung the corpse-laden suit around in a gentle arc, held it there and used bungee cord to clumsily lash a utility padeye at the belt of the dead guard's suit to the first in a procession of ladderlike handholds running out across the hull toward the rectenna tower.

Releasing his grip, he faced the tower squarely, keyed the suit's maneuvering unit and felt the impetus of a small thruster centered at the small of his back. Deftly extending and retracting his suited arms and legs, he balanced his mass on the centerline of thrust, crested the hull's bulge, cut off thrust and whipped out an arm and leg; the resultant spun him about head to toe. Long out of practice, he overcorrected, brought himself back to face the airlock from which he had exited, and keyed the thruster to kill his momentum. When the jet cut off, he drifted downslope at low velocity, and managed to catch a handhold on the fly.

Six meters distant, the webwork structure of the rectenna tower reared spaceward. He attached his suit's long nylon tether by sliding open and slipping the carabiner at one end over a handhold and drifted there, surveying the tower. Actually, there was very little to see other than thinly cross-trussed legs. Despite the extra-brisant Semtex charges furnished by his accomplice, in Rudy's estimation the explosives Miura was readying for use fell somewhere between marginal and inadequate to blow the armored main power bus. He thought their best shot might be to knock out one of the tower's legs, and thus tip the dish away from the invisible microwave beam's path, then do likewise to the next rectenna tower, and if there was time, the next.

Anxious to get back inside and help Miura run a checklist on his pressure-suit, he slipped apart the carabiner ears, stowed the tether and prepared to jet back across the hull. Caution acquired during his lunar vacuum experiences made him glance up into the headpiece's prism viewer. The MU's compressed carbon dioxide readout showed only two percent, ninety-eight percent depletion. The small gas bottles were not meant for continuous use, only to help maintenance personnel get around, or succor an incautious vacuum worker who might fail to adequately tether himself and drift away from the satellite. Kicking himself mentally, he was disappointed at having missed the minimal thruster charge when he and Miura had hurriedly checked-out the suit. No matter; going hand-over-hand across the hull was safer; it would also suffice to keep him well below the outward-looking sweep of Artsutanov's security radar.

He consulted the prism viewer a second time. The mixed breathing gas telltale read “1/6” — enough for another quarter-hour, twenty minutes, maximum. Once back inside, he would attach a recharged bottle.

Moving energetically, yet exercising caution since the MU’s gas reserve all but depleted, he pulled himself hand over hand across the hull, reentered the solar blaze and was forced to halt again. He clung to a handhold half-blind until the lens of his faceplate darkened and the heat exchange blower speeded up, ventilating the suit with additional cooling air to compensate for the fierce solar blast unfiltered by atmosphere.

While serving in the military, he recalled shooting the breeze with new recruits among his fellow rangers who thought of space as being colder than a witch’s teat, near zero absolute — a fallacy. Vacuum had no intrinsic temperature; electric heaters kicked in whenever the wearer of a pressure-suit entered shadow and began fiercely radiating thermal energy. Working on-orbit, in cislunar space, or for that matter anywhere inside the orbit of Mars, meant intermittent exposure to the solar furnace’s untenuated thermal bath, where cooling was the problem, not heating.

The suit’s winking digital chronometer told him sixteen minutes and nine seconds had elapsed since he’d entered vacuum. That should have given Matsuda, Miura, whatever the hell he called himself on Tuesdays ample time to divide the explosives, rig the detonators and timers, and suit-up. They would run through his checklist quickly, and get directly to the task at hand.

He reached the maintenance airlock, where the external controls were overlarge in order to accommodate fingers encased in pressure-suit gauntlets. He depressed the OPEN switch plaque, but for some reason the hatch declined to obey the command, refusing to cycle open. Puzzled, he bent and looked more closely at the control panel. Direct sunlight made it difficult to see the steadily winking amber light signifying the fact that pumps were even then scavenging air inside the lock chamber.

The discovery troubled him. For Miura to dare going EVA without completing the checklist was unthinkable. He seriously doubted that to be the case; the Japanese agent seemed too smart to chance it. He’d bluntly confirmed his professional status, and when it came to survival traits professional field assets were known for anything but reckless behavior.

Apprehensive, knowing not what to expect, he pulled himself off to one side as the airlock’s outer hatch began to swing open. A pressure-suited figure came forward as if preparing to emerge, and stopped in the open hatchway. Still in sunlight, the auto-polarizing faceplate lens of Rudy’s headpiece stayed darkened, making it difficult to discern the other’s stern features.

Miura swung his gauntlet, motioning Rudy inward. Entering shadow, the lens of Cateel’s faceplate turned less opaque.

The double-agent leaned forward until their headpieces clicked together. “We neglected to do something important,” he announced in a tinny, conducted voice.

“What?”

Miura ignored the query. “How much MU fuel in your thruster unit?”

“Hardly any left.”

“Come back inside. We’ll attach a recharged unit.”

Preparing to follow the other into the airlock, Rudy saw the ballooned arms of the other’s pressure-suit extend and clutch handholds on either rim of the airlock’s egress hatch. Knees bent

at the flexible bellows joints, a pair of rough-shod boots were planted at the beltline of Rudy's pressure suit.

The two-legged push, more a violent shove than a kick, tore loose Cateel's grip on the handhold.

Propelled backward into vacuum, he cartwheeled in slow-motion toward the distant stars.

SIXTEEN

Another half-hour had slipped away with no sign of Cateel and Miura, and General Yee's deep alarm was now genuine panic. Despite an iron will that refused to allow subordinates to sense his inner turmoil, he found it next to impossible to conceal his acute distress.

Spitted on the horns of a profound dilemma, his emotions whipsawed between the fear gnawing at his vitals, and fuming, volcanic rage, he tried to reconcile the delay, inventing obstacles, confrontations and incidents that might have made acting the crucial part of "saboteurs" difficult to perform, and his dire reflections pinballed from one likelihood to the next, each more pregnant with disaster than the preceding.

Something had obviously gone very wrong. The pair who should have been here many minutes ago were either enmeshed in a situation from which they were unable to extricate themselves, or the Nipponese field asset had obeyed UNIA's unforeseen instruction and blindsided Cateel, or — equally unthinkable! — Miura had never harbored any intention of playing his role. He might have not only done away with Cateel, but had perhaps ignored the warning and was contriving to sell-out UNIA. Were his masters at the Ministry of Justice intent on duping both would-be dupers in favor of some truly catastrophic scheme?

A fourth possibility obtruded, a potential eventuality fostering not merely additional alarm, but stark terror. What if Cateel, brutally manipulated by Daniel and unaware that his sister and young nephew had been freed, had been seduced by Miura into collaborating in an act of authentic sabotage? If such an awful supposition proved to be the case, Operation Quench could backfire in Yee's — and China's — face. The more he thought about the lethality of that very real threat, and its consequences, his fear swelled to monumental proportions.

What to do? The quandary had to be resolved at once. Failure to do so could lead to a major disaster, although a precipitate, hasty decision might only make matters worse. If the pair had indeed suffered some form of unavoidable delay, he himself could easily become guilty of inadvertently trashing Quench by dispatching search teams to locate the "saboteurs." Somehow that line of reasoning struck him as unlikely. Any untoward incident involving either Cateel or his accomplice surely would have been reported. With or without Cateel's collusion, however, Miura might be somewhere out there, at this instant setting authentic explosive charges ...

The general quailed inwardly. Yin or yang! What alternatives: bad, or potentially worse? Indecision could easily prove as fatal as any form of overt action. What to do, what to do . . . ?

He made a rapid survey of the power gallery annex. Gaggles of "injured survivors" had clustered in self-conscious knots, prepared to stream into the power distribution gallery and take their assigned places. The well-coached men and women murmured among themselves, speculating about the unexplained delay in performing their rehearsed roles. His aide, the only

other individual aware of more than Quench's rudiments, hovered before a pair of video monitors, watching over the operator's shoulder for a first glimpse of the intruders.

Another interminable minute ticked away. Yee's intuition screamed a louder warning of impending calamity. A veteran when it came to making tough, multifaceted decisions, he threw all reticence about committing himself to the winds of fate. "Major Wool!"

The aide shoved away from the vidicom station, plunged across the compartment and adroitly arrested his flight. "Sir?"

"Call in the standbys. Describe Miura and Cateel to the makeup women, but don't let them waste time on nonessentials. The drill will commence the instant the doubles are ready."

"At once, sir!"

"Wait, Major," said Yee, recalling his aide. "Once things have been set in motion, use my authority to coordinate an immediate search of the entire satellite. Conscript additional help: casual bystanders, workmen, any and all able-bodied men and women. Suit-up the vacuum maintenance technicians, too, and the off-duty load gangs, manufacturing researchers, anyone capable of using vacuum gear. I want Artsutanov scoured inside and out, every compartment, passageway and storage cubicle, and every square meter of the hull. I want those two found, and I want them found *now*. Start here in the outer hub and work inward. Go!"

Thrusting himself away, the major began shouting orders on the fly.

* * *

Having deserted his post to recruit a handful of trusted companions, Guardsman Chen began a search for the "lying foreign devils" in Joy Street. He and the fellow security men and women he had rounded up made a rapid, fruitless sortie through the bordello, their rude intrusions earning ribald harassment from one or two madams, amused contempt from assorted working girls and boys, and irate embarrassment from more than one customer.

Leaving Joy Street, now doubly furious over the "foreign devils duplicity," Chen and a baker's dozen of companion guardsmen split up. Flitting from one sector of the microgravity hub to another, combing the maze of production facilities, shops and research labs, the searchers failed to turn up either "trespasser." One member of Chen's team happened to cross paths with the five remaining junior officers of Colonel Vlassikov's security corps. Informed of what was afoot, the officers joined forces and began directing Woo's hastily recruited search squads.

As additional impromptu teams were dispatched, the manhunt grew more intense and widespread. Chen and a fellow guardsman poked their heads into one of the zenith airlock service compartments. Only a cursory glance through the hatchway was needed to show the cubicle unoccupied. They failed to notice three pressure-suits missing from the rack. Chen whipped about, started back toward the connecting passageway.

The guardsman called, "Hold on, Chen. The smell."

Chen sniffed, wrinkled his nose. "Phew! A maintenance brother needs toilet-training."

The other said alertly, "Three pressure-suits are missing from the rack, an odd number. The vacuum monkeys always work in pairs per safety regulations. How can we find out if a maintenance crew's outside?"

"Check the log on the bulkhead."

The guard scanned a column of hand-scrawled ideographs. "Hmm-m-m, the last EVA listed was sixteen hours ago. No one stays outside half that long."

“Something in here smells worse than crap,” said Chen. He shoved off, arrested himself at the closed airlock. Here the lingering stench of skatol was fainter. He peered through the inner hatch’s thick peek-a-boo window. “No one in the lock chamber. Look in the equipment storage bins while I check the annex.”

Their hurried search turned up nothing. “What often happens,” Chen remarked thoughtfully, “when someone dies?”

“What do you mean?”

“His bowels void.”

The guardsmen exchanged troubled glances.

“I’ll call the super.” Chen unlimbered his phone.

* * *

Bathed in raw sunlight, four great tethers slashed blindingly across a sky of starless jet, and dove earthward as if ruled with geometric precision on a straightedge. The quad of tethers converged into a single caesura, clotted to a dim, shining strand, and vanished at the center of nebulous blue haze lightly shrouding the distant globe.

Spaceward, the tether filaments congealed in the direction of the spacecraft inertial launch and retrieval complex, which from a distance resembled an overly bright star. Cateel studied Artsutanov’s massive dual drums, their slowly rotating halves vividly severed by knife-sharp shadow. The satellite appeared to be receding from him at roughly the pace of a walking man. Or was that an illusion.

An unwilling observer of the spectacle, Rudy watched the simultaneous arrival and departure of transiting capsules. The inbound unit, a boxcar-ugly freight carrier, was engorged by the satellite’s tapering nadir launch and retrieval tower just as a descending passenger capsule erupted from the opposite half of the tower. He fervently wished himself aboard the dazzling white passenger lozenge falling toward Borneo in a guided plunge. He consulted the prism viewer of the pressure suit’s headpiece; the breathing gas charge indicator read “1/12,” enough to afford ten or fifteen more minutes of good air, plus an additional quarter-hour of panting and gasping as exhalant built up and carbon dioxide gradually displaced the mixed gas in his suit. Then would come fadeout time. Lifesaving miracles were apparently in extremely short supply, a circumstance making final blackout inevitable.

He thumbed the suit’s thermostat control from AUTO to MANUAL, chiding himself for not thinking of it sooner. The blowers cut out, and cooling air ceased flowing through the suit’s torso and extremities. Better to sweat and breathe warm air through his last minutes. Comfort now meant less than nothing.

More than anything else he detested the utter helplessness and futility of his predicament. When booted him into space by Miura, his first panicky thought had been to shout “Mayday” over the suit’s transceiver and worry later about the consequences. No dice! Earlier, while going through the suit’s checklist, Miura had not only warned him about maintaining radio silence, but had surreptitiously ensured the caveat’s effectiveness by unplugging the limited range UHF pak and removing it from the suit’s utility belt pouch.

Only a trace of compressed thruster gas remained in the maneuvering unit’s small bottle; he’d used the dregs to slow his plunge a trifle, for all the good that would do. Now he had only the noisy sighing of his own respiration to keep him company, the sole reminder that still lived.

An overpowering survival urge flooded through him, emotionally turning him inside out. There were a thousand reasons for scratching and clawing and somehow clinging to existence, prominent among them was lovely, petite Sulin Quong, not to mention a mandatory requisite to assure the deliverance of his sister and the youngster she and her husband had named in his honor. The prospect of approaching death also reminded him of the major score he'd vowed to settle with that insufferable bastard, Carlton Daniel.

But scratch and claw with what? He had absolutely no tools — zilch! — except for the need to remembering breathing slowly, shallowly. Struck by the irony of the dire situation, he realized the lurking Chinese dragon was going to devour him after all, although not in the manner anyone other than Miura had foreseen.

Having locked the act of lethal duplicity in a separate compartment of his mind, he refused to stew about the vicious stab in the back. The obvious rationale for what had happened was that Miura enjoyed the rite of killing. He'd witnessed a prime example of that back in the airlock service compartment. And if he had correctly interpreted his quondam accomplice's skewed psychology, death-dealing-for-pleasure had to be indulged vis-à-vis, preferably by the use of one's own hands, not with a weapon or some other instrument.

But the end he knew was on its way would do nothing to satisfy Miura's penchant for hands-on murder. His death would be unseen and unsung. He would sleep forever in an unmarked grave, sailing endlessly around the planet in an equatorial orbit common to the other items of debris sloughed off during a century and more spent boosting geosynchronous satellites into high orbit. Other than the laments of Sulin, Magdalena, her husband and Little Rudy in far-off America, his passing would go unnoticed, if not unmourned.

He tried to guess what the future held for Maggie and the boy. He wondered if his failure to report back, never to be seen or heard from again, would cause the insolent, ego-driven ass appointed to direct UNIA's clandestine activities to keep his promise and order the hostages released. Daniel's weasel-words echoed hollowly in his mind: "Trust must be reciprocal, Cateel." The great man would probably order his goons in California to hold off for a week, a month or more in order to be sure he himself could not betray the "reciprocal trust," and furthermore speculated idly about whether his sometime sympathetic associate, Pastoria, had bothered to try and carry out his farewell pledge to do whatever he could for Maggie and Little Rudy. With an upwelling of remorse, he understood that he would never learn the resolution of their plight.

Drifting toward oblivion in hard vacuum, he could not help but dwell on the ramifications of the finale now close on the horizon. Philosophers and religious people liked to call death, "A part of life," a sentimental cliché that amounted to plain, self-serving bullshit. Death marked an end of life, not a part of it. It required little imagination to picture dozens of more pleasant ways to cash-in one's chips than slow suffocation as a prelude to an endless journey through the endless night. Floating through starry eternity as a frozen, desiccated mummy held no allure whatever. It would be a supremely isolated, incredibly lonely death, a death by millimeters. The temptation to open his suit to vacuum and have done with it crossed his mind.

Angrily shaking off the specter, he decided self-destruction was for others, not himself. Once, during a prolonged, bitter firefight aimed at capturing the high ground on the southern ringwall of the huge Aristarchus crater, he'd witnessed a fellow U.N. High Ranger throw down his weapon, slump back against the lunar slag heap and bawl his eyes out. Week after week of

indecisive carnage had stretched the trooper beyond his limits. He'd had a bellyful of battlefield terror, of plodding onward in a state of grinding physical exhaustion, of tasteless field rations imbibed through a tube, of going sleepless twenty hours and more at a stretch, not to mention often risking his own life to undertake the compulsory task of hauling to the rear the bloodied, stone-stiff husks an airless death had made of a fallen comrade. The trooper had simply folded the cards he'd been dealt, and tossed them away just like his weapon. Sitting there on the lunar rock pile, bawling like a child, the poor SOB had undogged his pressure suit's faceplate and ripped it open before anyone could intervene. The result — explosive decompression — had been something worse than horrible, something too ugly to be seen.

He shuddered involuntarily. Weary of the spectacular those disenchanting panorama, he performed a minor contortion, reoriented himself to face outward, away from the satellite. A vast, glittering sea met his gaze. Serried ranks of solar energy receptors, uniformly arrayed to automatically tilt and follow the sun as, consonant with earthspin, Artsutanov's diurnal cycle swung the satellite and its outlying accessories around the globe like a gigantic tetherball on four extremely long tethering strings. He tried to gauge his flight path, a slow drift which had to be taking him toward . . .

His pulse rate quickened suddenly. He swung halfway back and studied the steadily shrinking satellite, visually calculating his angle of drift. Unless he was mistaken, ten or fifteen more minutes on the present vector would take him directly into the horrendous, invisible beam of microwave energy flowing from this quadrant's solar power array to the rectenna dish atop the tower he had scouted.

The prospect numbed him, reviving an all but forgotten memory. Nine-year-old Rodolfo Cateel had been hypnotized by the large electrified fly traps posted on either side of a Mindanao meat market doorway. The intermittent buzz-snap! had impressed his younger self by sounding like a drum roll, its erratic tempo tolling a death knell for thousands of incinerated flies. A small boy then, the conical mound of dead flies at the bottom of either trap had fascinated him.

He swallowed a lump in his throat. He was about to be zapped like the flies on that long-gone summer day — lesser irony piled atop greater irony. The alternative fates had manufactured a classic dénouement more appropriate to Greek tragedy than any real-life drama. Which would it be, gradual suffocation, or instant cremation?

Which . . . ?

He threw his head back against the quilted padding of the suit's headpiece and laughed uproariously. With no one other than he himself to hear it, the laughter rang in his ears until a grace note of madness invaded the hilarity and he choked it off. Breathing shallowly, he drifted toward one form of oblivion or the other in a lonely silence broken only by the faint sound of his own shallow insufflation and exhalation.

* * *

Pulling the transceiver away from his ear, Major Woo shouted, "General!"

Yee looked up. "They've been found?"

"Negative, sir. Zenith radar watch reports a white maintenance pressure-suit drifting away from the hull."

"Where away?"

Belted in place across the compartment, the major queried the watch officer in traffic control, listened for a few heartbeats and recited the details. "Receding at low velocity on a tangential vector between Artsutanov's 'X' and 'Y' radial axes. They have a fair optical fix."

Resenting the distraction, Yee said curtly, "Keep me posted."

Wide-eyed, Siu Lan Yee clutched her granduncle's sleeve. "You don't suppose it's . . . ?"

"No hasty conclusions," said Yee, his attention on other, more important matters.

"Sir!" Though hesitant to bother his superior again, Woo did so anyhow. "Optical magnification shows movement."

"Any radio contact?"

The major conducted another hushed conversation with the watch officer. "No distress call, sir, nor apparent . . . One moment. The drifting figure just changed orientation."

"Order Traffic Control to dispatch a tug and intercept."

"At once, sir."

"I'm going with it." Siu Lan determinedly pushed herself toward the egress hatch.

"If it is our mutual friend," the general called after her, "he may be injured. Take along a medic, and be sure to . . ."

"Sir!" interrupted Major Woo once again, his expression one of grave concern. "A serious complication. In a matter of minutes, the wearer will vector directly into the path of the number two power beam."

Siu Lan uttered an anguished groan."

"The remaining minutes," Yee told her, "won't be adequate to dispatch a tug. Even if time were available, sensors and redundant safety interlocks aboard the tugs make it impossible for a pilot to override and approach within a power beam's keepout radius."

Siu Lan paled. "We can't let him die," she appealed, her delicate features contorted.

"We can only do that which can be done," Yee said gently.

"Another report, sir." The cascade of imperative interruptions was beginning to affect Major Woo's diction. "Three pressure-suits are missing from a zenith airlock service compartment. Someone may of died in there."

The general's features remained imperturbable while his mind rocketed from one alternative to another. "Where is Vlassikov?"

"In his quarters, sir."

"Has there been any indication that he, or any of his remaining officers, are aware of the on-going search?"

"Yes, sir. Vlassikov's junior officers have joined in the hunt."

"Good." China's counterintelligence director ruminated. Drew a deep breath, and announced curtly, with confidence he himself did not feel, "Initiate Quench, Major!"

* * *

Sensing an invisible presence drawing near, Rudy glanced at the prism viewer. The air-bottle charge readout stood at "1/26." In four or five minutes, maybe less depending on well-calibrated the pressure transducer was, the gauge would read "0/0." It looked as if after all there would not be a photo-finish between suffocation and incineration. Unfortunately, the fix was in not only on the horse and jockey, but the judges and stewards had been bribed as well. The realization that fire would win out over suffocation sent him into an icy rage.

Once again the notion of opening his faceplate to vacuum flashed through his mind, and once again he dismissed it as an unworthy capitulation to the inevitable. Cruel alternative or not, writing finis to his own existence was simply not his way.

He abruptly extended his right arm and leg, and slowly rotated in the opposite direction. Now visibly more distant, the shadow-ruptured eye of the power rectenna dish stared almost directly at him. Bare minutes remained, perhaps no more than seconds; it was impossible to guess. Determined to meet the Old Man with the Scythe in buoyant spirits, he forced a cocky grin. The end would be short and searingly violent, a fitting capstone on his short, less than entirely happy life. It had not been a life without fear, nor certainly one for which there was any cause for self-reproach. At least he was inching toward oblivion without a big load of regrets.

He swung himself back, coming face-to-face with his fiery destiny. In drawing back his legs and tucking up, then extending them to slow his spin, something had nudged his thigh. He patted the pressure suit's utility pouch with his left gauntlet. What felt like a hard object was in the pouch, what felt like a hard object — the murdered guard's handgun.

A tool of sorts!

With a flutter of renewed hope, he recalled snagging the weapon in midair after Miura struck the guard's hand, causing the pellet pistol to tumble free. He had grabbed it — purely a reflex — and stashed it away in the heat of the moment.

Tearing open the pouch's Velcro flap, disappointment extinguished his momentary elation. The puny 6.35-millimeter semiautomatic pistol he withdrew held a magazine of only six explosive pellets — a “ladies gun” suitable for use within the satellite's confines, and nowhere else in particular. He checked the magazine clip; it was full, but held only six measly rounds, plus one in the chamber. He smacked the magazine back in place, struggled to insert his right forefinger in the smallish trigger guard. The thick pressure suit gauntlet made it a tight fit — too tight. He tried his gloved pinky, and worried about whether the weapon would discharge when he released the safety catch.

If he kept his head, used the pistol to best advantage, he had absolutely nothing to lose, but stood to gain a few precious minutes of life. Which would be more effective, trying to change vector “above” or “below” the plane of the energy beam he drifted toward? He made a snap judgment, deciding to try going “under” the invisible shaft of raw microwave energy.

Legs bent as far as the suit permitted, he threw out both arms, rotated about the suit's hip-to-hip axis, overcorrected, brought himself back around and stabilized. He ended up drifting boots-first toward the lethal, high-energy beam. Holding the small weapon butted firmly against the suit's utility belt, he aimed straight “upward,” thumbed off the safety catch and squeezed off a round.

A puff of gas ejecting from the muzzle dissipated instantly in vacuum. The only sound was the faint *sma-a-ack!* of the “blowback” slide conducted through the pressure-suit, and returning. The recoil jolted him more mildly than he had hoped.

The second shot's recoil sent him into a slow tumble. He corrected, realigned his long axis, boots-first in the direction of drift, and fired off round after round until the magazine was empty and the firing pin clicked on an empty chamber.

It seemed reasonable to assume he had affected his vector to some degree. The combined mass of seven small pellets was insignificant; it was their muzzle velocity that counted, and

produced a meaningful resultant that had altered his drift at a right angle to the power beam. He seriously doubted if the additive resultants had deflected his body-cum-pressure-suit mass very much from its original vector. Disengaging his gauntleted pinky from the trigger guard, he held the weapon loosely.

Seconds later, he cringed when a barely perceptible tingling sensation swept over him, and he knew he'd encountered the outer fringe of secondary radiant energy, spillover from minor divergence of the microwave beam proper.

With a roar of defiance his berserker Hukbalahap forefathers would have cheered, he drew back and flung the weapon as hard as he could into the invisible maw of awaiting death.

The pellet pistol sailed an indeterminate number of meters before glowing faintly, the slowly but surely turning cherry red and gradually turning into slag.

* * *

Siu Lan Yee flew to the zenith dock area. Major Woo had called ahead and invoked his superior's authority to commandeer a space tug. Even so, the young woman had difficulty persuading a busy dispatcher she simply *had* to join the tug's two-man crew. "Whoever's drifting out there may be someone very dear to me," she pleaded. "Can't you hurry?"

The dispatcher trying to do several things at once, said sharply, "Pilots are busy preflighting the bird, and you'll be in the way, Miss. A tug's flight deck is very cramped."

Siu Lan chafed in silence, her agitation affecting the dispatcher's concentration. Occupied with monitoring utility traffic, he cut an annoyed glance her way, keyed the access door open and waved the bothersome young woman away. "Auxiliary Dock Four. Hurry!"

Siu Lan needed no encouragement. Bolting from the dispatch cubicle, she zipped along the radial passageway, eased her momentum by burning her hands on the plastic safety line, careened around a corner, kicked away vigorously, darting past an alcove leading to the odd-numbered auxiliary docks, and flew into open, dimly lit airlock Four, gasping in surprise when she collided with someone.

In the act of excusing herself and dodging past, Siu Lan froze, her knuckles white on the lock chamber's handrail. Eyes closed, his mouth open in an agonized rictus, a scorched hole disfigured the man's bloodied forehead. On his chest, a pilot's sunburst medallion gleamed dully in the darkened airlock.

"Come forward." The soft-spoken command came from the shadowed dock beyond the airlock compartment open on either side.

Siu Lan saw the second pilot's body, and behind it a lurking, pressure-suited figure. "You!" she exclaimed.

"Two choices. Come aboard the tug, or force me to use this."

Her gaze riveted on the weapon's muzzle, Siu Lan said, "But, why?"

"Not unless you promise . . ." Siu Lan broke off at the deadly intent evident in the other's frozen features.

"Forget your Filipino lover. He's past help. Quickly now, come aboard!"

Framed in the open faceplate of his pressure-suit, the other's frozen features and slitted eyes eliminated all remaining doubt of his intention.

SEVENTEEN

A pair of adjacent power trough access panels had been opened. Video surveillance cameras recorded the actions of two technicians drafted to act as stand-ins for the “saboteurs.” Finishing their task of planting dummy explosive charges, the doubles stole away.

Yee thought their efforts to make the exit look furtive were painfully amateurish, but would have to do. A countdown would waste valuable time. He ordered his aide to send a “go” signal. Woo used his hand-held transceiver to cue the poised engineers, sappers and assorted “victims.”

Simulated explosions reverberated in the power compartment annex. The echoes died away, and acrid smoke billowed from the partially open power distribution gallery hatches.

Gauging his superior’s reaction, Major Woo waited for the general’s gestured command to key the transceiver. Power transmission ceased abruptly from the remotely controlled stations in all four banks of co-orbiting solar arrays. Life support blowers sighed into silence; the gallery’s luminous ceiling flickered and went dark as the annex depowered. Bulkhead-mounted emergency lights came on, dimly illuminating the gallery.

Yee watched with gimlet-eyed circumspection as “casualties” began streaming into the power distribution gallery. Strung-out along safety lines, the rehearsed personnel coughed and congregated in groups, drifting helter-skelter under microgravity in a jumble of attitudes and orientations.

“Make certain,” instructed the general, “the still photos are available ASAP. Alert your men and stand by, Major. Have you the list of casualties?”

“Here, sir.” Woo patted the pocket of his uniform blouse. “The colonel should be here any moment now.”

“It surprises me,” said Yee, “to learn Vlassikov hasn’t already arrived. Keep your squad out of sight until I give the word. Where are they?”

“In the high-voltage switching compartment, sir.” Woo hefted his transceiver meaningfully.

Less than wholly satisfied with what he’d seen and heard, Yee frowned. “The services of your squad may not be needed, but if it should prove necessary . . .” He let the somber thought dangle.

“Your pardon, sir. If I know the colonel, and I believe I do, it’s doubtful if he’ll buy into this charade, no matter how well staged.”

Yee cocked his head. “For his sake, we shall hope you’ve misjudged him.”

As it turned out, it was Yee who had misjudged his security colleague. Nine more minutes ticked away before the colonel put in an appearance. By then, moaning “victims” were being conveyed to the “B” Quadrant infirmary.

The five officers of Vlassikov’s security staff still aboard Artsutanov entered the annex in a group, with the corpulent Russian leading them in the van. Typically unsure of himself while coping with microgravity, Vlassikov clung to the freefall safety line with both hands and, his florid features paler than usual, and stared in disbelief at the first-aid being administered to various “victims.” Orderlies towed away “injured” power engineers and guardsmen. Vlassikov quailed at sight of a half-dozen body bags supposedly containing “casualties.” Clutching the

safety line in a death grip, he swung toward Yee, demanded in Russian, “What the devil has happened here?”

“Sabotage, Comrade Colonel.”

The word struck Vlassikov in the manner of a thrown brick. “Impossible!”

“Regrettable,” amended the general. “We are dealing with the situation. I strongly suspect one or more delegates to the trade conference have undertaken a secondary assignment.”

“Doing *this*?” His chin thrust forward pugnaciously, the colonel added rancorously, “That cannot be true. Every delegate was thoroughly screened. Deep background investigations were conducted on all foreign nationals.”

“By your organization,” reminded Yee unkindly.

“Now see here, Comrade General! Are you implying my people failed to —”

“No, Comrade Colonel, *you* see here!” Yee thrust a sheaf of digital snapshots into the other’s hands. When the exposures had been made, briefly unpowered blowers had not yet dissipated the smoke and fumes clouding the power gallery. Doctored photos not yet available would depict shattered cryogenic power troughs, the “victims” drifting randomly amidst the smoke haze and debris.

His manner crisp, Yee feigned impatience watching the colonel take his time shuffling through the snapshots. Looking stunned, he passed the damning pix to his second in command, a captain, who in turn showed them to the four junior officers. Exclamations and a concerted gabble in Russian accompanied the hasty reviews.

Outrage written large in every contour of his seamed features, Vlassikov turned the full force of his abrasive personality on Yee. “What is being done about it, Comrade General? Where are we as of this moment?”

“Aid is being dispatched. The passengers stranded on segments of the tether system accessible by tugs will be offloaded. Emergency power will afford the less fortunate aboard more distant capsules to remain where they are in relative comfort; they will be forced to endure a wait until such time as they become retrievable, or sent on their way groundward once power has been restored. To their misfortune, starting them outbound toward spacecraft launch terminus will require days, if not most of a week, or perhaps even longer.”

Aghast, the colonel said, “You mean to strand groups of important personages in midtether for a *week*? One entire week?”

“Perhaps you have a better solution in mind, Comrade Colonel. If so, please don’t keep it to yourself. The offloading, you see,” explained Yee impatiently, “must be done congruently in order to sustain the elevator system’s aggregate mass in equilibrium. It should comfort you to learn that long before my estimate of a week has passed solar power should be back on line. The chief engineer promised to put a preliminary damage estimate in our hands within two hours. Renewing operations depends upon the extent of damage, plus the nature and the quantity of all emergency corrective actions. No immediate danger to the satellite exists, nor to any critical portion of the overall system. In essence, the incident can be considered a gross inconvenience.”

“*Inconvenience!*” blurted Vlassikov, his manner overtly insulting. “Comrade General, your sense of proportion could stand closer scrutiny. The imperialists were warned time and again of the consequences following any attempt to sabotage the system. This crime will be punished with utmost severity. Has Beijing been notified?”

“Not yet, Comrade Colonel.”

“Before news of this calamity reaches our superiors,” insisted the colonel, grandstanding for the benefit of his officers, “I mean to have a look at this fine mess for myself.”

“It may not be safe to go inside just yet.”

“Safe . . . ?” Puffing his chest, Vlassikov tried unsuccessfully to stare down the general. “If you please, order the way cleared into the power compartment.”

Yee blinked. “If you insist, Comrade Colonel.” The meaningful look directed at Major Woo included a wordless command that went unnoticed by the indignant, self-important Russian.

Posturing as best he was able under the uncertainties of microgravity, Colonel Vlassikov led the way, clumsily going hand over hand along the freefall safety line. In single file, his cadre of officers followed him closely, disappearing one by one into the power distribution gallery.

Anticipating the carnage depicted in photographs, muffled exclamations of surprise erupted from the security contingent. Under the crepuscular illumination of emergency lights, the power distribution gallery looked totally intact, undamaged. After exchanging puzzled glances with the officers, Vlassikov's features contorted. Mouthing an obscenity, his display of outrage underwent a dramatic reversal when he caught sight of the weapon in Major Woo's hand. He bellowed, “Treason!” at the top of his lungs.

Woo's pellet took the colonel full in the chest; the explosive impact tumbling him in a backward head over heels frothy spray of blood. Spasming only once, the body fetched up against a power trough and rebounded limply.

Woo's squad erupted from the high-voltage switching compartment. The unarmed security officers scattered in panic, only to be shot down like birds in flight. The slaughter was over almost before it began.

Deafening silence and the faint stench of cordite propellant pervaded the power gallery. The major ordered his squad to check for signs of life. An exploding pellet announced only a single coup de grâce.

“How unfortunate,” declared Yee drily, “for the brave colonel and his men to be caught in such an ambush. Add six names to the casualty list, Major. Have the medics inflict burns and rupture flesh as we discussed. Make certain the photographers document everything twice over.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I don't suppose the pair we've been searching for have turned up.”

“No, Comrade General. But they will be found.”

“They had better be found, Major. Carry on!”

* * *

Trapped in the airlock chamber's confines between the murdered pilots, Siu Lan Yee couldn't tear her eyes from the muzzle of a weapon held in the steady, gauntleted fist of the figure in vacuum gear hovering in the tug's open hatchway. Her survival instincts blossomed. Trying to invent a stalling tactic, she was too frightened to think clearly. “I'll do whatever you want,” she said meekly.

Miura half-turned, pushing himself backward with his free gauntlet. “Quick, into tug!”

Preparing to comply, Siu Lan gasped when the lights back in the passageway flickered once, and died. Fumbling in Stygian darkness, she seized the nearest pressure-suited cadaver,

blindly tugged it between herself and her would-be killer. The exploding pellet produced a deafening roar within the airlock chamber's metal confines.

The pilot's body jerked from the impact, bumping the disoriented woman aside. She groped for a handrail, touched the smooth, round surface just as Miura fired again. For whatever reason, the second pellet failed to explode, ricocheted and sang across the chamber to carom harmlessly from the peek-a-boo window centered in the airlock's open hatch.

Fear of the dark is an inborn characteristic shared by all humans. The airlock chamber and passageway beyond, as lightless as the depths of a limestone cavern, induced claustrophobic angst in Siu Lan. Adept though she was at handling herself in freefall, the lack of a single photon impinging on her optic nerve clouded her misbehaving sense of direction.

Frantic to escape, she thumped her head painfully rounding into the passageway just as bulkhead-mounted emergency lights flashed on, wanly illuminating the path to salvation. Able to see again, she kicked off from the bulkhead, sailed the length of the passageway, twisted about in midair as she neared the far bulkhead, and absorbed her momentum with bent-kneed dexterity, and then droved hard with both feet, arrowing into the transverse corridor.

Peripheral vision teased her with a brief glimpse of the killer's bulky white pressure suit. Hindered by the cumbersome vacuum gear, Miura squeezed off a round that missed, but this explosive pellet, not bottled up within the airlock chamber; blew a ragged hole in the honeycomb sandwich partition at the far end of the corridor, wreaking unknown havoc on the far side.

Siu Lan erupted into the haven of the dispatcher's cubicle, nimbly arrested her flight and slammed closed the sliding door. Daring a hasty backward glance through the small window, she was encouraged to see the passageway beyond deserted.

The goggle-eyed dispatche, been roused by the exploding pellets just after the lights went out, had sought refuge behind a communications console. Gaping round-eyed at Siu Lan's blood-flecked tunic, he mumbled, "The . . . pilots?"

"Dead. Get out of here!" Siu Lan dove toward the cubicle's vidicom terminal.

"W-why did the lights —?"

"Not now. Go, and hurry!"

Instead of doing her bidding, the dispatcher pointed unsteadily at his computer terminal. "Look," he said.

"What is it?" Siu Lan was busy punching up a call.

"A departure," he said. "The pilots must be all right. The tug in Dock Four just broke free."

"Track it," she ordered. "No, wait; dispatch another tug to pick up whoever's drifting out there. Do it! Delay could cost someone his life."

"But I have no authority to —"

"*Do it!*" Siu Lan shrieked, just as the stern visage of Major Woo congealed in the vidicom display. She breathlessly related what had taken place.

* * *

Amazed and puzzled to still be among the living, Rudy was certain he had drifted well past the point of no return. Mentally and emotionally prepared for the fiery finale, he had thrown in the towel minutes ago.

But instead of flaring into extinction like a moth in a candle flame, or one of the zapped flies on that long-gone summer day in Mindanao, the tingling sensation had inexplicably diminished, and abruptly ceased. Had Artsutanov shut down one of its four prime power sources in order to rescue him? Or had Miura managed to blow the rectenna tower's power conduit? He dismissed both notions out of hand; his former accomplice might have succeeded in interrupting power within the satellite, but if so the microwave energy beam would still be outputting from that quadrant's array of co-orbiting solar energy receptors.

In any event, the endgame scenario had changed from a sudden flame-out to slow suffocation. Barring accidental discovery by radar, there was no way for the satellite's proprietors to know, or for that matter concern themselves, about his fate.

So it was to be yin, not yang. No difference, really; the net result would be identical. His air flask readout had registered "0/0" for minutes, and it was getting noticeably stuffy inside the unfamiliar Chinese pressure-suit that amplified breathing, making it sound overloud, threatening. He'd subconsciously begun panting, his lungs laboring to make use of the vastly diluted mixed gas in the suit now richly infused with the carbon dioxide residue of his respiration.

In one way, he wished the end would have been swift, not slow and tenuous. This way, there would be no sharp line of demarcation between consciousness and unconsciousness. Self-knowledge also made him aware that his thoughts were getting fuzzy, a touch haphazard — a classic symptom of hypoxia, not to mention increasing nausea and a skull-splitting headache.

For some reason it seemed appropriate to take a last look at the universe all around him before drowsiness eliminated whatever reasoning and sensibility were left. Here in the plane of the equator, the sun's coronal blaze stood out stiffly in a radiant fan now playing hide and seek with Earth's ethereal blue limb. The zodiacal light faded rapidly as the satellite's kilometers-per-second orbital velocity swung it, and him, around into the planet's less dense, expanding cone of penumbral shadow. No longer overwhelmed by solar glare, myriad stars winked into existence, remote and utterly unsympathetic.

A waxing three-quarter Moon hung near the Pleiades. Rudy let his gaze rove across the pocked lunar surface. He located the walled plain of Copernicus; adjacent to it, in the darker mare between Imbrium and Procellarum, was the insignificant, thirty-seven-kilometer dimple of Aristarchus. He thought of the sweat, blood, tears and toil expended during the abortive U.N. struggle to prevent Red Chinese forces from gaining their objective, and immediately realized what a minuscule role he himself had played in the futile mini-war, police action, or whatever history ended up calling it. The battle of Aristarchus now seemed even more futile and wasteful now than it had during the engagement. He tried to picture the current beehive of activity going on in, around, and beneath the distant crater.

The Moon wavered, danced before his eyes, its silvered outline blurring indistinctly. He wondered what was wrong; his eyesight had always been exceptionally acute. But wasn't there another matter he should be attending to, something he either had to do, or had failed to do? He recognized the suspicion, but could not seem to put his finger on what it might be.

Oh, of course: breathing, that was it. He had to remember to breathe. A silly notion. It seemed ridiculous to concentrate on something that had always been automatic. Breathing was good for you. It was something everyone did normally, without conscious effort.

An amorphous, angular shape loomed close, eclipsing the moonlight. His last concrete impression was of a dark, sharp-edged monster reaching out for him. *Odd*, came the random thought. He wondered why the Chinese dragon had waited this long. The monster could have had him days, weeks ago. Maybe it hadn't been hungry then, or perhaps it lived only in vacuum. That had to be it; the dragon was a space dweller.

Damfool notion! he chided himself. No living creature could exist in vacuum, not even a Red Chinese dragon. Nothing out here to breathe.

Nothing!

The dragon crept closer, breathing fire in tiny spurts . . .

* * *

Magdalena Saunders peered from a round portside window as the Chinese shuttle maneuvered in Earth's umbra. The velvet sky was laced with the gemstone brilliance of countless stars. "Why can't we see the big satellite from out here?" she asked.

"It's a pretty fair distance below us," informed Erik Caesecu, "and just now in shadow. When the whole elevator kit and kaboodle swings round into sunlight you'll be able to follow the tethers downhill all the way to Artsutanov, except from out here it'll look like one more real bright star pasted in the center of the globe."

Murray's insides had been churning ever since microgravity overtook the spacecraft in freefall. Only his strong-willed determination not to be sick in front of Magdalena had thus far conquered the nausea brought on by a first grapple with weightlessness. Suffering acute discomfort as the shuttle jockeyed toward the spacecraft launch and retrieval terminus, he willed himself to breathe deeply, and relax.

The younger Caesescu colorfully described the short bursts emanating from the maneuvering thrusters as, "The pilot's goosing this skybuggy into a docking slot."

"You already explained it," said Maggie, "but I still don't understand why it's so tricky to, uh, land out here."

Erik's homely but affable grin prefaced his disclaimer. "Dock, not land, pretty lady. It takes genuine piloting skill to, uh . . . Tell me, did you ever take a pail full of water and whirl it in a circle over your head?"

Maggie cut an uncertain glance at the huge man. "Can't say I have, no. Why?"

"Because the water stays where it is, in the bucket, even when its swung upside down."

Kapps nervously swallowed bile. "Centrifugal force?"

"Close, but no cigar, Mr. Fibbie." Erik held his grin. "Centrifugal force is what exerts tension on the bucket's handle, or in this case the elevator system tethers. Artificial centripetal gee-loading is what keeps the water in the bucket instead of dousing your curls; it also keeps the inertial spacecraft complex where it is at the end of its tethers. Once we dock, you'll feel a skosh of weight on your feet — less than in Luna, but something at least halfway substantial. Only difference is that your feet'll be pointing at the stars, not Artsutanov, or the ground below."

"Centripetal force," conceded Kapps, suppressing a belch. "But you haven't answered Maggie's question. What makes docking so difficult?"

"Forces need to balance for stability," explained Erik. "Always! Both sides of the equation have to be equal, a law of nature that can't be broken or bent. The instant this obsolete sputterbucket mates with the terminus, centripetal force will grab hold and try to kick it away

into the sky. Why? Because the centripetal force induced at docking makes ‘down’ a thataway direction. Our schnortenzoomer has matched the terminus’ orbital velocity and vector, but we’re co-orbiting with it unattached, still in freefall while sneaking up on the complex from an out-orbit direction.”

Noting Magdalena’s continued puzzlement, Erik added, “Here it is in a nutshell: when the computer readout lets our pilot know we’re aligned within a red hair of a docking slot, mild boost from the thrusters will drive the ship prow first into the tip of a telescoping ram. The ram then collapses part way under our ship’s impetus until the mating thingamabob latches, then the ship spring back under the newly added mass as centripetal force tries to throw us away into space. But by then the shuttle’s been captured by the ram, which will retract all the way, and bring the bird inboard to the dock area, where the umbilical tube will mate, and we’ll disembark. Make sense now?”

Maggie wasn’t sure. “I . . . guess so. Oh, Murray!” she cried. “Come look. Now you can see it all.”

“Get a leg on if you want a gander,” advised Erik. “Pilot’ll swing ship soon now.”

Kapps unbelted hastily, pulled himself across the aisle and joined Maggie at the viewport. “Holy! The *size* of it!”

Limned in moonlight, the spacecraft inertial launch and retrieval complex resembled a gigantic man-made donut. A necklace of mammoth boulders — “mini-astroidal masses” was the commonly used term — boosted at fabulous expense from the rag-tag collection of rocks circling the Sun into a stationary, ring-shaped structure sustained by a quadrate of tethers extending earthward to the satellite, anchored beneath a tower protruding from the massive hub.

A boxy space tug slid silently past the shuttle, emitting tiny plumes of gas from its thrusters. The elder Caesescu roused from a doze, said something to his son in Czech and inclined his shaven head toward a starboard window.

Erik flew across the cabin. The pair gazed earthward, jabbering excitedly in Czech.

Butterflies once again began chasing themselves around Murray’s midsection, but for a different reason. He sensed the agitation in the voices of Caesescu senior and junior without understanding a syllable of their discourse, and asked what was wrong.

“Elevator’s at a dead stop,” announced Erik. “Pop spotted a pair of capsules — an outbound, and an inbound — unmoving on the tethers.”

Wondering if there were things they were not being told about, Kapps exchanged apprehensive glances with Magdalena.

The door to the flight deck slid open. The pilot leaned sideways, peering back into the cabin. Also sounding unduly agitated, he rattled off something in Chinese. Erik responded in the same language. The door to the flight deck slammed closed.

“Panicsville, folks.” Erik regarded Maggie and Kapps levelly. “Seems to be a serious glitch aboard the satellite. A power outage has shut down the whole system. They suspect sabotage.”

“Sabotage? Is Rudy down there?” demanded Maggie.

“Likely as not. But don’t work yourself into a tizzy. Your big brother can take care of himself better than any dude I’ve yet run across.”

Shocked, Maggie stared at the brutish father and son pair. Erik's gross features were perfectly neutral, but she found it hard to reconcile the dismaying news with the elated expression leavening Wladislaw Caesaescu's profoundly ugly features.

* * *

Voices penetrated the shell of semi-consciousness enclosing him in its soft, warm arms. He coughed once, coughed more and groped aimlessly, trying to discover what seemed to be suffocating him. A hard, rounded object covered his nose and mouth; his fingernails made a clicking sound when he touched it. He tried to pull it away, but weakness made it difficult to find a purchase.

"Easy, sir. Just lie back and relax." The soothing feminine voice was clouded by a pronounced Shanghainese accent. "You'll begin feeling better soon." The respirator mask was gently removed from his face.

Rudy opened his eyes, coughed again and inhaled the sweet, oxygen-rich air in voracious gasps. The white-frosted Chinese nurse stepped back, giving way to the piquant, unsmiling features of Sulin Quong. The nurse said something Cateel couldn't quite make out, and left the compartment. He caught a glimpse of the uniformed security guard posted outside the open door.

"Where . . . ?"

"Artsutanov's 'B' Quadrant infirmary," Sulin told him. "Shh-h-h-h, rest now. The medic said you should feel fine in an hour or two. You were unconscious only a few minutes."

"You . . . came for me?" The headache was dwindling, but he felt lethargic, out of touch physically as well as mentally.

"A space tug picked you up. What do you remember?"

"Confusion," he said. "The last thing I recall . . ." He paused, swallowed hard as memory flooded back. "Stupid of me. I thought the tug was . . . Why is it so dark in here?"

"Because of your mission," she said matter of factly. "They're combing the satellite and surrounding space for Miura. Was it he who cast you adrift?"

Jerking half-upright as if jabbed with a cattle prod, Cateel sank back against the pillow. Feeling numb, all he could think to say was, "I hope he isn't found. I want him myself, want him very badly. It's personal."

"A close brush with endless sleep," observed Sulin, her voice laced with gentle sarcasm, "has done wonders for your pronunciation."

"Sulin, I'm not, uh . . ."

"You have permission to use my real name if you wish — Siu Lan, not Sulin. Siu Lan Yee. The general is my granduncle."

Rudy caught his breath. "How long . . . have you known?"

"Actually, since before the beginning."

Rudy was silent for long seconds. "Now, I suppose, comes the interrogation. Does your granduncle favor torture, drugs, hypnosis, what?"

"All of the above, plus psychological refinements of his own invention." Siu Lan's expression underwent a subtle change. "I have only one question for you, and a candid answer will be appreciated. Before he egged you into doing the dirty work in vacuum, did Miura reveal his further plans?"

Cateel decided not to answer.

“As you wish,” she said. “I realize what you believe your situation to be.”

“Miura isn’t Hideko Matsuda.”

“Certainly not. He’s a professional field officer who has divided his dubious loyalties between the Japanese Ministry of Justice and your UNIA big boss, Daniel. Where is Miura?” she prodded. “Why has he gone on a killing spree?”

“Obvious, isn’t it?” Rudy grimaced, now confident that no additional harm could come of a forthright answer. “If systems power is off, he must have successfully blown one of the rectenna towers. Now he’s running for cover, wiping out anyone who happens to come between him and a getaway. He enjoys killing. In fact, he dotes on it.”

“The rectenna towers . . .” Siu Lan’s eyes widened. “Thank you. Get some sleep now.” She rushed out of the infirmary room.

Exhausted, Cateel closed his eyes and speculated about what nugget of information he might have inadvertently given away.

EIGHTEEN

The White House chief of staff woke the President at eleven minutes to four in the morning. Donning a robe and slippers, America’s chief executive shuffled from the upper floor bedroom. He eased the door shut to avoid disturbing the First Lady’s rest, and gave heed to the chief of staff’s low-voiced utterance. His drowsiness vanished. Fully alert, he shot an apprehensive glance at the uniformed Air Force warrant officer posted ubiquitously in the hallway, on his lap a black satchel known as the “football” laden with the codes for Armageddon.

“Has sabotage been confirmed?”

“Doubly, Mr President. I should have said triply. The word came via a sequence of satellite intercepts just before Beijing went off the air.”

“Off the air?” Crows feet at the corners of the chief executive’s eyes tightened. He fingered his stubbled jaw. “Very well,” he said, a break in his voice, “make a few quick calls. Have the NSC ExCom, SecState, Defense and the security adviser convened ASAP. Send in coffee and cakes. Sounds like a less than healthy beginning to a very long day.”

“At once, Mr. President.”

“When you’ve finished rounding up the yodelers and high-tension thinkers, ring the Chinese Embassy and make an appointment. I want to meet with Dr. Chou at his earliest possible convenience.”

“Consider it done, sir.”

“Exactly who broke the news?”

“Langley, Fort Meade and a third source we only rarely mention. Simultaneous intercepts, Mr. President.”

“Umm-m-m, at least the spooks are up to speed. Get on you horse now. Look for me downstairs in twenty minutes.”

The President slipped back inside the bedchamber. He intended to shave and dress hurriedly without waking his wife, but the First Lady stirred beneath the covers. “What now?” she asked sleepily.

“Early reveille,” the President told her. “A Chinese fire drill, you might say.”

Holding the black satchel in his lap, the warrant officer sat in the hallway, waiting for the summons he prayed would never come.

* * *

Rudy heard the door to his infirmary room being unlocked, watched it being pushed open without benefit of a knock. General Yee entered, his manner urgent, and found the patient slumped in a bedside chair, deep in thought.

"I imagine," said Yee, "you have by now fit the various pieces of the puzzle in place."

Still a bit woozy from his recent ordeal, Rudy coolly met the counterintelligence director's piercing gaze. "One or two mysteries still have me groping for answers."

"All in good time," said Yee curtly. "Of vital importance is learning the whereabouts of your accomplice. The tug in which Miura presumably escaped was found abandoned. You told Siu Lan the satellite's external power rectennas were the prime target of opportunity, yet a thorough search of the hull has turned up no sign of our mutual friend."

Rudy blinked in surprise. "But the, uh, power outage . . . Siu Lan said . . . inferred, rather, that he'd used the explosives."

"Such was not the case."

"Then why the emergency lighting if he —?"

"Not now," declared the general sharply. "Leave explanations, recriminations, everything of that nature until later. Tell me where you suspect Miura may have gone to ground. We have a desperate need to learn his next move. He must be stopped."

Rudy's perplexity mounted. Hoping for answers, not more questions, he said, "Siu Lan mentioned how you've known about us all along. Why haven't you —?"

"Not *now* Cateel! I really must insist!"

"Helping you," said Rudy, "could be construed as giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Why should I tell you anything?"

"Several excellent reasons," Yee said hastily. "First and foremost, whatever you may think of me and my organization, we are not the enemy. Secondly, aiding in the search could save thousands if not millions, of lives, including those of Siu Lan, your cherished sister, mine, and of by far the least importance your own."

"My sister!" Rudy came up out of the chair. Sudden dizziness forced him clutch the hospital bed's guard rail for support. "Magdalena's been freed?"

"By us, yes. You were coerced into accepting a patently lethal assignment by the abduction of your sister and a young nephew, apparently your namesake. They were retrieved by my people some time ago and conducted to safety."

Shocked, Rudy said, "How can I believe that?"

"You must, because it is true."

"Where are they now?"

"The boy is safely at home with his father," informed the general. "Your sister and the FBI agent heading up the kidnap investigation, as well as a pair of other gentlemen you will most certainly recognize, are aboard a vehicle descending from the launch terminus. Your sister is anxious to see you."

"Maggie here in *space*?" Incredulous though he was, a wave of intuitive foreknowledge swept through him. "You had her brought out here," he accused, "as bait to turn me. Wasted

effort, General. Your blackmail style matches Daniel's. No matter what you do to me, or her, I'll never work for your side."

Yee's sanguine expression grew darker. "Instead leaping to faulty conclusions," he said, "why not pause and examine matters as they now are? You might also consider what a thoughtful gesture it was on our part to find and rescue your loved ones. No, on second thought forget that. Under present circumstances, neither your future nor theirs are a fit topic for discussion.

"Heed me!" said Yee much more loudly. "Everything outside this peaceful infirmary room is in turmoil, and we face a supreme crisis. All of us. I am humbly requesting your assistance, and I expect it to be forthcoming."

"Humbly forthcoming?"

"Choose humility, arrogance or desperation, no matter. In your view, where would Miura be likely to flee with the explosives? What potential targets did you discuss with him?"

His mind churning, Rudy slumped down in the bedside chair. *Maggie and the boy safe!* Despite making one shattering disclosure after another, he decided General Yee fairly radiated sincerity. A feeling of intense relief flooded through Cateel, then quickly subsided. Seconds elapsed while he revolved the alternatives. "I'm not all that conversant with explosives," he finally said, "but what I saw wrapped around Miura's shins, thighs and waist was not the same type of gelignite I was shown in Tokyo. He told me a second exchange had taken place."

"Where?" The query cracked like an exploding pellet.

"At the airport in Pontianak. He'd supposedly been given something called 'Semtex H,' and called it the most brisant form of plastique yet developed."

General Yee paled. "Are you certain of the term he used, Semtex H?"

"Certain, General. But it could have been another of Miura's fairy tales."

"Wait, you say his shins, thighs and waist were wrapped in rolls, *kilos* of explosive?"

"Quite a few kilograms."

A grimace of pure terror. "Until now," uttered Yee, "we've assumed that he'd planted the explosives and was fleeing to preserve his worthless existence. It did seem a valid premise after you told Siu Lan the external power rectennas were the primary targets. Yet all four quadrants of Artsutanov were combed, with no sign of Miura, or any evidence that he had been out there."

"He was also packing detonators," added Rudy, "and two-hundred-hour timers."

The blood drained from the counterintelligence director's face. "Dolt that I am! It means enough time has elapsed for him to accomplish something infinitely more difficult to discover."

"Has the entire elevator system been searched?" asked Rudy.

"Think about your question," said Yee, a note of resignation creeping into his diction. "A house-to-house search of Shanghai could be conducted in less time than it would take to scour the elevator complex root and branch, even if that were possible just now."

For someone supposedly feeling much better after his ordeal in space, Rudy began to feel a good deal worse. After another thoughtful interlude he said, "*Gimu!*"

"You echo my first thought precisely." Yee folded his arms. "Repayment for *on*, to use the barbarous Japanese term." The general rocked on his heels, directed a look of circumspect intensity Cateel's way, and said, "In your opinion, would Nippon dare to repay an imagined obligation in such grisly fashion?"

“Payback time,” breathed Rudy. Unnerved by a prospect that made it impossible to sit still, he rose and began pacing the infirmary room. “I’m afraid it’s a logical conclusion, but only if the blame can somehow be shifted to UNIA, and me. And here I thought *Samurai bushi* were extinct as dinosaurs in modern Japan.”

“Less so than one might think.” Yee had grown quieter, more reflective. A tangible aura of fear radiated from him, tainting his every word and gesture. “There are variations of *on*,” he said, measuring his words. “The lifelong familial obligation one inherits from one’s parents, for one. In the old days, *ko on* was accepted from the emperor, but only *nushi no on* from one’s superiors.”

Cateel held his tongue, listening Yee think aloud, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Eyes closed, his lips twisted, deep in thought, at last the general said, “My misperception of the threat may exact a frightful toll. I underestimated the part Miura’s superiors asked him to play, grossly misinterpreted Nippon’s intentions. *Gimu* has to involve the elevator system.”

“Could he possibly knock out the whole system?”

“It is difficult to conceive of such a thing, but. . . yes. After what you’ve told me, the inconceivable could indeed become a reality.”

“With only a few kilos of plastique?” objected Rudy. “That seems hardly enough to chop four hefty tethers?”

“Severing all four would not be necessary.” Yee bowed his head, inner agony written large in his aging countenance. “Cutting a single tether will suffice — any of the four, and each is strongest here at the satellite’s zenith and nadir anchorage terminations, where diametrically opposed forces try to pull Artsutanov apart. Out at the counterbalancing spacecraft complex, however, their strength is greatly reduced. Yet severing a single tether anywhere transfers stress and strain unsymmetrically to the remaining three, and once symmetry has been lost . . .”

“Are you telling me the whole system would come apart?”

Yee’s affirmative nod was almost imperceptible. “The devastation and loss of life would make all former disasters seem mere peccadilloes. But I fear the anticlimax would prove infinitely worse.”

Still less than completely recovered from his bout with near-suffocation, Rudy was not thinking clearly. “Sorry, General. What could possibly be worse?”

“Retribution,” said Yee in a dead voice. “The doors of our thermonuclear arsenal would be flung wide, unleashing dogs of war whose breed the world has seen only twice before.”

The general turned away, briskly pushed open the extra-wide door and exited the room. Accosting the guard as he passed, he said, “Lock up behind me. The patient is not leave this room for any reason.”

“At your orders, sir.”

Startled, and deeply dismayed by Yee’s abrupt departure, Rudy stewed in gloomy solitude. If the general had not been lying in his teeth, which struck him as unlikely under the circumstances, the boy was safely at home, and Magdalena was also safe and unharmed, and for that he was damned thankful.

But for how long? he wondered darkly.

* * *

Jarred to the core by the dismaying prospect that ricocheted around in his mind like a hot marble might be happening elsewhere, After Yee departed, Cateel began to feel more himself physically. He doused his face in cold water in the adjoining lavatory cubicle's emergency-lit gloom, patted himself dry with a paper towel, and sat down beside the bed to think the Miura matter through.

In short order, he decided the Nipponese asset's goal had to be destruction of the space elevator system. The clincher had been the sight of China's astute, nominally unflappable counterintelligence director rushing away in panic. At this juncture, lesser targets than the great tethers themselves defied logical analysis. Where, then, had the general inferred the tether system to be most vulnerable? He mentally reviewed the data he had skimmed in the technical library.

At either the nadir or zenith Artsutanov stationary hub interfaces, and again out at the spacecraft complex, tether terminations ran through labyrinthine vacuum seals below the base of each respective launch-and-retrieval tower, where each tether splayed outward into bundled strands — breakouts of the main tether body — where they were secured in place by deep penetration-welding at graduated anchor points within the respective structures. His research had also informed him of something confirmed by the general: basic tether design varied out at the spaceward facility where the multiple tether terminations were fused directly to the nickel-iron cores of the cosmic debris joined in toroidal form as elevator system's counterbalancing mass.

Yet at either interface, multiple breakouts would have to be sundered in order to dislodge, or sever, a main tether. At first glance, that seemed a task Miura would find insurmountably difficult to accomplish since, on paper, the configuration struck Cateel as too complicated for impromptu sabotage. In order to attack any tether, a saboteur would have to venture into vacuum, and General Yee had no doubt arranged an extremely warm reception for a stranger in vacuum gear attempting to go EVA at either Artsutanov or the outlying spacecraft complex.

Where, then, was the likeliest junction where Miura might attempt to do the deed? Had he simply gone to ground somewhere, or was he heading for the likeliest target of opportunity? Sabotage anywhere in mid-tether struck Rudy as impractical for several reasons. Whichever target he opted to strike, Miura would have to stay out of sight until the explosives were in place; that was a given. Where, then, could he hide in the meantime? Where could he possibly hole up with dozens, or more likely hundreds of armed men actively searching for him? Was he simply biding his time until the search cooled, or busy setting the charges somewhere at this instant, plugging in the detonators, and activating the timers?

Or, came the devastating thought, had he already done so?

Making a conscious effort to dismiss any and all enmity he felt toward the man who'd done his best to murder him, he tried to put himself in Miura's shoes, tried to think like him. Faced with an identical situation, hunted and on the run, yet dedicated to completing his infernal mission before giving thought to seeking safety in flight, what specific target would he himself choose? The tether system certainly smelled right, felt right. But, *where* in the tether system? What segment of accessible cabling was most susceptible to sabotage? Yee had cited the spacecraft launch terminations as the weakest segment of the overall system, and therefore . . .

Retracing his steps, he took that line of reasoning apart item by item, and examined each piece, questioned its logic, then put it back in place. Miura's primary problem would be to evade the searchers; secondly would come the truly difficult task of setting the explosives where they

would not be discovered prior to detonation. His third problem would be fleeing to safety within the two-hundred-hour grace period.

Could Miura — could anyone! — hope to accomplish all three difficult tasks? A viable getaway was where the prospective scenario broke down. How could Miura hope to engineer an escape? Siu Lan's obscure reference to a power outage still puzzled him. She had described elevator operations at a standstill, with stranded passengers — principally homeward bound trade conference delegates — being rescued from those capsules suspended within range of the space tugs and returned to Artsutanov. Many unfortunate delegates, if not most, had been left dangling somewhere in midtether, and if Miura's only getaway route was via space the starward launch and retrieval facility was his only hope, and it was certain to be swarming with Yee's people, not to mention a few rescued, disembarking delegates and other passengers bound for Luna.

How, then, could he . . . ?

Brought up short by an answer so chilling that it had been overlooked, a film of perspiration dampened Cateel's brow. What if Miura was giving no thought to escape? The question burned in his mind.

While discussing the ancient Nipponese concept of *gimu*, neither he nor the general had thought to mention a second, entirely different form of repaying one's ancestors for one's failures — *seppuku*, the practice of ritual self-disembowelment dictated by ancient tradition as the ultimate, most extreme form of *gimu*. *Seppuku* was intended to repay a debt for failure so enormous that no ordinary death could hope to cancel it. Had the man's leaders weighed the risk of thermonuclear devastation against the prospect of a long, drawn-out economic demise, and opted for a quicker if vastly more perilous solution?

No, he thought, *it was too extreme*. Suicide, ritually performed or otherwise, was an unlikely tactic for any national government to embrace. Nor was it easy to think self-martyrdom could possibly be the ostensible goal of a proud professional like Miura. And yet, and yet . . . Fatalistic as it might sound, he himself had more than once witnessed Miura's mental toughness, his rigorous self-discipline. The more he thought about it, the easier it became to convince himself of the conclusion's validity.

His emotions roiling, he heard the door to the infirmary room being unlocked. When it swung wide, his sister came through the doorway, her features indistinct in the dim emergency lighting.

"Rudy!" She ran into his arms.

"Ah, Maggie, Maggie!" He held her tenderly, rocked her gently, inhaling the fragrance of her hair, trying to think of something appropriate to say, but the words refused to come.

"Hiya, Soldier. Up 'n at em!"

Suddenly weak-limbed, Rudy gaped, released his sister and shuffled backward as if preparing to defend himself.

Erik Caesescu leered at Cateel, a lopsided grin softening his craggy features.

"The d-door," faltered Rudy, "you forgot to knock."

An amiable chuckle. "We're singing the same dumb tune as always. Here, Cateel; I'm real eager to have you shake hands with someone you've been dying to meet, if you'll excuse that less than tactful expression. Pop, this here's Rudy Cateel, the best field officer you or I or anyone else is ever likely to cross paths with."

The shaven-pate, hooknosed visage of Wladislaw Caesescu loomed beside his son's massive shoulder. The East Bloc spymaster regarded Cateel levelly, his expression neutral.

"It's . . . m-my day for surprises," stammered Rudy.

NINETEEN

In late afternoon, a young priest drew closed the high, ornately carved double-doors of Quito's landmark church, *La Compania*. Politely reopening the left-hand door, he bid farewell to *Quiteño* stragglers departing by ones and twos and family groups. He admitted no worshippers into the church, turning them away with a somewhat lame excuse that minor repairs to the altar were scheduled to take place.

After the final pair of congregants departed, the priest looked all around to make sure the church was deserted, and only then did he invite the Chinese charge d'affaires to slip inside. The diplomat sat in a front pew, hands folded over his briefcase, stolidly inspecting the baroque columns, the lofty ceiling, the massive altar resplendent with gold leaf.

The Archbishop of Pinincha Province emerged from the vestry, a lordly procession of one. Making his way to the altar, he genuflected before the Host and approached the diplomat, who rose and bowed low. Amenities were exchanged. The Archbishop was gratified to hear his guest's fluent Spanish. "How may we be of service, *Señor?*"

The diplomat opened his briefcase and withdrew a single sheet of watermarked stationery. "Your Excellency, please accept my nation's gratitude for agreeing to this meeting on such short notice. I have been instructed to deliver a letter from Chairman Li Qin of the People's Republic of China. The letter is addressed to *el Presidente de la Republica del Ecuador*. Will you be so kind as to read this, the only copy in existence. Afterward, the copy must be destroyed before we discuss the message it contains."

Mystified, the Archbishop donned rimless bifocals. Behind the old-fashioned spectacles, his eyes bugged as he read the paragraphs written in formal Spanish. Holding the note aside, he had difficulty containing himself. "But . . . why, *Señor?* The subsidies and concessions enumerated here are . . . The letter speaks of low-interest loans for hospitals, schools, roads. It mentions subsidies for the export to China of wheat, barley, cocoa beans, maize and bananas. Your government cannot possibly be serious about allowing the duty-free importation of every product our poor nation has to offer."

The charge d'affaires purposely kept his response low key. "Your Excellency will also note that in addition to taking advantage of extremely low-interest loans, Ecuador will be at liberty to market hard goods imported from the People's Republic at drastically reduced prices."

Removing his spectacles, The Archbishop twiddled them distractedly, and hedged. "Sir, I must say that despite the overwhelming magnanimity described in this letter, I fear the objective, bestowing largesse, will be exceedingly difficult to achieve. Ecuador has continually refused the United Nations Organization permission to build on the specified site. The *cordillera* of the Andes is volcanic from end to end, and Mt. Cayambe rears less than one hundred and thirty kilometers from *San Francisco de Quito*, our national capital."

"A dormant volcano," observed the Chinese diplomat.

“Ah, dormant. Yes, *Señor*, but for how long? Mightn’t the difference between dormant and extinct one day serve to illustrate a catastrophe? Nor can one overlook the earthquakes which rock the region from time to time, often causing severe damage.”

“We are aware of that, Your Excellency. The danger, if a danger there is, will be someone else’s problem. Is that not so?”

The Archbishop chewed his underlip. “Do you honestly believe a major United Nations endeavor of this nature will be feasible if based at Mt. Cayambe?”

The diplomat’s smile, shallow yet disarming, preceded an equally disarming statement. “Your Excellency, should what we have in mind transpire, cannot the smug, self-serving United Nations Organization be allowed to contend with that question? The volcano’s caldera lies three one-hundredths of a degree north of the equator. The facility our Western friends wish to construct must therefore be built on Mt. Cayambe’s upper, southern slopes, not at the summit.”

“Precisely on the equator?”

“Very precisely, Excellency. Additional boons for Ecuador are certain to spin off from a *yanqui* enterprise of this magnitude.

“*Yanqui* . . ? But I thought you said the, er, U.N. was —”

“The driving force behind a prospective U.N. space elevator enterprise is all too obvious, Excellency. As for the boons mentioned in the letter, your northernmost seaport, *Esmeraldas*, would reap a bounteous dividend indeed from the burgeoning influx and outflow of trade. *Rio Esmeraldas*, as well as navigable reaches of the lower *Guaillabamba* flowing down from the highlands, will become major waterways. Should Ecuador’s leadership prove agreeable to the terms and conditions stated in the letter, your nation’s economic advantage will surge beyond any and all expectations.”

“Again, *Señor*,” declared the Archbishop, trying not to sound argumentative, “I must ask why? I simply cannot imagine a reason for the world’s wealthiest superpower to suddenly bend and sprinkle a superlative degree of largesse over our nation. Not simply to render aid to Ecuador, surely.”

His expression enigmatic, the diplomat retrieved the only copy of the letter. The wooden kitchen match he took from his pocket struck the Archbishop as entirely out of place in the church. Lighting a corner of the document, he held it momentarily, then let the ashy residue settle on tiles worn hollow by the tread of numberless parishoners. “It is not for either of us to question why, Your Excellency. There is, however, one exacting but unspoken condition attached to the boons outlined in our illustrious Chairman’s letter.”

“And that?” asked the Archbishop warily.

“Total, completely absolute silence with regard to the letter of Chairman Li Qin and its contents,” said the diplomat in a manner brooking no compromise. “No one other than yourself and *el Presidente* can be allowed to learn of my visit, or of this gesture of friendship by the Peoples Republic. No one!” He passed the Archbishop a sealed packet. “Here is the official document, signed by Honorable Chairman Li Qin. If you will be so kind, please make certain it is passed directly into the hands of *el Presidente*, only to him, and none other.

“I am also instructed to tell you my government insists that you please reinforce to *el Presidente* the terms and conditions stated in the letter, and it is the honorable Chairman’s hope that you do so in the strongest possible terms, and also provide a gentle reminder that should

Ecuador violate the secrecy of the prospective agreement it will be rescinded instantly, rendered null and void.”

“It shall be as you say,” responded the Archbishop. “I believe . . . That is to say, I am certain our government will be amenable.”

“We shall pray that it is so, Your Excellency.” The charge d’affaires bowed low, lifted his briefcase and made ready to leave the church.

* * *

Staring blankly at the featureless wall of the infirmary compartment, a quasi-prisoner in what he could not seem to stop thinking of as the enemy camp, Cateel speculated about whether his relationship with Siu Lan was the reason for being treated like a casual guest instead of an adversarial threat. Despite the confusion attendant upon that difficult-to-arrive-at conclusion, he also refused to blind himself to the oppressive certainty that sooner or later a reckoning would come. The prospect of a mock trial in some Red Chinese star chamber was not something to be relished. Conviction and imprisonment, or worse, after a tribunal of that nature, would be a foregone conclusion by no means difficult to understand.

The poignant reunion with his sister had relieved his mind in one way, yet had also added to his confusion regarding things as they were, amplifying the fact that events and individuals were coming at him too fast and furiously.

Admittedly dumbfounded by the appearances of UNIA Asian Section’s despised “Keeper” and of all other people his *father*, Wladislaw Caesescu, the quarry he had worked so hard to ensnare in Singapore. He’d been equally shocked to learn that the abrasive guard he had once kicked downstairs was none other than the renowned espionage genius’ offspring. To cap the overwhelming sense of unreality reinforced by the visit of his sister, the spymaster and his son visit, he had also shaken the hand of an American FBI agent Maggie referred to as, “A true friend without whose help I wouldn’t be here.”

True friend or bitter antagonist, he found himself wishing the federal agent had left his sister safely at home in California instead of aiding and abetting her journey into space, where the hazard posed by Japan’s star field asset loomed larger than life, and unfortunately the threat was all too real.

He was stewing about the weird nature of his present situation when the door was unlocked and Erik Caesescu rushed inside and without preamble blurted, “Give a close ear to what I have to say. Not a second to waste.”

For the best part of ten minutes Erik tolled the highlights, whys and wherefores of Operation Quench. The finished recital, while of vital interest to Cateel, put him in anything but a mood to “buy” each and every shred of the information. “Pie in the sky,” was his scornful comment. “Where’s the gain for the PRC? If what you say is true, and the phony sabotage was stage-managed, all it means is that the missiles will fly sooner instead of later. I can find damned little saving grace in *that*.”

“Soldier, you don’t listen good,” accused the huge man, his yellowish eyes glistening with intensity, “and I hate to repeat myself.” He leaned close, his bulbous nose inches from Rudy. “Now open your goddamn mind as well as your ears! Pop’s network dug up strong hints that certain Western powers, mainly la belle France in cahoots with U.N. slopeheads like your schoolmaster, Daniel and a crop of egomaniacal wisenheimers salting the current American

administration, are seriously contemplating a preemptive strike. One faction wanted to hit the elevator's ground station, and another urged a military takeover of Ecuador to grab the site suitable for a Western elevator ground station. The assorted multinational hawks put their pointy heads together and decided they wouldn't go into the economic toilet without making a fuss. A balls-to-the-wall *major* fuss."

"Nuking the elevator?"

"Maybe yea, maybe nay. Who can to say? But think about it: one smart bomb could take out Mt. Beturan in a breeze. Their better-dead-than-red master plan may call for doing just that, then ducking for cover to sweat out China's counterpunches and swatting their way to some fuzzy, half-assed brand of 'victory.' Yee took Pop's raw data, had his people do beaucoup digging on the quick to refine the result, categorized it in depth, extrapolated from it seven ways from Sunday and literally wet his pants. Each and every indicator pointed to some level of king-sized global blowup, now or later doesn't really matter much. Reason the situation was coming to a boil is that the Western bigwigs were no about to roll over peacefully and go tits up dollar-wise. Hawkish mandarins in the West decided they wouldn't let themselves become passive victims of the money-mad Eastern mandarins. Savvy?"

"As a Western corrective action," observed Rudy, "that makes absolute nonsense."

"Oh, yeah? What their 'corrective action' amounts to," Erik continued earnestly, "is a skewed, up-to-date version of the Cold War cliché I mentioned: 'better dead than red.' The general's brain trust ginned up seven independently computer-modeled scenarios, each a touch scarier than the preceding. Yee had the brass balls to lay his head on the block by sneaking the scare scenarios in front of Chairman Li's tired old eyes. The axe damn near came down on him when certain self-important Central Committee mandarins got wind of it, but Li Qin is some wise old vulture who keeps his mind open. When someone he respects in spades like my old man yells fire Li Qin listens. He eventually whiffed the smoke himself, bought into Yee's woeful messages and personally green-lighted Quench."

The more he thought about it, the more difficult Rudy found it to swallow the unlikely scenario. He shook his head as if to clear away the cobwebs. "Still leaves me in the dark. You say the elevator system is in need of rework and repair. Fine! Why not just shut the damn thing down for a week, a month, however long it takes, and do the rwork? Why this dumb show, this . . . Quench rigamarole? Why hold a meaningless on-orbit trade conference? More importantly, why goose UNIA into involving me and Miura in a dangerous, pointless charade?"

"Uh-huh, dangerous you got right, Soldier, but I've got to quibble about 'pointless.' At one swipe averting a thermonuclear confrontation from the West, and simultaneously saving China's rosy red face, is the one and only sole rationale. What the hell! You should know the Asian mindset as well or better than most anyone else. China's mandarins finally bought into what you seem to consider a 'dumb show' to save face and simultaneously put the quietus on a looming nuclear brouhaha. The Party's wheelers and dealers absolutely refused to admit that the magnificent construct paving the way to their Great Leap Upward was anything less than one thousand percent perfect. So for the love of God quit thinking of Quench, or your part in it, as *pointless*! Believe me, the upshot of our failure to consummate Quench will be anything *but* pointless. We want the West to cringe for a few anxious hours while the hawks on both sides of the pond sweat out the for-damn-sure-real threat of big-bang retaliation China threatened."

Picturing what might have been about to take place if not for Yee's bold action-decision, Rudy cringed inwardly. "What will stop the Western hotheads," he asked, "from sweating their way over the brink and putting a genuine scare into the PRC? Your Quench addicts must have realized the first missiles could as easily fly east to west and not west to east?"

Erik Caesescu shrugged. "Yeah, it was always a consideration. The balloon could go up in either direction. What hurts really bad is that Quench would have come off slick as glass if the Nips hadn't decided it was payback time."

Payback! The word rocked Cateel like a physical blow. On the verge of mentioning *seppuku*, the suicidal version of *gimu* he and General Yee had overlooked, an instinctive reticence to tell all prevailed. He kept the notion to himself.

"The snapper's been set in motion," added Erik. "Word of a purported sabotage has been leaked from Beijing. A few dozen delegates to the trade talks are right now dangling somewhere on twixt here and the ground, no doubt scared spitless. Before Pop and I brought your sister and that Fibbie, Kapps, in to see you, the general mentioned that the U.S. military had gone to a high state of readiness, and he's sure the EuroBloc powers won't be far behind. We have 'em right where we want 'em, on the edge, jittery and under the gun."

"What, if anything," asked Rudy, "will prevent either side from punching The Button?"

"Hopefully, the newsflash of an oddball happening on the far side of the world."

"A what? What the hell does that mean?"

In lieu of an answer, Erik checked the time on the chronometer banded around his massive wrist. "Need to trot, Soldier. What we have to do quicklike is take away Miura's fire sticks before he blows you, me, your sister and the rest of us sky-high. Sorry for the rotten pun, but I'm afraid it fits." His yellowish eyes agleam, Erik leaned close again. "I need an answers, and they have to come from you. Where do you think the sumbitch is, where's he headed? What's his next move, his target?"

Rudy gave the sudden anger inside him free reign. "No dice! Carlton Daniel, your father and you and the general have stayed up nights figuring out ways to use my sister against me. Now you're crowd me into a corner now, trying to force me to work on the side of the angels. But I no longer have the faintest idea which side that might be."

Erik's dry chuckle was humorless. "Only angels I know of play harps and ride around on clouds. Answer me this: is that stuffed-shirt Daniel on the side of the angels? How about the bloodthirsty Nips who sent in a ringer to trash you as well as the elevator system? How angelic you think *they* are? No, don't bother answering," added Erik harshly. "I'll fill you in on one absolute for-certain fact that may help you decide where the angels are. Opting to use the general's good offices, Pop convinced the PRC that artificial catharsis would be a damsight more wholesome than the real thing. But now the whole Quench show's balanced on a tight wire that could go slack any second. I have no doubt — none! — that matters will settle down fast if we can collar Miura before he pulls the plug. What d'you say to that?"

"What I say," Rudy told him, "is that your Quench fairy tale, noble objective and all, smells like a first-order Marxist con game even if it doesn't jibe with their sacred dialectic reasoning. It's jam-packed with too much idealism and altruism to be believed."

The younger Caesescu's manner changed markedly, abruptly turning much more aggressive. "The 'dialectic reasoning' horseshit you're spouting, whatever it is, and for whatever

it's worth, has to take a back seat to pragmatism now that the chips are down. The bottom line is simply stated: China's hierarchy is acutely embarrassed by the magnitude of economic overkill born of the make-and-sell marriage of Artsutanov plus their lunar works in Aristarchus and elsewhere. The Party line was formerly 'Nothing succeeds like success,' but succeed it sure as hell did, and the global turnaround of international trade was such a 'success' that it hit the good ol' boys who run the PRC with a tomato-in-the-face surprise."

"You really expect me to believe that?"

"Believe or be damned! What you tab as altruism is a null concept in the revised Marxist-Leninist lexicon. Pragmatism, not altruism's the current watchword."

"Then what exactly," demanded Rudy, "does 'pragmatism' have to do with an oddball happening on the far side of the world?"

"Can't say yet. The details are hush-hush. But isn't it the apex of rationality — no, pragmatism, to stick with that term — for China to forestall the casting of thermonuclear spears by lending a hand to any society that owns the gumption and wherewithal to build its own elevator system? The West desperately wants a road into space equal to China's. Fine and dandy! The Chinese know damn well the universe is big enough, diversified enough, to accept any and all varieties of our species, and whatever social codes they adopt to govern themselves."

Captivated by the other's enthusiasm despite the lingering reservations he couldn't shake entirely, Rudy did not swallow the other's sermon at face value. He was in the act of framing a down-to-earth rebuttal when the infirmary door swung inward.

Without even a glance at Cateel, one of Major Woo's agitated junior officers excitedly told Erik the general needed him at once. "We believe the fugitive has been located, sir."

"Where?"

"A space tug falling toward the ground has passed the point of no return, fuel-wise. The saboteur's target is thought to be somewhere in mid-tether."

"Jesus-my-beads!" Brushing the lieutenant aside, Erik made a hurried exit. When Rudy tried to follow him, the guard stationed outside barred his way. "Stay put, you!"

* * *

Pacing the confines of the infirmary compartment under the satellite's pseudo-gravity spin, Rudy tried to reconcile Erik's account of Operation Quench as an explanation of the CPR's "pragmatic" solution to global economic chaos. His gut reaction, was not entirely negative, nor a matter of belief or disbelief. There was no denying the fact that Erik had aided in fitting the major pieces of the overall puzzle in their proper places. What stuck in his craw, he decided, was the civilization-saving deception fostered by Yee which called for he and Miura to set up the staged destruction, get away and make identical reports to their respective masters.

Now that Yee's Quench scenario had turned nightmarish, he had a burning desire to help find Miura before it became too late. But how could he hope to be of aid penned up here in the infirmary? A wave of frustration caused him to halt, pop a fist into his open palm and reflect on the news reported by that excited young officer. Learning of Miura's purported whereabouts had electrified Erik, but logic said it could never have been Miura's intention to set the explosive charges in mid-tether, then contrive to somehow escape. Such a course of action did not ring true for several reasons, mostly because he had convinced himself Miura had self-sacrifice in mind.

Seppuku had to be the endgame Miura contemplated, not flight. The longer he thought about it, the more certain he became.

Sabotaging the elevator system in a cold-hearted, suicidal way made sense in only one respect, and otherwise struck him as nonsensical. Searching his mind as he would, he was unable to visualize an exit path from mid-tether. The elevator was down, inoperative; that fact alone tended to substantiate the conclusion. If he was wrong about *seppuku*, Miura's sole hope of a successful getaway would be via deep space, an objective definitely indicating that his target lay in the starward direction, not earthward.

If that was true, it meant the outlying spacecraft launch and retrieval complex had to be his specific target, not an isolated segment of the extremely long tether set stretching down to distant Mt. Beturan. Yet once again martyrdom was an odd, unrealistic form of *seppuku*, again nagging him to make the conscious effort of slipping into Miura's shoes, getting inside his head. Under similar circumstances — the object of a widespread manhunt, on the run while packing gelignite, timing and detonation hardware — what would have been *his* move?

He would have to lie low for a time, naturally, just as Miura had apparently done, or was doing, and then go straight for the elevator's throat in balls-out attack mode, and hit the system's weakest link which, judging from what he'd learned, was the junction between the Artsutanov out-orbit tether set and the spacecraft terminus. General Yee's description, plus hours of clumsy research in the technical library, indicated that less tensile strength was needed at the outlying tether terminations than at any other point in the entire elevator system.

Pacing restlessly about the infirmary compartment, he sorted the combinations and permutations of hiding places and potential attack points, and after another, longer period of elliptical reasoning, realized pursuing the matter in haphazard fashion was fruitless.

Filled with sudden determination, he thrust aside further speculation, stepped to the door of the infirmary compartment and pounded on it feebly.

The guardsman used his key. The door swung inward, and the uniformed guard found Cateel groveling on his hands and knees, clutching his midsection, mouthing a plea for help. The

Bending down quickly, the guard instinctively reached out a helping hand, turned his head open-mouthed to call for a nurse.

Whipping himself around, Cateel's joined fists were last thing the young guard would see for the better part of a half-hour.

TWENTY

United Nations Intelligence Agency Director Carlton Daniel roused from sleep. He groped for the bedside telephone, grunted and listened briefly, then excitedly interrupted his personal aide. "One moment, Stephens. Say again, please."

Having dared to disturb his master's rest by ringing the Belgravia townhouse on the director's closely guarded private line, the aide cleared his throat self-importantly. "Ecuador, sir. We've apparently been granted access to build at the Mt. Cayambe site."

"*Whaa-a-t?*" Daniel caught his breath. "It came out of the blue? Impossible, utterly impossible!" He levitated himself to an upright position in bed.

"Formal notification has been amply confirmed, sir."

“Quite beyond belief! How did we learn of it?”

“A call from Geneva moments ago, sir. Dr. Grayson asked his deputy to contact every U.N. facility straightaway and pass along the glad tidings.”

“I see, I see. What I meant was how did the news reach Geneva?”

“A telefacsimile from Quito, or so we’re told.”

“Quito, you say? A faxed hardcopy,” demanded Daniel, “not word of mouth?”

“A fully documented transmittal, sir. Dr. Grayson endorsed the offer as genuine. The letter, embossed with Ecuador’s Great Seal, carries the president’s verified signature. According to the wording, Geneva will receive the original document via diplomatic courier. When the secretary-general has it in hand, your office is to receive an authenticated copy. What may please you most of all, sir, is that the letter cites your sterling efforts to bringing about a change of heart within the Ecuadoran administration.”

“Does it indeed! Capital, Stephens!” Flabbergasted, not to mention being supremely elated, the director said, “Your communication with Geneva, was it recorded?”

“Oh, of course, sir.” The aide sounded mildly affronted.

“Excellent, excellent! Stay on top of the matter,” urged Daniel breathlessly. “If Geneva should call again, please try to keep them on the line as long as you possibly can. I’ll be at my desk in much less than an hour.”

“As you wish, sir. May I be the first to offer heartiest congratulations.”

“Thank you very much, Stephens.” Inordinately pleased with himself, he rang off.

Daniel did not bother to wake his man’s man. He made his toilet, dressed with undue haste thinking exultantly, *Success piled upon success!* Ecuador, heretofore merely the most promising among several lost causes, had reversed its decision overnight, a lightning stroke of the fist magnitude which transformed all of his prior hard work into a signal triumph. Basking in a roseate glow of self-satisfaction, he enthused over the astounding development, coming as it had hard on the heels of the electrifying word that Cateel and Matsuda had successfully disrupted power aboard Artsutanov. This new sunburst of good news was almost too much to bear.

A thousand things needed doing. First and foremost would be petitioning an immediate audience with the PM. Daniel pictured himself in morning coat and ascot, humbly presenting himself at Ten Downing Street, where he would of course selflessly decline personal credit for Ecuador’s serendipitous capitulation. With access to a western hemisphere construction site now in the U.N.’s pocket, a personal call on the PM would be not just obligatory, but imperative. In addition to augmenting his personal political accounts receivable, a stroke of good fortune of this size and scope could not help but undercut the war scare which had rocketed through Whitehall during the latter part of the week.

It was really all Daniel could do to digest the incredible stroke of good fortune. Now the ultimate approbation of which he had only dared dream might indeed fall his way. United Nations official notwithstanding, he was and would forever remain the UK’s most loyal subject, a gentleman who yearned with every fiber of his being to be tapped as a knight of the realm. Mightn’t His Royal Highness decide to demonstrate the nation’s gratitude by tendering an invitation to Buckingham Palace? Daniel squelched the thrilling prospect. Time enough for wishful thinking after the dust had thoroughly settled.

Summoning his driver in a state of euphoria, Daniel rode to his office through the dense predawn fog blanketing Greater London.

* * *

Cateel hastily divested the unconscious guard of everything but his underwear. He pulled on the gray-green uniform tunic, judging it a “one-size-fits-none” garment. The trouser cuffs fell above his ankles; the awkward Velcro closure strips made the loosely-cut tunic hang sloppily around his midsection. Half a head shorter than himself, the youthful guardsman was also much stockier. Letting down the hospital bed’s side rail, Cateel hoisted the flaccid youth, dumped him on the hydraulic mattress and tugged the coverlet up around his ears. He had trouble tucking his overlong hair beneath the other’s loose fitting billed cap. Realizing he must look like a spear carrier escaped from the cast of a comic opera, he seized the plastic belt and holster, checked the semiautomatic pellet gun’s magazine, reholstered the weapon and cinched the broad belt more tightly about his waist.

Easing out of the infirmary compartment, he used the guard’s coded key-card to lock the door behind him. Thankful for the subdued emergency lighting prevalent throughout the entire satellite, he breezed past the nurse’s station, eyes averted, and encountered few people in the passageways outside the infirmary. The low light level saved him in passing groups of uniformed men and women going inboard.

The spin elevator’s rotation slowed to a stop, delivering him to Artsutanov’s zero-gee zenith hub without incident. He found an empty compartment in the bank of central lifts and rode nonstop halfway to the zenith docking area, where a complication appeared when a pair of unsmiling guardsmen stepped into the compartment at a mid-level stop. Ignoring Cateel, they continued an animated conversation.

“What scares me,” said the taller guard in Mandarin, “is evacuating the ground station.”

“All personnel?”

A sober nod. “Lieutenant Chang overheard one of the engineer pukers say everyone had been sent to either Sintang or Pontianak.”

Obvious trying to sound unimpressed, his companion said, “Rumors fly like crows. When you think about it, evacuation makes sense. With no elevator traffic up or down, why not?”

“Get real!” chided the other. “Chang thinks the ground station expects an attack . . .”

Eyes front, Rudy minded his own business. Unfortunately, the cramped compartment’s emergency light, although dim, gave him no place to hide.

When the guards fell silent, he sensed their curious appraisal. “Brother,” quipped one, “that’s some uniform you’re almost wearing. Who’s it belong to?”

“A friend.” Rudy feigned chagrin.

“Wrong.” The guard snickered. “Whoever it is, he’s no friend.”

The other guardsman tittered, inspected Cateel more closely “Hey, you talk the talk real good, but you aren’t Chinese.”

“True.”

The nearest guard edged backward, one hand dropping a hand to the flap of his holster.

Rudy’s spearing kick smashed him sideways, bouncing his head off lift compartment wall and dislodging his cap. Despite the microgravity environment, the compartment’s impetus caused the semi-conscious guard to slide slowly toward the floor. Rudy hit the emergency stop

button; the compartment juddered to a halt at the next level. “Your uniform,” he told the other guard, “take it off.”

The young man glanced at the muzzle of the stubby pellet pistol in Rudy’s fist, licked his lips, and said, “You won’t get away with this.”

“There is no ‘this’ to get away with. Drop your holster belt, get out of the uniform!”

The uncompromising glint in Rudy’s eyes discouraged argument as he collected both holstered sidearms, then bound the younger man’s hands behind him using the sleeves of the overlarge tunic he himself had been wearing.

Donning the purloined uniform, he jammed the spare weapons under his holster belt and overrode the emergency stop command. The lift accelerated, continuing its “ascent” toward the hub’s zenith.

“You’ll be caught, punished.” The bound guard shot a glance at his unconscious companion. “There’s no place aboard for you to hide. When you’re found, I’m going to —”

“I’m going to stuff something in your mouth unless you shut up.”

The guard subsided angrily. No one was waiting to board the lift at the zenith hub’s first stop. The instant the doors separated, Rudy planted both feet against the compartment’s rear bulkhead, punched the lift command button, and shoved off, arrowing into the vestibule. The closing doors cut off the young guard’s cry for help.

The uniform, plus his obvious need to make haste, caused the few red-coveralled workers he encountered to clear the way. Negotiating passageways on the fly, he used the walls to change vector, trying to keep his angle of incidence equal to the intended angle of rebound, and each two-legged impetus sent him flying from bulkhead to bulkhead. He tried to reconstruct the route he and Miura had taken during their junket to the zenith dock area by searching for nonexistent landmarks, and became misoriented when microgravity began playing subtle tricks on the senses.

He could not afford to waste a second, yet seconds were being wasted. Twisting and turning, doubling back when he ran into a dead-end passageway, or was confronted by one of the off-limits labs and manufacturing facilities, he searched for the familiar orange-and-blue load gang directional arrows. There was only a slim chance of eluding the inevitable pursuit in the maze leading “upward” toward the hub’s zenith docks.

Unfortunately, he had no recourse other than try and do his best.

* * *

Despite comprehending only every third or fourth word, Wladislaw Caesescu caught the gist of Yee’s summation. His eyes bulging pugnaciously, shaven bullet-head wagging in disagreement, he barked a sentence in Czech.

Severely rattled by the situation’s critical nature, General Yee realized he’d been speaking English. Sublimating his impatience, he waited for Erik to explain what troubled the spymaster.

“Pop says we’re dead wrong,” declared Erik, not bothering to translate his father’s iconoclastic outburst. “He’s convinced the space tug we’re trying to intercept is a red herring.”

“Upon what,” demanded Yee, “does he base such an assumption?”

Father and son consulted in their own language. “He’s convinced Miura’s playing hare-and-hounds, drawing off the chase, laying a false scent.”

Yee deliberated in silence. Rather than arriving at a consensus of opinion regarding the double-agent's probable whereabouts and intentions, the impromptu three-way council of war showed signs of turning into a roundtable discussion. "Explain," the general said tersely.

Erik nodded. "Okay, for argument's sake let's say Miura's going for one of the main tethers somewhere beyond a tug's transit range. Problem with that scenario, according to Pop, is the runaway tug and the pair we've sent chasing after it are free-falling, with limited fuel aboard. If Miura *is* conning the runaway, Pop wants to know why he hasn't retrofired, why he's letting Coriolis vector him farther and farther away from his supposed target, the tether set.

"That aside," added Erik before Yee could interject a comment, "the sixty-four billion dollar question is a beaut. Even if the sumbitch does have enough juice aboard to retrofire, maneuver, and clamp onto a tether with the tug's mandibles, how in hell does he figure to scarper after doing the dirty deed? With the elevator system kaput, Pop sees damned little salvation in that route. If Miura stays in the tug, he and it will turn into a fireball when it slams into the atmosphere at terminal velocity. If he stays stuck to the tether, he'll be nabbed, and executed."

His features haggard, the general said, "Should Wladislaw's postulate prove correct, no one is aboard the tug our men are risking their lives to intercept."

"True, and Pop's sure the unmanned tug's a throwaway, a stalking horse."

"Should he be correct," said Yee, "we've come full circle, arrived back at square one."

"Afraid so, General. But Pop did highlighted the key logic element. Miura's only getaway option's got to be outbound through space, not groundward."

"That," assured Yee, "is why I posted Major Woo and two squads out to in the terminus."

"Where we . . . ought be, not here," insisted the elder Caesescu, taking up a losing battle with the English language.

Despite lingering misgivings, at last Yee concurred. Lifting his transceiver, he punched buttons, preparing to issue orders that would recall the space tugs desperately seeking to intercept the descending vehicle, now thousands of meters off-line, and plunging toward fiery destruction. Before he could get through, an aide rushed in with word of Cateel's defection and disappearance.

Icy fury was reflected in Yee's eyes. "Find and detain him," he directed. "If he resists in any way, weapons are free."

The general's withering sidelong glance silenced Erik's unspoken objection to permitting the use of deadly force.

* * *

Listening to Cateel's plea with no more than half an ear, the harried dispatcher working in Auxiliary Dock Two cast a perfunctory glance at his visitor, then returned his attention to the traffic control monitor. "Your best bet," he advised, "will be the bird refueling in Dock Five. Every other item of flight hardware is working overtime to evacuate passengers stuck in the spaceward capsules."

Rudy shoved off, bulleted along the gently curving transverse passageway, and accosted Dock Five's dispatcher, who offered minimal encouragement. "Yes," he said, tapping a response to the string of digits illuminating his video panel, "eight-zero-nine's about to depart. Doubt if it's bound for the complex, though."

"What's its mission?"

“Search me,” the dispatcher told him. “Same as the rest of the fleet, I suppose. Flight Control's ordered all pilots to either patrol Artsutanov's hull, or offload one of the last few batches of passengers stuck between here and the launch complex.”

“Is there time enough for me to get aboard?”

“Close, but if you shake a leg to Chute Three . . .”

Eight-zero-nine's co-pilot was in the act of cycling the hatch closed when Rudy flew into the airlock chamber. “Who're you?” he demanded.

“An observer. Will it crowd you if I ride along, look over your shoulder?”

“Flight deck's a tight squeeze. Skipper might give a nod if you stay out of the way.”

“Guaranteed.”

The utility vehicle's cramped, red-lit “office” resembled the cockpit of a light plane in some much earlier era. The captain nodded, reinforced the co-pilot's instruction, telling the newcomer to grab a handhold and stay clear. The pilots completed their checklist, were cleared to depart by the dispatcher. The tug backed into space with gentle nudges from its forward thrusters.

Rudy clung to overhead handgrips, watching every move the pilots made to learn the control system on the off chance he might need to disable the crew and fly the vehicle. Fingering the butt of the holstered sidearm, he psyched himself up to commandeer the tug if necessary.

The pilot reacted to a voice in his headphones. “Affirmative. Eight-zero-nine departing Artsutanov at sixteen-twenty hours.”

“Where to?” Rudy wanted to know.

“Out-orbit,” said the co-pilot. “The rescue tug making an earlier pickup was short of space, leaving behind a half-dozen emigrants. We'll collect 'em, haul 'em out to the terminus.”

Relieved to learn the pellet pistol could stay holstered, Cateel asked casually if rescuing stranded passengers was a rugged assignment.

“Fairly routine,” assured the co-pilot.

The tug's flight path paralleled the vertical tether quad stretching skyward. Fretting about the passage of time, Rudy nevertheless became fascinated with the view forward. Limned in moonlight as they flashed past, evacuated passenger capsules hung motionless on the inbound and outbound tether pairs.

“Live one ahead,” announced the co-pilot. Over his shoulder, he advised Rudy to hang on tight as they were about to turn ship.

After rotating end for end, the tug decelerated with relatively gentle nudges. Fifty meters distant, the tenanted passenger capsule's red warning lights winked in unison. In the illuminated upper-deck viewports people inside could be seen waving frantically.

Conning the tug by the seat of his pants, the pilot displayed a degree of virtuosity, using the vernier controls of his thrusters to bring the vehicle in at the pace of a slow walk. He had to jink twice to align the tug centrally between the looming ascent tether pair, then held the vehicle stationary above the hatch of the capsule's small emergency airlock. Rudy watched the flat panel display. Stereoscopic charge-coupled-device video cameras mounted on either side of the tug's blunt nose let the pilot guide the vehicle into gentle contact with the capsule's ribbed topside.

“Hang on,” warned the co-pilot. “We're about to do a flip-flop.” The docking collar mated with a low-pitched grinding sound conducted through the hull. With gut-wrenching

suddenness, the cabin floor turned into a ceiling as centripetal force gripped the tug. The illusion was that the spacecraft had turned topsy-turvy.

“Can I lend a hand?” offered Rudy, hoping to speed the transfer operation.

“Sure,” said the co-pilot. “Once boosted inside, make sure they’re strapped down.”

A sextet of agitated emigrants bound for the lunar manufacturing site had been stranded for hours in states ranging from sheer panic to passive terror. As they boosted themselves aboard jabbering thankfully among themselves, Rudy troed to calm a quartet of frightened men and two wild-eyed women. When all six were safely secured, he went forward and rejoined the crew.

An hour and twenty minutes later the tug docked at the space elevator’s out-orbit terminus. Anxious to begin searching for Miura, Rudy chafed until the last rescuee disappeared through the hatchway. He thanked the pilots for the ride, hustled through the airlock, and recoiled at sight of a pair of explosive pellet weapons trained on his chest.

“Hands high!” instructed Major Woo.

Rudy allowed himself to be disarmed. A guardsman awarded him a stern look, ripped the billed cap from his head. Noting the pips on the officer’s stiff collar, Rudy said, “You’d do well to give me a hearing, Major.”

“Save your tall tales for the tribunal,” said Woo. “General Yee is on his way here. If it were up to me, I would shoot you and have done with it.”

Rudy evaluated the other’s taut, uncompromising manner. On inspiration, he asked Woo how many of his men had thus far failed to report.

The question brought Woo up short. His eyes narrowed. “How did you learn of it?”

“Miura’s somewhere here in the complex. I *know* he is. He kills because he likes it, kills for pleasure. Your man or men failing to report are probably dead. If you’ve sent others to find out why they can’t be contacted, they’re also probably dead. We haven’t time for accusations, recriminations, loose talk or second-guessing. The clock’s ticking, , Major.”

Far from convinced, Woo said, “He can’t be out here,” sounding much less than certain.

“Yes, he is.”

“An unreasonable assumption. Even if you’re correct, there is no possible way for him to plant the explosives and escape without trying to get past me and the men I have posted.”

“What if Miura isn’t interested in escaping?”

Woo frowned. “Your meaning . . . ?”

Choosing his words, Rudy related his earlier speculations. “I’m convinced that he has dedicated himself to set the charges, ignore the timers and go down with the elevator system.”

“Suicide?”

“Call it *seppuku*. It sounds much nicer, at least to him.”

Woo’s scathing rebuttal to Cateel’s outrageous theory was never uttered.

A muffled explosion rippled through the airlock vestibule. The non-skid metal deck of the spacecraft launch and retrieval terminus tilted crazily beneath the soles of the Velcro-shod boots Cateel had “borrowed” from a guardsman.

The tug carrying Yee, Magdalena Saunders, Kapps and the Caesescus was in its final approach to the spacecraft complex docking bay. Erik Caesescu's gasp of anguish came a half-beat ahead of dismayed cries uttered in concert by the pilot and co-pilot.

Framed in the tug's transpex forward bubble, the enormous disc shape moved slightly askew, its sunlit portion reflecting dazzling brilliance, the remainder neatly sliced by dense, impenetrable shadow. Plumes of gas gushed from a consecutive row of nearside spokes anchoring the termination breakout segments of one great descending tether, glowing brightly in raw sunlight before instantly dissipating in vacuum. Visibly severed, four segments of the main tether dangled in limp, curlicue fashion, while a fifth and sixth were slackly bowed.

Erik leaned into the tug's cargo bay. "Pop, General, get up here!" he bellowed. "Miura just pulled the plug."

Alarmed at the uncharacteristic overtones of panic in Erik's announcement, Yee flinched, unbelted and hastily tugged himself forward. Close behind him, the elder Caesescu arrested his flight by seizing a handhold at the rear of the flight deck. The spymaster took in the spectacle at a glance and cursed in his native tongue, his phlegm-filled voice barely audible.

Yee ordered the pilots to back the tug away and stand by.

"How many breakout segments per tether?" demanded Erik.

"Sixteen."

"Jesus my beads! Nearly half of one are chopped. Will the main tether hang in there on what's left?"

"Not . . . very long." There was agony in Yee's tone of voice.

"Then if any more go . . ."

Although no response was forthcoming, the conclusion was obvious. With one terminus tether semi-severed, centrifugal loading had transferred automatically transfer to the three remaining segments, and would cause them to fail one at a time, after which one by one the remaining tethers would fail. Deprived of stability upon losing its counterbalancing mass, the complex would vector off into space like a suddenly released tetherball. The space elevator system would take its time going down, but down it would go.

Wladislaw Caesescu prodded his son with a stubby forefinger. He rattled something in rapid-fire Czech. Erik brightened, his reply buoyant with revitalized enthusiasm.

"Pop has a short-term fix in mind, General. He advises pulling every docked spacecraft and tug around to the out-orbit side, line 'em up there in each docking ram above the canted section, and run 'em at full boost to partially compensate for the lost tether segments. He thinks it'll shove the loose side of the torus back into rough alignment, moderately ease the strain on the remaining stable terminations."

"Not a permanent fix," objected the tug's pilot.

"In no way," agreed Erik. "But it might help what's left of tether integrity to hang in there long enough for engineers jury-rig repairs."

His eyes alight with reborn hope, General Yee urged the co-pilot to unbelt, and usurped his seat. Donning the proffered headphones, he began issuing orders over the command network, then broke off, his sharply indrawn breath a gasping comment on the additional puffs of gas ejecting from a seventh termination spoke, causing additional breakout segments of the damaged

tether to curl away from the structure and droop limply in vacuum. The inertial spacecraft launch and retrieval complex tilted a degree or two farther out of plumb, a prelude to eventual, all but inevitable disaster.

* * *

“Report!” Major Woo clutched the transciever tightly, the tendons in his wrist standing out. He listened for several heartbeats, turned pale, and fumbled to slip the instrument into the pouch at his belt. Shooting a glance at Cateel, he turned to his squad leader. “A number of tether terminations have been ruptured,” he told the lieutenant.

“He may have used up the gelignite,” suggested Rudy.

Woo puffed his cheeks. “We’ll pray that it is so. If not, the succeeding termination spoke are his next logical target.”

“Shall I take the squad in, sir?” asked a lieutenant.

The major’s headshake of denial was adamant. “The service crawlspace is unlighted and cramped. Enter one by, one and he will pick us off one by one. I’m going in alone. Put two men on every entry hatch still under pressure. Move!”

The lieutenant wheeled and began shouting orders.

“What,” asked Rudy, “will keep him from picking you off?”

Woo lifted a pair of infrared night-vision goggles from his belt. “In the dark, I hope to spot him first.”

“Four eyes,” argued Rudy, “are sixteen times better than two. Let me come with you.”

Woo regarded Cateel levelly. “Your arithmetic is as faulty as your wish to accompany me.”

“I have a score to settle, Major. He tried to eliminate me. I mean to kill him on sight.”

“I realize that you know him, know his ways,” said Woo. “But can a spy be trusted to catch a spy, or is his genuine intention to help his accomplice take care of business?”

“I want him even more than you do,” said Rudy.

“You are too much like him.”

“Not in any way.”

“Words slide from your mouth with great ease. How can I be sure you won’t aid him?”

“He tried to kill me.”

“I have already heard that excuse. What you are suggesting is out of the question.”

“My sister, the only surviving member of my immediate family, was brought out here at the order of General Yee. I’ll do anything to remove her from of harm’s way. *Anything!*”

Woo obviously did not relish the prospect of confronting Miura alone, yet knew it was his duty. He pondered. “In good conscience, I cannot allow you a weapon.”

“Agreed. I’ll go first, draw him out. You follow close behind, weapon in hand. Think fast, Major. There’s no time left to debate my virtues.”

“Or vices.” The officer sighed. “I think it best for you to stay under guard.”

Rudy’s ultimate, quietly spoken plea seemed to jar the major: “Please!”

Woo adjusted the night-vision goggles, seating them on the bridge of his nose, then slid them up to his forehead. He regarded Cateel narrowly, still wavering, and relented. “You will stay well back. I will go in first.”

“Your call, Major.”

* * *

“And you, Comrade General? What present outcome do you foresee?”

Face to face with the implacable vidicom image of Chairman Li Qin, Yee made a determined effort to appear resolute. “At at the moment, Comrade Chairman, the situation is very fluid. Moments before I arrived, my aide, Major Woo, entered the tether termination spoke. He is an extremely capable officer.”

“Sufficiently capable to stop the saboteur single-handed?”

“He is not alone,” admitted Yee reluctantly. “I’m told the UNIA asset convinced Woo he could be of assistance. Should they be successful in preventing an eighth rupture, the integrity of the main tether will —”

“Do you dare tell me that Daniel’s field officer was allowed to accompany your aide?” Li’s expression had undergone a subtle change. “One might think twice about the reliability of allowing a renegade to assist in dealing with his fellow renegade.”

Deflated by the calmly stated words of his nation’s supreme leader, the general did what he could to convey reassurance. “I have every reason to believe he is trustworthy, Comrade Chairman. In seeking vengeance, Cateel once told my grandniece he hoped we failed to apprehend Miura so that he could personally take care of the man. I have every confidence in him, and Major Woo was made aware of my opinion.”

“I see. In that event, Comrade General, solving the weighty problem shall be left to your discretion. But to once again pose the question of questions. What outcome do you foresee?”

Realizing candor was the only option Li Qin would accept, Yee said, “I would be remiss not to say the matter can go either way, Comrade Chairman. The engineers advise that tentative stability has been partially reinstated through the use of massed spacecraft thrust in opposition to structural misalignment, thus lessening excessive loading on the remaining tether segments by reducing to some degree the strain on their respective terminations. Should an eighth breakout segment be severed, however, they advise immediate evacuation of all personnel capable of being accommodated by the docked and co-orbiting spacecraft.”

In the vidicom flat-panel display, Li Qin’s eyes clouded, the only visible manifestation of his inner turmoil. Expecting thunder and lightning to descend for allowing Quench to backfire, he was very surprised to hear nothing in the way of condemnation or recrimination. “Thank you, Comrade General. Your forthright answers are greatly appreciated. Should it prove necessary, the exit stampede you describe would comprise a tragic footnote to our Great Leap Upward. We shall therefore endeavor with every means at our disposal to avoid such a tragedy, shall we not?”

“In *every* possible manner, Comrade Chairman.”

In a softer voice, Li Qin said, “You have done your utmost, my old friend. Whatever the outcome, remember always that we shall persevere, and shall convince the Western powers of our benign intentions. Despite repeated assurances on our part, the threat of imminent conflict has lights burning late in every Western capital.

“And in that regard,” continued Chairman Li Qin solemnly, “with all due respect, through no fault of your own, you have neglected to play the remaining trump card at your disposal.”

Startled, Yee knew Li Qin’s well known addiction to contract bridge had given birth to the reference. “Your pardon, Comrade Chairman. I beg you to relieve my ignorance.”

“You have in your possession,” said Chairman Li, “and in fact there at your side, so you have said, what might become the ace of trump — the American federal officer who might agree to communicate directly with the highest government official to whom he had access? As their man on the scene, mightn’t he be encouraged to persuade certain higher-ups that the People’s Republic does not now, nor has it ever, given serious thought to a preemptive employment of strategic weaponry? He might indeed convince his government that our beleaguered nation would never dream of retaliating to the dastardly U.N. sabotage effort in such a draconian manner.”

The notion not only fired Yee’s imagination, it reignited his roiling emotions. “I hope you will forgive my oversight, Comrade Chairman. In the heat of the moment, I confess that gambit never occurred to me. Let me sign off now and try to solicit the gentleman’s cooperation.”

“Please do so at once, Comrade General. Keep us informed.”

“I shall, Comrade Chairman.”

* * *

“You’re *where*, Murray?” Suddenly all ears, the FBI Deputy Director gripped the arms of his executive chair.

“Not long ago,” Kapps told his superior, “Mrs. Saunders and I were flown out here aboard a Chinese shuttle.”

Gaping at the image in the vidicom display, the deputy director said, “Jesus!”

General Yee had coached the FBI agent on what to say, as well as what not to say. Kapps briefly recapitulated the chain of events during the kidnap investigation, the murder of one perpetrator known to be a U.N. employee, how a trap placed on the Saunders landline had led the chase north to San Francisco, where he had learned Mrs. Saunders and her toddler had been “rescued” by unknown benefactors, and her subsequent invitation to pose as her husband.

“The news of elevator sabotage is accurate, sir,” concluded Murray earnestly. “I can personally attest to the fact of a power outage. The system is down, and definitely the result of sabotage. Unfortunately, one of the saboteurs turned out to be Mrs. Saunders’s brother, Rodolfo Cateel, a UNIA intelligence officer. The kidnap motive in a nutshell is that Magdalena Saunders and her tyke were abducted to blackmail her brother into accepting what on the face of it amounted to a suicide assignment — sabotage of the space elevator’s power system.”

Incredulous over what he’d been hearing, the FBI deputy director said, “UNIA *kidnapped* the relatives of its own agent? Come on, what the hell is this, Murray? Are you giving me fact, suspicion, fiction of what?”

“Fact,” replied Kapps. “What I hope to put across very strongly, sir, is a thousand times more important. The PRC has absolutely no intention of attacking anyone, anywhere, in reprisal for the sabotage efforts. I sincerely hope you’ll take that message up the line.”

There was a brief silence in Washington. “Murray, I’d be the last to doubt your veracity or integrity, but what you’re asking is . . .” The executive ruminated. “Your story tends to corroborate the official line coming from Beijing, but . . . Christ Almighty! This whole ball of wax is starting to sound like some conspiracy theorist’s daydream. How can I be certain no one is coercing you to make this call? Were you pressured in any way?”

“Not at all,” denied Kapps. “In fact, just the opposite. What I’ve told you comes straight from the horse’s mouth. I was politely invited to make the call only because of my chance presence out here. Things have come to a head, and —”

“How in the name of God,” interrupted the other, “can you be certain our Chinese friends aren’t readying a preemptive strike? Your ‘polite invitation’ could be a ploy to set us up for a second Pearl Harbor, except on an infinitely more lethal scale.”

“Sir, please think about what you just said,” pleaded Kapps. “Against whom would the CPR retaliate?” Purposely holding back all mention of Japanese involvement, he added, “The U.N. is a multinational organization. Would nuking U.N. world headquarters in Geneva prove anything other than the advertised capability and the efficiency of China’s weaponry and their delivery systems? Would that degree of destructive ‘retaliation’ effectively do anything more than turn a major European city into a field of radioactive rubble?”

“Umm-m-m, point taken,” admitted the deputy director. “In truth, point, game, set and match. All right, I’ll do what I can at this end,” he said, sounding as if he meant it. “It amounts to sticking my neck way out strictly on your say so, but you’ve never given me any reason to lessen my confidence in you, and yess I’ll take the message all the way to the top. I hope to hell you know what you’re doing.”

“You won’t be sorry,” promised Kapps.

* * *

The hatchway yawned, exposing a cylindrical pit of all but palpable blackness. Motioning for quiet, Cateel made as if to enter first, but the major shouldered him aside. Despite Rudy’s gestured urgings, Woo disdained use of the night-vision goggles pushed up on his forehead, and boldly switched on an electric torch. Cringing at what he thought might be the result, Rudy watched the officer turn and back down a short, flimsy metal ladder. Woo pulled out his sidearm when he reached the catwalk below, and waited there for Cateel to descend.

The tunnel, rectangular in cross-section, afforded limited headroom; its “floor,” an expanded-metal catwalk suspended from the overhead by slender, inadequate looking stanchions even under the mild, pseudo-gravity loading imposed by centrifugal force. The electric torch’s shaft of light flicked along the confined crawlspace leading outboard toward the labyrinthine vacuum seals of the eighth tether segment. Satisfied that Miura had no place to hide in that direction, Woo led the way deeper into the installation.

The electric torch produced eerie, dancing shadows flickering in the tether trough below the catwalk. Evenly spaced, welded buttresses arched above and below the tether’s eighth breakout segment, where it was affixed to the structure by staggered secure weldments.

Weaponless, his reflexes at hair-trigger, Rudy trailed the slowly stalking officer. “Douse the light,” he advised in a stage whisper.”

“Not yet,” countered Woo.

“Better to use night goggles, go in the dark,” urged Rudy.”

“I will when reaching the first transverse passage to tether spokes on either side.”

“At least,” Cateel told him, sounding frustrated, “hold the damned flash at arm’s length, and keep shining it down into the tether well.”

The major wisely adopted this last suggestion, and moved cautiously, weapon in hand.

Behind Woo, the short hairs lifted at the nape of Rudy’s neck. The claustrophobic service tunnel was an abominable place in which to stalk a predatory animal like Miura, who not only gloried in slaying, but accomplished it with neither reluctance nor remorse. To cap the chilling notion that the man might be crouched behind any of the buttresses ahead of them was the

certain knowledge that an explosion could blow he and Woo away at any instant by opening the tunnel to hard vacuum. The total advantage belonged to Miura.

Moving in tandem along the catwalk, stealthily putting one booted foot ahead of the other, Rudy halted behind the major when his flashlight lit the first buttress and flanged tether-segment tie point. The hollow termination spoke had been fabricated in structural sections, with flanged buttresses at either end of a particular section, then welded together and vacuum-sealed after assembly. At each junction, where the tether segment below the catwalk had been fused to the structure, the angled gussets of a buttress offered a convenient hiding place. The major edged his torch over the flange's rim and spotlighted a sprawled security guard's gray-green uniform. The man's eyes were open, staring blindly. His skull was crushed on one side; a considerable amount of blood had dripped through the expanded-metal catwalk into the tether trough.

Major Woo swore softly.

"Now at least we know where he once was," whispered Rudy.

In reply, the major merely grunted.

They pressed on toward the succeeding tie point. No one lurked behind the next flanged joint, or the one after that.

When the dark opening of a side tunnel appeared, Woo slowed his step, poked his torch around the corner and peeked with one eye. A red light glowed beside the hermetic hatch six meters away. "Zero pressure in breakout seven," said Woo. "It was the last segment blown."

Rudy began to wonder if Miura had already planted explosive charges in tunnel eight's termination segment. If so, he had probably set the timer and was now long gone. It would be up to he and the major to find and disarm the charges.

Tagging Woo's heels, Rudy edged into the final section, where the tether segment disappeared into a solid structure. Woo threw torchlight on the end bulkhead, and both men froze in mid-stride.

A band of what appeared to be grayish clay enwrapped the tether segment where it emerged from deeper tie points. The dark spike of a detonator protruded from the gelignite, with the rectangular dial face of a timer reflecting torchlight like an evil eye.

Brushing past the major, Rudy charged forward, bent on disarming the explosives by yanking out the detonator. He was single-mindedly concentrating on his objective when a lightning flash went off inside his skull. He crashed shoulder-first into a stanchion supporting the catwalk, staggered another step and crumpled on the rough, expanded-metal catwalk.

His vision wavering, he watched the indistinct figure of Miura rise from the tether trough below the catwalk and lunge, swinging a length of bloodied pipe. The major's pistol discharged, but the pellet exploded harmlessly against the overhead with an ear-splitting crack. Tiny shrapnel fragments peppered the catwalk.

In a semi-conscious daze, the right side of his face on fire, Rudy heard heavy breathing, but was barely able to recognize the scuffling sounds and grunts for what they were. Woo and Miura were grappling, yet for some reason their struggle did not seem to concern him. He strained to raise his head, a disinterested observer instead of a participant. The scene blurred, going in and out of focus.

The half-minute Miura spent battering Woo senseless gave Rudy enough breathing space to rally his senses. Blinking repeatedly, he took stock. Blood was running down his neck, and his

broken lower jaw hung slackly, in agony. Thus far, shock had held at least some of the intense pain at bay, but he felt that changing for the worse.

Groping upward, he felt for a support stanchion, spat out shattered teeth in a shower of red spittle, came slowly erect and tottered toward the blanket of gelignite wrapped around the tether termination.

An expertly delivered kidney punch felled him a second time. He rolled instinctively as he went down, twisted about and shot his booted right foot into Miura's groin. The other grunted and reeled backward a step, temporarily unable to prosecute the attack.

Cateel staggered erect, gaining his feet feeling weak and trembling, drained of energy. The electric torch, fallen beside the still figure of Woo on the catwalk, silhouetted Miura's stocky form. Poised on the balls of his feet, the other had posted himself between Cateel and the explosive charges. True to his nature, he anticipated what was in store and was waiting for Rudy to regain enough strength to make the coming contest a touch more interesting.

"So you survived. Most resourceful," applauded Miura. "Come to me bringing all your Shotokan skills, and we shall resume our drill eh? Please promise to use all your talents. Hold nothing back. This bout will be our last."

Backlighting by the electric torch, Miura was a dark silhouette, his sharklike grin invisible, although Rudy sensed that it was there. The length of pipe clanged in the tether trough below as Miura tossed it away. "We have only minutes," said Miura. "If the blast doesn't do for us, explosive decompression will. It would be unseemly for you, my sometime assistant, to survive the blast only to breathe vacuum. Come to me, try to get past me and be a hero. It will add spice to our final moments."

Seppuku! Cateel thought weakly. He had guessed correct, for all the good *that* did. At first a ripple, then a wave, and finally an unstoppable tsunami, the berserker fury made famous by his forefathers coursed through him. He launched himself recklessly at the other, only to be doubled over by a kick in the midsection that knocked him backward. The follow-up kick was meant to take his head off, but his reflexes, though slowed by injury, saved him.

They fought in silence. Nothing Rudy tried worked quite properly in the weak pseudo-gravity. A hair late in fending off one of Miura's vicious thrusts, he was hammered backward again, and yet again. Running on sheer willpower, he took advantage of the confined space and caught Miura's kneecap with a lancing right boot.

"Amateur!" accused his opponent, hopping away nimbly, and scornfully decried the tactic. "Still favor the pitiful schoolboy *hittsui-geri*, do you?"

A natural counter-puncher, Cateel fought enveloped in a red fog of agony adequately fueled by superheated, white hot inner fury. Deeply ingrained combat instincts drove him. He managed to hold his own until Miura ripped a flattened hand to his badly injured jaw, and the world exploded in agony, and then suddenly went dark.

The catwalk rose up to smite him as time slowed to a crawl, slowed still more and came to a full stop. Barely able to lift his head, he hazily discerned the boot lifted to stomp out his life.

An incredibly loud explosion slammed Miura against the tunnel's curved wall and he disappeared, tumbling head first over the rail into the gap between catwalk and tether trough.

Feebly, employing the last dregs of his remaining strength, Rudy crawled on his hands and knees to the tether termination and tugged the detonator free.

The timer clicked over brief seconds after he disarmed the wrapped gelignite.

* * *

General Yee's outward serenity belied his internal turbulence. Deep sorrow accounted for the emotional maelstrom coursing through him, apparent in the long seconds he spent studying the still figure of his former aide. At last his world-weary gaze turned to the injured saboteur. "Confining this unworthy one presents a problem," he told the guardsmen holding Miura between them. "For the moment, put him in the nearby airlock for safekeeping."

His head a crucible of agony, Rudy saw Miura stiffen. Rigid as a tightly wound spring, the double-agent clasped his tourniqueted arm, where the explosive pellet had shredded flesh to the bone. His toothy shark's grin came and went swiftly, a vain attempt to deflect Yee's unnerving stare with a show of bravado. "Our purpose," he said, "has been achieved."

"Your sole achievement," denied Yee, "has been assuring the downfall of the Ministry of Justice. If fortunate, allowed to keep the head on his shoulders, Tomono will spend the rest of his days as a salaryman staring from the window of some anonymous Tokyo highrise."

"Your elevator system is finished."

"By no means," declared Yee. "The launch complex will be evacuated only in order for repairs to commence at once."

Miura eyed the general with utter disdain. "I ask only a sharp blade, Yee-sama. Perhaps one of these brave gentlemen will be kind enough to perform *kaishaku*."

When he spoke, the general's voice totally lacked inflection. "You dare to address me in a respectful term?"

"How else?" Miura refused to wilt under the general's contemptuous stare. "A weapon, instead, perhaps, with a single round chambered. I beg this favor of you, General. Call it a matter of honor between honorable gentlemen."

"Beg . . . ?"

"With utmost humility."

"No." The softly uttered denial echoed coldly in the access tunnel's metal confines. Rudy watched the tableau unfold through the red haze of pulsing agony lacing through his broken jaw with every heartbeat.

"Humility," declared Yee in an icy monotone, "is an emotion not common among *bushido samurai*. You could be one of the last *ronin* in existence, hopefully *the* last. The elevator has survived your failed mission, while you have proven yourself an even greater failure. You will be received by your dismayed ancestors with the blood of innocents on your hands, duplicity graven in your heart, and your *gimu* unfulfilled." The general gestured curtly.

Displaying no hint of the pain in his shattered arm, Miura allowed the guards to roughly escort him along the catwalk, while two pairs of hands helped steady Cateel, supporting him as the intense agony in his jaw flared even more brightly when taking a first tentative step. The guardsmen helped him climb the ladder, one pulling from above, another boosting him from below. Emerging from the tether anchoring tunnel, the strain of going up the ladder sapped what little remained of his strength, and he came near blacking out.

Gripped securely, the man posing as former industrial tycoon Hideko Matsuda waited with outward patience for the airlock to cycle open. He seemed to deliberate with himself while

searched General Yee's impassive countenance, then spat, "*Kisama wa ningen jenai!*" and with regal dignity, stepped over the airlock's high threshold.

The general did not hesitate to punch the control panel himself. The hatch cycled closed and the hermetic seals cammed together, Yee tapped the control panel again, overriding his original command.

An indicator light glowing amber promptly winked red. The high-pitched squeal of venting air signified that the lock chamber was rapidly exhausting to vacuum.

Explosive decompression ensures a rapid if hideous death. Faint thumping sounds within the airlock chamber diminished and ceased.

Cateel's gorge rose. "My . . . turn?" he mumbled, the broken jaw making the question barely intelligible.

Yee's thin smile was not at all reassuring. "As the world will soon be made to realize, the bloodied mummy in there *is* you, Cateel. The dessicated husk of your antagonistic associate no longer resembles anything human, hence it's actual identity will neither come to light, nor will it be allowed to become anything more than a topic of conjecture by Tomono's analysts. The saboteur responsible for disrupting Artsutanov's power system will be advertised as none other than you yourself. Even as we speak, Beijing is disseminating the news of your guilt, and of course the less direct guilt of your employers."

Dwelling in agony, Rudy was at a loss for words. He did manage to mouth a barely audible, "But, why . . .?"

"To understate its role," replied the general, "it will suffice to paint Daniel's organization in its less than true colors, rather than pointing the finger of blame at the actual culprit, Nippon, which might well bring about the cataclysm we have labored so earnestly to avert. The Western powers are busy sheathing their sabers, and our leadership believes it far wiser to showcase UNIA's brinksmanship in this affair and label the gentleman leads it as the inept figurehead he actually is. Censure will be heaped on the collective Western mindset responsible for endorsing and reinforcing UNIA's clandestine activities. After all, wasn't it UNIA's arrogant attitude that inspired the foolhardy adventure in which you played a principal if unknowing role?"

"Quickly now!" General Yee clapped his hands. "Get this man to the infirmary."

* * *

Her expression made it apparent that the nursing supervisor wanted to discourage the visitors from overstaying their welcome. Finding it impossible to follow their incomprehensible foreign devil chit-chat, she finally lost all patience and rendered an admonishment in staccato Mandarin. "You must leave now, and let the patient rest."

Not wishing to become argumentative, Siu Lan switched languages. "How is he doing?"

"Still extremely uncomfortable, Miss. He's twice as obstinate as any patient we have ever treated here. He has twice refused the prescribed analgesic."

Siu Lan translated for the benefit of Magdalena and Kapps.

Maggie rolled her eyes. "That does sound like my big brother."

Hearing Maggie's comment, Rudy tried to say something, but only winced. His wired jaw made speaking not only difficult; it aggravated the pain.

“Shush-h-h, don’t try to talk,” urged Maggie. Regarding him with analytical concern, she said, “Later today Mr. Kapps and I are heading home. The elevator will be down during the repair cycle. We’re being shuttled back down to Hong Kong, so this is . . . goodbye for now.”

Rudy extended his hand to be shaken by Kapps, and managed to mumble a heartfelt, “Owe you, FBI.”

Murray gently took the proffered hand. “You have that backwards, Cateel. It’s we who owe *you*. There are a few matters I’d like to clear up when you’re feeling better. Let me know where you’ll be taken, and I’ll call you from . . .”

“No,” gritted Cateel through his wired jaw, fighting down the surge of pain. “Must be . . . non-person for Mag. No one can . . . know I live. No one, not Art, Little Rudy, no one!”

“Don’t say that,” protested Maggie.

“Have to,” insisted Cateel. “If London learn I live, you . . . in danger.”

“Are you serious? They wouldn’t dare!” said Magdalena.

“They,” assured Rudy as emphatically as his burning jaw allowed, “would dare. I only . . . witness to what happen. Must disappear.”

“I hear you,” said Kapps. “I’ll take care of everything in the States. The general coached me on what to say, how to handle Japan’s part in the affair. The FBI will keep Maggie and the boy under a microscope for at least the next six months.”

Rudy blinked his thankful approval. “After that, no . . . matter.”

“Rest and get well, Big Brother. It will be hard for me, but I promise to keep my mouth shut.” Her eyes misted, Maggie leaned over and kissed Rudy’s forehead.

He patted her hand.

After the others had filed out of the infirmary compartment, Siu Lan came and sat in the bedside chair and took his hand tenderly, but didn’t say anything. After a while, beaming with the piquant smile he knew so well, she said, “Now I have you all to myself.”

EPILOGUE

The necklace of blunt-ended monorail cars departed Picard in a surge of acceleration. Rushing through starshot vacuum, the express hurtled along an elevated magnetic levitation track cleaving the sere wilderness of Mare Serenitatis. After brief stops at the lonely way stations of Maraldi and Linne, the train streaked toward the terminator, emerging from night into the slow-paced lunar sunset, where polarized windows tinted automatically against the blast of unleavened sunlight and the stars vanished overhead, swallowed up in glare reflected from the sunlit desolation and long shadows rushing past below.

Siu Lan Yee enjoying the view. Serried bulwarks of the flame-tipped Appenines shouldered away to the southwest. Directly ahead of the rushing train, the outer ringwall of Autolycus humped above the grossly foreshortened horizon. When Rudy covered her hand with his own, she broke the lingering silence. “Really, sir! Aren’t you being overly familiar?”

Rudy chuckled. “You treat me like a stranger.”

“Well, you certainly look like a stranger.”

“I’m no longer sure *who* I am. It’s a shock to peek in the mirror, see someone else staring back at me.”

"I suppose eventually I'll get used to the new you." Siu Lan had kept vigil at the Crisium Mediocenter, waiting for him to be discharged. At the unveiling, Rudy had caught her shooting covert glances of disbelief at his revamped features. She hugged his arm possessively. "You're handsomer than ever, but . . . different." Sensing his aversion to the topic, she changed the subject. "You still haven't explained what's in that cold pack you've been lugging around."

"Oh . . . things."

"Things? Frozen goodies?"

"Give it a rest, Siu Lan. You'll find out soon."

"How soon?"

"After we talk to your illustrious granduncle."

"I'm also a Yee," she said brightly. "Why make me wait?"

"Doesn't count. You aren't a general."

"Spoilsport! The young woman pretended to pout.

They overnighted in a transient hostelry on Level Five of the anthill carved beneath the Aristarchus crater, boarded the space-to-space shuttle *Aleksandr Nevsky*. Catapulted from Mare Procellarum's long mass-driver, the ship was flung into trajectory, its destination the repaired, refurbished inertial launch and retrieval complex at the space elevator's spaceward terminus.

The week and three days spent in transit during both legs of the journey down to the ground station were spent in dreamlike languor. They talked and made love and slept, then talked and made love and slept again. Grounding at the Mt. Beturan site rested and refreshed, totally committed to one another, their first taste of the stultifying heat and humidity outdoors jarred them into a reacquaintance with reality. Boarding a tram, they stepped off at the headquarters building and rode up to Yee's air-conditioned penthouse suite.

The general greeted them warmly, embracing his grandniece, exchanging bows of mutual respect with Cateel. His authentic executive assistant served tea and cakes while Yee marveled at the transformative results of Cateel's cosmetic surgery. "Your own sister would fail to recognize you. Now then, what plans have you made for yourselves?"

"There's something I have to do," said Rudy, "then we'll go back to Luna."

His shrew, analytical mind at work, the platinum-haired counterintelligence director regarded the former UNIA field asset with unwinking concentration. "Intuition tolls a warning bell," he said. "I believe I know what you have in mind, and it causes me great distress. Will you be offended if I tender a kernal of unsolicited advice?"

"Your words of wisdom are always welcome, General."

"At the risk of perpetuating a timeworn cliché," declared Yee, "I must remind you of an ancient pearl of Chinese wisdom. Who seeks revenge," he said, exaggerating the warning's gravity, "digs two graves."

"It isn't what you may think, General."

"So?" Yee's silver brows lifted. "If not too inquisitive, may I ask what 'it' might be?"

Rudy explained.

Siu Lan bubbled impulsive laughter, then quickly sobered. "You mean in the cold pack you brought down from Crisium? Rudy, that's *gross*."

Yee's normally sedate features convulsed in a mask of hilarity. "Sincere . . . apologies," he said haltingly. "I should have known better than to underestimate your imagination. You have my blessing, of course."

"I'd love to take credit," said Rudy, "but Erik Caesescu's the man who owns a runaway imagination. Not that it discourages me, but I'm afraid the actual doing will take more than your blessing. I'll need a some help from my friends — a foolproof ID, U.K. passport, perhaps a few hundred pounds sterling."

"Each of those items can be arranged," assured Yee.

"How will you find them?" asked Siu Lan.

"Erik sent me a copy of Sir Carlton's fanciful autobiography. Slipped between the pages was a note that spelled out the details."

Two days later, keeping whatever misgivings she might have felt to herself, Siu Lan saw Rudy off at the airport in Pontianak.

* * *

Typical April weather greeted Rudy on his arrival at Gatwick International. He rented a small electric four-seater and found it drizzly and dreary motoring through the low lying Cambridgeshire countryside. Passing himself off as a visiting Asian Studies lecturer, he registered at the Marriot in the modern city surrounding the ancient Cambridge center of learning. When the rain abated the following forenoon, he strolled the "Backs" beside placid River Cam, letting the spires of St. John's instill in him renewed respect for the enduring quality and serenity of university life.

Fraternal twins, the Churchill College undergraduates bore only a slight family resemblance to one another. Unearthing their whereabouts proved anything but difficult. Clad in a bowler and dark gray pinstripes, Rudy toted a briefcase, a topcoat and the rolled umbrella that was obligatory for anyone who dared to venture outdoors in England's springtime. Blending invisibly into Cambridge's eight-century-old atmosphere, he circulated for hours bent upon one nameless errand or another, politely tipping his bowler to passing dons, he tailed the twins to their shared lodgings, and shadowed them for the next day as they visited their respective tutors. He even nursed a tankard of mild in the noisy pub where they sometimes relaxed after hours.

On the afternoon of the third day, having their itineraries down pat, he abandoned Cambridge and roved the countryside north of the city, eventually settling on what he'd been searching for, a rather neglected cottage lost in the fens. Judging by outward appearances, the house was vacant according to the weathered HIRE-PURCHASE, FURNISHED sign posted alongside the graveled driveway. He jotted down the realtor's name and address.

Back in Cambridge, the stodgy broker hemmed and hawed and acted leery about renting to a foreigner, but one glance at the Asian gentleman's forged credentials, not to mention his fat roll of banknotes, caused a drastic revision in the other's attitude. Taking possession of the latch keys and a two-month lease, Rudy shook hands with the realtor, thanking him obsequiously.

Late the following afternoon, as if by chance, he pulled the rented electric runabout to the curb and leaned from the window, accosting the twins as they left their lodgings. "I say," he called, affecting an Oxon drawl, "would either of you chaps mind directing me to Trinity Chapel? I'm to meet someone there for evening services, but coping with the ins and outs and byways of this confounded town is difficult for a stranger."

“Happy to oblige, sir.” Blond, tow-headed Gareth bent to look Cateel over with a measure of respect.

“Going that way ourselves,” put in Geoffrey. “If you like, we’ll ride along, give a steer.”

“Oh, I do appreciate that. Decent of you, if you’re sure it isn’t too much bother.”

“No, not at all. You’re doing us a favor.”

The twins piled in. After introductions all around, the small talk went smoothly. Yes, as an Asian Studies lecturer Rudy was visiting England for the first time since his own matriculation at Oxford. Loving every moment of it, too, save for the abominable weather, which he feared might never improve.

The sally drew indulgent smiles from both young men. Feigning interest, Rudy allowed the lads to point out landmarks as they drove.

Gareth was chattering about something when Rudy sucked in a deep, silent breath and held it. Slipping his left hand under the dash, he keyed the squib of odorless, gaseous Placidyl rendered by one of the lab technicians at General Yee’s beck and call. A half-block farther along the street, the twins slumped in their seats. Rudy pulled the runabout over, parking at the curb. He reached across the recumbent form of Gareth, rolled down the runabout’s window, wrenched open the driver’s door and stepped out. Breathing deeply, he paced all around the vehicle as if searching for suspected damage. Passers-by paid scant attention to the youths dozing inside.

Dusk had descended by the time the four-seater made its way out into the gloomy fen country. Employing the fireman’s tote, he carried the lads one at a time into the cottage’s rear bedroom. After using a hypodermic syringe to make certain they would sleep for at least six hours, he locked the bedroom door, took down the cold pack from a high shelf in the master bedroom closet, and used tweezers to remove a pair of dry-frozen human parts from the ghoulish collection obtained in the Crisium Medicenter morgue. Placing the unsavory objects in a small box, he wrapped the parcel in plain brown paper, pasted on an address label, locked the cottage and drove the hundred and thirty kilometers into Greater London.

* * *

“Priority call, Sir Carlton,” announced Stephens, the great man’s invaluable aide.
“Channel six, sir.”

“At this ungodly hour?” The proud knight of the realm glanced up from the classified document he’d been perusing. Setting his wakeup cup of tea in the saucer, he asked, “Scrambled, encrypted, what?”

“The gentleman is speaking in the clear, sir. His access code was verified, but it’s a bit odd. ‘Immanuel’ is by far the oldest cover name still active in the triple-A database.”

“Umm-m-m, Immanuel; afraid it doesn’t register. Very well, put him through.” Taking a priority call was no novelty; the director often accepted several calls per month from personnel involved in critical assignments.

“Good day, Sir Carlton.” The voice sounded vaguely familiar, although the vidicom terminal’s flat-panel display remained a featureless, random wash of pixels.

“Who is this, please? I’m not accustomed to having priority calls begin with airy salutations.”

“Immanuel.”

“Yes, yes.” Daniel’s his bushy brows knitted. “I fear I’m not acquainted,” he said snappishly, “with anyone choosing to use that name.”

“Really? Deuced strange that is. It was my codename for months in Singapore. On second thought, does the name Rodolfo Cateel ring a bell?”

The director surged to his feet, unwittingly scooting his castled leather executive chair into an unoffending bookcase. “You are, uh . . . You appear to still be with us after all, assuming it *is* you. How very remarkable!”

“Oh, still breathing, Sir Carlton, no thanks to you.”

“I, uh . . . That is, we supposed you . . . Listen, if you are indeed who you say you are, I imagine you must be eager to come in.”

“Oh, it’s definitely me. Have no doubt of that.”

“Ah, but is it?” declared Daniel. “Anyone who happened to read my book could call himself Cateel, couldn’t he?”

“Did your cloak-and-dagger epic include the assigned codename, or the priority number I used to get in touch with you?”

“Umm-m-m, point taken,” conceded Daniel. “Give me your whereabouts, and immediate provisions will be made to have you picked up. And please switch on video at your end, if you will. Talking to a blank screen makes our discussion rather too one-sided. I should very much like to verify your identity, if you don’t mind. After all, it’s been nearly —”

“Ah, but I do mind, Sir Carlton. I know all your calls are recorded. If further proof is needed, a voiceprint will establish who I am. Nor have I any desire to come in out of the cold. Actually, I’m enjoying the cold. There is one small favor you’re going to do for me, however.”

“Am I indeed!” The director’s inflection turned peevish. “May I inquire what that ‘small favor’ might be?”

Cateel explained in very few words.

“What rubbish!” Unbridled contempt underscored the exclamation. “Why should I listen to such cheeky nonsense?”

Rudy explained the reasons.

“My *grandsons*? You wouldn’t dare!”

“Fair is fair, Sir Carlton. You didn’t hesitate to order my sister and nephew kidnapped. You might thank me for returning the favor tit for tat. Call their lodgings in Cambridge if you have any doubts. Go ahead, try and contact Geoffrey and Gareth.”

Whey-faced, Daniel groped behind him, sank heavily into his executive chair looking as if he might be having a seizure, and began frantically pressing and re-pressing a button concealed beneath the desk’s underlip. “I say,” he began, his fruity baritone easing into a more conciliatory register, “one cannot help but think it juvenile of you to hold a grudge of this magnitude and duration. Why not sit down over a glass of Madeira and discuss it like the professionals we are? After all, I’m essentially a reasonable man who —”

“I’m not,” assured Cateel. “No point in stalling to keep me on the line, either. You’ll never learn where I’ve tucked away the lads for safekeeping. UNIA taught me too well to give the game away that easily. I’ll begin with ears, Sir Carlton. How do ears strike you? Would you prefer left ears, or right ears?”

Wordless, bubbling sounds escaped from the director’s throat.

“Yes, I understand,” soothed Cateel. “Decisions can be a bore. No matter; I’ll decide for you. I think ears first, then toes. After that perhaps fingers. Eventually we’re bound to get to the, uh . . . We’ll have worked our way to more delicate appendages.”

Rudy rang off with a flourish.

That evening, as the sun set over the British Empire’s insular remnant, a manhunt of monumental proportions was being organized. New Scotland Yard and every constabulary jurisdiction and UNIA office within Great Britain’s length and breadth, plus every Secret Service office in the United Kingdom and portions of the globe friendly to the UK, received telefaxed photographs and detailed background information related to Rodolfo Taruc Cateel, a renegade former UNIA field asset, kidnapping suspect, and most-wanted fugitive, together with comprehensive data pertaining to the youthful innocents he claimed were being held hostage.

Under mild sedation in his Belgravia townhouse, Sir Carleton’s manservant woke him when the morning post delivered a package. Gingerly advised of the contents, he collapsed.

A pair of big toes later, the frantic knight capitulated. BBC interrupted an afternoon documentary devoted to the lifestyles and peculiar mating habits of an obscure species of water beetle in order to announce the surprising resignation, effective immediately, of United Nations Intelligence Agency Director Sir Carlton S. Daniel. The decision to step down was ascribed to “advancing years and declining health.”

Back in the fens, Rudy switched off the ancient holovision tank that was an item of the cottage’s bleak furnishings. Checking on the twins, he assured himself the medication administered at tea time would put them out for at least four hours. Leaving the bedroom door ajar, he collected his topcoat and overnight bag, dropped the keys to the electric runabout on the vehicle’s front seat, and set off on a two-kilometer stroll down the lane, where he phoned for a cab to take him into Cambridge.

Purchased a telefacsimile printout of the Daily Telegraph, he read the account of Daniel’s unheralded abdication while the London bullet train whisked him to Liverpool Street Station. Deciding to avoid the Underground on the off chance that it afforded limited freedom of movement, possibly cornering him, he waited patiently, umbrella unfurled, in a drizzly rush-hour queue, until a bus seat became available. He changed buses four times on a roundabout route to Gatwick Intercontinental.

Ticketed, his carry-on overnighter in hand, he was sauntering through the concourse toward the designated boarding gate when a light tap on the shoulder made him halt.

A beefy stalwart with rosy cheeks evaluated him with a myopic squint, while his companion compared his features with those depicted in a flat photograph of a much younger Rodolfo Cateel, and muttered, “You’re plain daft, Jim.”

“Beg you pardon, sir. From the rear it looked as if you might be . . . What I mean to say is, uh . . . Walked past, I couldn’t tell you were by way of being, er . . .”

“No Enn-glitch.” Grinning like the village idiot, Rudy bobbed his head repeatedly.

“Quite right, sir. Sorry to trouble you. On your way, then, and have a pleasant trip.”

The hypersonic jet was preparing for takeoff. A flight attendant making sure all of the passengers had obeyed the FASTEN SEAT BELT commandment paused to wonder why the distinguished looking Chinese gentleman in seat thirty-four-A was smiling secretly.