

# **SOMETIMES THE DRAGON WINS**

William Walling

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

*A remark attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte*



## prologue

Lightfooted under mild lunar gravity, the practical nurse bustled into the Crisium Medicenter solarium. The parcel she carried was wrapped in silver foil dotted with tiny green Christmas wreaths; an ornate scarlet ribbon made it the *pièce de résistance* of gifts. Unsure whether the patient was awake or dozing, she approached his powered wheelchair diffidently.

“Mr. Cateel . . . ?”

Clad in a backless gray hospital gown, the patient did not stir. He had allowed his lap blanket to slip to the floor and was basking in the sunlamps’ artificial radiance.

The nurse neither approved of, nor trusted Filipinos in general. And certainly not this tall, singularly self-possessed individual whose head was swathed in bandages. During their first encounter, she had been startled to hear her halting query answered in flawless Mandarin. In her opinion, the patient had lingered in the solarium longer than was beneficial. Yet the nurse decided it definitely would not be she who urged the testy gentleman to return to his private room.

“Mr. Cateel,” she said more firmly, “a package for you.”

The patient’s mummy-wrapped head turned. “What is it?”

“I don’t . . . I’m not sure. It’s heavy, a box of candy perhaps. Security x-rayed it. They say it’s harmless. It came only a moments ago, so I thought you might like to —”

“Give it here, please.”

Miffed at the brusque dismissal after she had sacrificed minutes of her morning break to deliver the fancy parcel, the nurse handed it over. Turning on her heel, she left the solarium with gliding, disenchanted steps, the soles of her white nursing shoes squeaking on the floor tiles.

There was no accompanying card, nor was one necessary. Cateel had intuited the sender’s identity at first glance. Few individuals knew where he had been sent to recuperate. It had to be from Erik, General Yee or his grandniece, or Chairman Li Qin himself, and possibly select members of the Politburo.

Slipping a thumbnail under the silver foil, he peeled it back. Wrapping and ribbon fluttered to the floor in lunar slow motion, revealing a hardbound volume. He blinked. Having seen no material printed in English for some time, he had to shift mental gears.

Cateel regarded the book askance. He chuckled softly, deep in his throat. Emblazoned with a stylized version of the UN Intelligence Agency’s helm-and-mace logo, the blood-red dust jacket bore a title embossed in gold letters:

A F U R T I V E C A R E E R

Sir Carlton S. Daniel

An overblown dust jacket puff gave a thumbnail account of the author's rise from anonymous Cambridge don to UNIA director, citing his ascent as, "Meteoric, capped by the knighthood gratefully bestowed by His Majesty." A flat photo captured Sir Carlton half-turned toward the camera, posing beside a lichen-encrusted stone wall bordering his estate near the Cornish village of Tevistock. The very model of a tweedy country squire, he was bending to pet an intimidated Welsh terrier, but his sanguine, droop-lidded pout of infinite sincerity looked at odds with his vacuous gaze, suggesting to Cateel the onset of senility.

His second chuckle was laden with bemused skepticism, totally devoid of humor. He opened the volume at a bookmark someone had inserted and began skimming the text.

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**. . . and whether bogus or genuine, recently declassified documents identify him as Rodolfo Taruc Cateel, although the name itself is of no consequence. Falsifying his age upon enlisting in UN Aerospace Forces from a poverty-stricken district of Mindanao, Cateel saw lunar combat with the 33rd High Rangers. He earned a field commission during the course of infamous scuffles which, despite moderate casualties on either side, settled nothing whatever. The UN's lunar "police action" failed to prevent the Peoples' Republic of China from industrializing sublunar sites near the crater Aristarchus, or mining deep rilles in the Prinz region, or extracting helium-three from the Sea of Tranquillity's regolith for Asia's fusion reactors.**

**Concluding his tour of duty, Cateel opted for honorable discharge when his regiment stood down and rotated to Sinus Iridum for rest and recreation. He briefly attended the University of California, Los Angeles, where he proved himself an indifferent student, although one who excelled in all forms of athletic endeavour. Achieving Black Belt status in the martial arts discipline of Shotokan Karate brought him to the attention of an associate professor of linguistics who happened to be in our employ. He was casually recruited and, subsequent to rigorous training, undertook a number of exacting field assignments which unfortunately must remain unsung.**

**I came into personal contact with this singular field asset during a time of intense trial and tribulation for the West. Having observed with misgivings the decade-long assembly of an enormous geosynchronous satellite orbited by the PRC above northwestern Borneo, conjecture related to its purpose and location ran rampant within the Western intelligence community. American Skywatch Satellite surveillance soon unearthed a collateral mystery: a massive excavation project adjacent to the summit of a mountain peak known to Borneo's long-departed Dutch settlers as *Gebergte Beturan*. Rearing one full statute mile above upland rain forests in the Indonesian state of Kalimantan, it was judged no coincidence that Mt. Beturan straddled the equator at precisely the huge satellite's "substellar" point.**

Shortly thereafter, Chinese shuttles began resupplying a major on-orbit factory operation of some sort, and eventually precipitated an unparalleled disaster. While truly staggering, civilian casualties could only be estimated here in the West. The notion of achieving facile, economical access to near-Earth orbit via a “space elevator” designed to link some point on the equator to a satellite orbiting in dynamic equilibrium had been bruited about in the technical literature for more than a century. Western experts decried the “insurmountable” instability difficulties to be overcome were such a leviathan construction to be attempted *in situ*. The caveat turned out to be hideously accurate.

Imagine if you will a set of monstrous, coiling cables whipping about the globe, smashing whatever happened to be in their path—ocean for the most part, fortunately—and a dim appreciation of the disaster’s magnitude may be gained.

Callous disregard for the safety of peoples inhabiting equatorial climes, or outrageously prohibitive expenditures notwithstanding, persistence and dedication are attributes one must grant to the monolithic, “liberated” Marxist-Leninist society which dwells on the far side of our beleaguered planet. Yet as months wore by here in the West, scathing allusions to the “Borneo Boondoggle” gave way to watchful waiting.

The revamped Artsutanov Satellite looms above Kalimantan today—a pair of tremendous, disc-shaped structures designed to counter-rotate, we are told, in order to null the “gyroscopic moment” induced by orbiting in consonance with earthspin that would otherwise cause it to drift toward one of the poles. Lightweight materials exhibiting phenomenal tensile strength are producible only in the microgravity environment. The thirty-six-thousand-kilometer-long pilot cable, fabricated on-orbit, consisted of “miracle” strands woven of composite foam-steel fibers interlaced with a strengthening core of perfect-crystal metallic “whiskers.”

Dispatched on a guided plunge down through the atmosphere, the pilot cable was anchored in a “receptacle” pit excavated deep within Mt. Beturan’s bowels, with the enormous satellite itself counterbalanced by what the Chinese termed “mini-astroidal masses” tethered at the extremity of a shorter, skyward-reaching cable system. Upon completion of the pilot project, the world’s populace thrust geopolitics aside for the moment and greeted the extraordinary feat with a mixture of tumultuous applause, envy, and large measures of apprehension.

Ancillary constructions proceeded apace. Four permanent, congruently drawn cables eventually replaced the relatively fragile pilot. When service was at last inaugurated, passenger capsules and freight modules began traversing the quadrate cable system in week-long journeys up to and down from the satellite, as well as to and from the “inertial” spacecraft launch complex at the secondary cable set’s far terminus. A veritable sea of solar energy receptors arrayed to co-orbit

with the satellite shunted bountiful gigawattage to the surface, thereby transforming a hitherto lightly populated region of Kalimantan into the world's most power-wealthy community.

Far too much ink has been spilt concerning China's brilliant stroke in facilitating offworld enterprises—their propagandistic “Great Leap Upward” so loudly trumpeted as the technological marvel of the third millennium. Which indeed it is. The space elevator system has endowed Communist China with a truly staggering advantage in the exploitation of near-Earth and cislunar space.

Yet here in the West the obverse of this bright, shiny coin reflected a darker, much more somber hue. Envy aside, one must give credit where credit is due, yet successful deployment of this modern day “Jacob's Ladder” into the sky amounted to a consummate loss of face for the West. In speaking offhandedly of the world's ancient and modern Seven Wonders, Artsutanov looms as a monumental triumph of technology. It puts trifles like the Egyptian pyramids, or Lagrangian habitation macrostructures such as Xanadu, completely in the shade.

It would be pointless to dwell upon the machinations, recriminations, inquiries, table-pounding debates and vituperous denunciations leading to the fact of Rodolfo Cateel's mission assignment. Western noses, already painfully out of joint, were bent still farther when the PRC's autocratic ruling clique issued a stern caveat, vowing that any attempt to interfere with space elevator operations would be met with massive thermonuclear retaliation. A gratuitous threat of this nature sharply nettled certain dignitaries responsible for the conduct of Western affairs. Having always abhorred blackmail, and blackmailers, I confess to numbering myself among them.

This statement elicited muffled laughter from beneath the patient's bandages. Heads turned in the solarium. If aware of the curious stares, Cateel gave no sign. He read on.

Yuri Artsutanov, a Soviet era scientist who elaborated upon “fanciful speculations” concerning a similar enterprise written by Tsarist Russia's legendary teacher and innovator, Konstantin Tsiolkovskiy, published an advanced space elevator schema in KOMSOMOL'SKAYA PRAVDA, circa 1960. If noticed at all in the West, the article was laughingly dismissed, as were subsequent theoretical explorations of the radical concept by Soviet visionaries like an obscure Soviet scientist named Polyakov.

During the latter phases of elevator construction, a veritable parade of UNIA field assets, in addition a number dispatched by one Western intel organization or another, attempted to penetrate Artsutanov. Few returned, and of those who did even fewer had learned anything significant. Field assets of Asian heritage were never employed during UNIA's clandestine “games” with the PRC. Prone to dual, triple and often quadruple allegiances, they uniformly demonstrated a reluctance to

part with freedom, or their lives, in exchange for vital information, and tended to simply “take the money and run.”

Derogatory to their ethnic strain as it may sound, Filipinos have earned a reputation in certain quarters as “the world’s greatest thieves.” Even so, when Cateel was first proposed as the man for the job at Artsutanov I was extremely dubious. On the eve of his penultimate briefing, I changed my mind, not so much because of the man himself (muscular and lean, quite tall for a Filipino, he possessed remarkable physical presence), but rather due to the acquisition of what we considered a trump card involving his personal affairs. As for the individual himself, Cateel and his eventual fate remain enigmatic.

A childish cartoon found crumpled in a wastebasket at one of our Tokyo safe houses, where UNIA Asian Section field assets were often sequestered prior to Far East assignments, was presumably drawn by Cateel on the eve of his paradrop into Borneo. The crude sketch 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 of some pertinence . . .**

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Cateel’s perusal was interrupted by an officious orderly who approached the wheelchair and took hold of the handles. “Therapy now,” he said in pidgin Tagalog.

The young orderly drew back in alarm when Cateel, eyes burning darkly through slits in the layers of bandage, informed him in staccato Mandarin what could be done with his therapy. He introduced into the indictment scurrilous flaws attributable to the man’s antecedents, contemporaries, and prospective progeny.

The orderly fled in search of reinforcements. Not bothering to retrieve the fallen blanket, Cateel laid the gift book in his lap, energized the wheelchair and rolled out of the solarium. Entering a slideramp at the far end of the corridor, he rode upward two levels and found the hospital’s small observation rotunda unoccupied.

Brooding in a silence broken only by the faint sussuration of air issuing from the life support louvres, Cateel gazed across the sere, desiccated rubble heap flooring the walled plain of Mare Crisium, now bathed in earthlit refulgence. He knew he would never get used to how mystical and enchanting earthlight could be. It delicately silvered the gray-scale wasteland pocked with boulders and craterlets, etching the blackest of inky shadows. Above the distant ringwall’s serrated rim, a three-quarter 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 wheelchair, Cateel studied the desolate lunar landscape, reflecting on places and faces from the past, recalling victories won, defeats endured.

## William Walling

He did not protest when the orderly and a hulking companion ran him to ground. He allowed them to escort him back to the characterless, antiseptic private room that was his temporary prison.

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For an Asian hooker, the Thai woman struck Cateel as all but senile—late-twenties, he judged, and inclined to plumpness. He watched her dress by not looking directly at her, wondering 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.

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

Rather than traipsing down the hall to the third-rate hotel’s communal showers, he ran tepid, rust-flecked water into a chipped porcelain basin and gave himself a sponge bath, then sat on the lumpy, narrow cot that masqueraded as a bed and let Singapore’s sultry night air dry him. The room’s furnishings were Kafkaesque: a frayed wicker chair with wobbly legs, a battered mahogany night stand, and an ancient holovision tank that featured fuzzy 3-D images in odd, psychedelic colors. He switched on the holo out of boredom. Surfing the overabundance of satellite channels, he came upon a news anchor babbling in Chinese.

Fluent in Mandarin, though less so in the Cantonese dialect, 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, with additional dozens injured.

*What else*, thought Cateel, *is new?* Changing channels haphazardly, he learned that with a single dissenting vote the UN Department of Environment & Population’s nine-member Triage Committee had downgraded the status of Chad. Emergency grain shipments had ceased. UN Peacekeeping Forces had interdicted a portion of the stricken nation’s populace, effectively sentencing them to extinction. The commentator droned on. Condemning the practice of triage as “genocide,” he went on to decry UN’s insensitivity to the abysmal human condition prevalent in the blighted African nation.

Again came the idle thought: *What else is new?* Cateel crossed his arms over his muscular chest. He drowsily kneaded shoulder muscles sore from yet another day of dawn-to-dusk drudgery. He was reaching for the remote controller to snap off the holo when someone off-camera handed the newscaster a bulletin.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the anchor said in a different voice, “this just in from Beijing. The official news agency, Xinhua, reports a precedent-setting

trade conference has been scheduled to be held in space. Delegates from respective Pan-Asian governments, as well as those from selected portions of the Pacific Rim, will be hosted during an extended session aboard the Artsutanov Satellite. The conference's purported aim will be to resolve economic disparities allegedly created by China's 'dumping' of drastically underpriced hard goods and electronics on world marketplaces. The delegates will be flown to Borneo and lofted to orbit from the elevator's ground station in Kalimantan."

His mein serious, the newscaster laid aside the bulletin. "To say this announcement comes as a surprise would be a gross understatement. Until now, all major attributes of space elevator operations have been cloaked in the most closely guarded secrecy. A break with established policy of this magnitude cannot help but capture the attention of every nation which has suffered drastic economic woes during recent years . . ."

*And that, thought Cateel, definitely was news.*

Heavy-lidded, his thoughts turned inward. He clicked off the holotank, tugged the beaded string dangling from a bare bulb pendant from the mottled ceiling, and sank back against the pillow. Sunrise would bring another day of sweat and toil and a nameless freighter tied-up wharfside waiting to be offloaded. Yes, dawn would bring a reprise of today, yesterday, too many other yesterdays. One thing he could count on: daybreak would bring yet another freshet of anxiety over whether or not the target had finally decided to risk exposure.

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, he thought. Always tomorrow, never today . . .*

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Jolted by a surge of adrenaline, Cateel stiffened at sight of an electric jitney pulling up at the far end of the deserted wharf. If one or more passengers had arrived to meet the target, his slow-paced hours of frustration might be at an end.

The Agency's finger man in Macao claimed to have seen Caesescu twice, though never at close range. Delivery of the "package" had been promised shortly. Word that the septuagenarian spymaster planned to cross the causeway over Johore Strait and enter Singapore proper had been gratifying. Less than gratifying was not knowing if and when his appearance would ever take place.

Cateel had played and replayed the prospective scenario over and over again in his mind. Here in the tropics, a wide-brimmed straw Panama would no doubt cover the aged espionage genius's shaven pate. He would naturally be accompanied by the usual bodyguards, although that should not hinder the strike. Hired goons could be taken out quickly, efficiently.

His excitement mounting, he studied the parked jitney, speculating about whether today would be the day; and if so, how long the target would dare risk exposure. Macao had reported that someone, or something, aboard a Singapore-bound freighter was deemed worthy of Wladislaw Caesescu's personal attention. Cut off by necessity from direct contact with his source, the local chief of station, Morley, had not learned of a reason for the

delay—something sorely displeasing to Cateel, since it forced him to endure added weeks of dock-walloping labor to maintain his cover.

A figure emerged from the distant jitney, and his anticipation turned into a sharp pang of disappointment. Even at a distance, he recognized Patel, his control officer. He couldn't imagine why the veteran Pakistani agent would endanger the operation by making contact here on the wharf.

Hunkered out of the persistent drizzle in the dubious shelter of a warehouse's lee, Cateel stayed hidden in plain sight among the group of huddled day laborers awaiting a work call. He exchanged a word of two of friendly badinage in pidgin Tamil, bummed an illegal cigarette from one of the Sri Lankan stevedores and smoked hungrily. Looking straight ahead, he let peripheral vision track the bearded gentleman who was sauntering casually along the wharf's fender. Patel halted directly across from the warehouse. Resting one hand on a bollard, he stared out to sea.

Rising stiffly, Cateel dropped the half-consumed cigarette in a puddle. He shuffled through warm, lightly falling rain to a point within earshot of Patel, unzipped the fly of his soiled dungarees and urinated into Keppel Harbor.

Across the roadstead, looming through the morning drizzle, the nebulous whalebacks of Pulau Brani and Pulau Blakang Mati were barely visible. The islands formed semi-protective ramparts against the occasional high seas pounding in from the Singapore Strait. The low, gray silhouette of a supertanker rode through the chop beyond the harbor, escorted by a rakish frigate against increasingly frequent oil piracy. The tanker, most likely laden with a million or more metric tonnes of liquified Antarctic coal, was hauling it toward the heavily fortified storage complex adorning Pulau Bukum Island.

The control officer's continued silence was annoying. Cateel zipped his fly and waited. If the balloon was about to go up, Morley, UNIA's psychotically humorless chief of station, would be waiting at a window of the Singapore Docks & Harbour Board offices in the glass-and-steel highrise rearing in the direction of the Main Wharf.

Assuming that Patel was there to alert him, Cateel had his hand-picked team poised in a pair of electric vans, nerves at hair-trigger, weapons locked and loaded. All it would take to kick off the strike would be the appearance of Wladislaw Caesescu. Set up this neatly, pinned between harbor and warehouse, it would be child's play to eliminate the spymaster.

But that was the last thing UNIA wanted. London insisted that the old man be taken alive and well so that his brain could be picked synapse by synapse. A perpetual thorn in the Agency's side, Caesescu had in recent years worked exclusively for the Red Chinese. Yet to him, loyalty was a pluperfectly reflexive commodity. A firm believer in equal opportunity employment, he was loyal to, and invariably served, the highest bidder. After his mind had been emptied, the semi-legendary espionage genius would probably be traded to Beijing in exchange for two or more UNIA stray lambs. Ensuring his survival was the factor that trebled, or even quadrupled, the prospective strike's difficulty, making success a dicey, touch-and-go proposition.

Patel stood at the wharf's fender like a gawking tourist. Seemingly preoccupied with the view, he scanned the seagirt horizon without turning his head. In a stage whisper, he said, "Library, now."

"What?"

"Go," urged the control agent.

"That's insane," whispered Cateel.

"On your way, Rudy. Comes from the top."

Before Cateel could offer any further objection, the control officer stroked his beard thoughtfully, then wheeled and strolled back the way he had come.

The urge to kill seething inside him, Rudy trudged back toward the warehouse. The idiots! More than one head would roll over this craziness. Or would they? Morley was a seasoned professional, too much so to permit compromising his point man without an excellent reason. Now, with the operation's clock ticking, and perhaps ready to strike midnight, had Morley unearthed some hitherto unknown reason to abort? Or had Tokyo gotten cold feet? Neither seemed likely, and yet . . .

Torn between an urge to ignore the directive, and the deeper realization that he had no choice but to comply, he thought the matter through. Patel had taken an inordinate risk by messaging him here on the wharf, so it was possible—probable, even—that something paramount was in the wind. He had no recourse but to follow the order. His *modus operandi* was cast in concrete, a commandment from control was a commandment from God.

Ruefully lifting his eyes to the opaque windows of the distant highrise where he assumed Morley was posted, he gave up in disgust and departed the wharf with long, angry strides.

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Singapore's National Museum and Library occupied a prominent niche in Stamford Road, not far from Raffles Place. The mid-week change in a designated trysting spot was troubling. A specific confessional booth in St. Andrews Anglican Cathedral was the current week's appointed site, not the library.

Feigning moderate drunkenness, Rudy whistled up an electric taxi. He had the East Indian cabbie drop him off on a side street four blocks from his objective and took normal precautions, adopting a circuitous route, twice doubling back through alleys and side streets, then emerging to study the reflections of passers-by in store windows. He had not grown a tail, nor had he expected one.

Dungarees blue-splotched from the incessant drizzle, hands callused, the cuticles around his fingernails cracked from weeks of wrenching physical labor, Cateel realized how out of place he looked climbing the library steps. He lowered his gaze, feigning self-conscious humility as he pushed through the double doors and learned that Morley was not in the highrise behind the Main Wharf.

Seated at a rear table in the main reading room, UNIA's paunchy chief of station was idly leafing through a quarto-sized pictorial volume that highlighted Singapore's checkered history. Rudy paused at a shelf, selected a

volume at random and chose a seat diagonally across the long mahogany table from Morley.

The older man yawned, politely covering his mouth with the back of one hand, and said in a low, barely audible voice, "You're recalled."

"Impossible!"

"Off with you."

"But, why?"

"Orders," insisted Morley. "No argument, please."

"Damn such orders!"

"Comes direct from the Man." The portly middle-aged gentleman checked his wrist chronometer. He closed the book, left it on the table and wandered among the stacks in leisurely fashion, stopping here and there to inspect titles. Not once had he so much as looked at Cateel.

Rudy closed his eyes, stewing impotently. The unbelievable order Tokyo had issued wiped out months of difficult, dangerous work issued at one stroke. Recall was a chokingly difficult lump to swallow. He fretted through the prescribed ten minute interval between departures, letting his blood pressure subside, and quit the library in a black, despondent frame of mind. To rid himself of excess nervous energy, he walked the twenty-odd blocks to the sleazy hotel room he rented by the week.

Rudy used a straight razor—an heirloom from his father—to shaved his four-day growth of stubble. He donned a navy blue silk shirt and a gray, wrinkle-proof tropical weave suit, tossing other oddments of clothing and personal effects into a cheap plastic overnighter—the only luggage he ever carried on a field assignment. He searched every corner of the dreary room to assure himself nothing would be left behind. Leaving the door ajar, he slipped down the grime-encrusted rear stairway instead of bothering with the cranky elevator, and hailed a cruising electric cab.

Forty minutes later he checked in at the Pacific Basin Airlines counter in Paya Lebar's Singapore Intercontinental Airport. The airline was Agency-owned; neither a ticket nor a reservation were required.

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"Do you have him, sir?" inquired Dr. Giovanni "John" Pastoria.

The dignified, impeccably clad Nipponese gentleman posing as former industrial tycoon Hideko Matsuda bent to more closely inspect a half-dozen holographs and digital flat photos strewn across the technical consultant's teak desk. He tapped his temple. "I have him here."

Pastoria nodded. "Then we'd better get these pix back in Cateel's folder. The director was due here a half-hour ago."

"May I take a snapshot with me?"

"Sorry, Mr. Matsuda. You can take nothing with you other than what will be strapped around you at the airport in Pontianak."

The supposed former multimillionaire's stolid expression remained unchanged, but his eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Packing gelignite on one's person is no healthy exercise."

“Totally safe,” assured the ex-physics professor. “Plastique explosive is inert, sir. Lacking a detonator, you can drop it safely, mold it, play catch with it.”

“I was aware of that,” said the hastily recruited Japanese field officer. “Accidental detonation is not a concern. Yet Chinese officialdom does not have a reputation for sentimentality. Should things go wrong, a detonator might be inserted and nature allowed to take its course.”

Pastoria hid his discomfiture behind a bold statement, but it was mostly sham. “A sublime reason,” he said, “for not letting things go wrong.”

“This man,” said the other, indicating a full-color holograph of an unsmiling Rodolfo Cateel, “looks far too young and inexperienced to undertake such a complex assignment.”

“Pictures can be deceptive. Rudy’s remarkably fit; guessing his age is next to impossible. He’s by far our most accomplished, most versatile asset.”

“Never,” said the other flatly, “have I encountered a totally trustworthy Filipino.”

Miffed by the comment, Dr. Pastoria spent a moment describing Cateel’s fieldwork. He cataloged several key assignments carried out by Asian Section’s premiere field operative. All Matsuda was being asked to do, he assured, was to transport the explosives to a clandestine delivery on-orbit. “Actually,” Pastoria concluded, “it’s unacceptable to question the tools and methods we’ve selected.”

“When one’s life hangs in the balance,” said the other with wry inflection, “it seems appropriate to question every facet of the . . . operation. To me, this man you praise so glibly is a cypher, a null. His presence aboard the satellite, should he accomplish the near-impossible task of getting aboard, redoubles the existing hazards. Obvious hazards are quite sufficient, thank you. Adding another is not at all to my liking.”

Irked at being put on the defensive, Pastoria said, “This whole thing came together much too fast, Mr. Matsuda. Immediately after the trade conference announcement, we brainstormed the mission scenario during one sleepless, sixteen-hour session. We went round and round, sir. Everyone scratched his head and threw in the towel until —”

“The . . . towel?” questioned the other.

“Your pardon, sir; a figure of speech. What I meant to say is that we had given up on inventing a practical method of inserting our man, as well as the explosives, aboard Artsutanov. Just before the session broke up, Howard Baste, the gentleman in charge of field operations, learned from a . . . From one of his contacts that you’d been selected as the Nipponese delegate.”

The man thought to be Matsuda digested the disclosure with a solemn blink.

“Director Daniel,” added Pastoria, “made the final decision himself. He’s flown over from London expressly to meet you, and to conduct Cateel’s pre-mission briefing.” Eyeing the other keenly, the technical consultant went on to say, “Let me clarify something, sir. Cateel will learn only your cover name, and nothing else other than your appearance. You will have absolutely no contact with our man until you both arrive aboard Artsutanov. Cateel could

not compromise you, or your role even if he wanted to, and he has the most excellent reason in existence for *not* wanting to. I'll vouch for him personally, if that's any comfort."

The picture of stoic self-restraint, the agent's real name was Katsugi Miura. He thought back to the previous evening's intense briefing in Kobe. Having settled on a radically different use for the gelignite in question, Ichiro Tomono and his minions at the Ministry of Justice had been overjoyed to learn that UNIA planned to supply the explosives gratis. All during the limousine ride to the helipad, and during the jetcopter flight to Tokyo, Tomono had spoken quietly but decisively. "It will be simple for you to play the part of a once wealthy captain of industry, Katsugi. As Nippon's official delegate, you must remain aloof. Yet that doesn't say you may not question whatever scenario they propose, just as the authentic Matsuda-*san* would surely do."

The faux Matsuda's eyes were the color and texture of obsidian marbles; they glistened with banked fires of satisfaction as he lifted the photos one by one, glanced incuriously at each, and passed it to Dr. Pastoria.

A stir in the corridor caused Asian Section's technical consultant to hurriedly jam the sheaf of photos and holograms into Cateel's bulging folder. He dropped the folder into the secure file, keyed the fireproof cabinet's cypher lock, and opened the door to his office.

The fruity baritone of UNIA's chief executive could be heard down the hall. "... and a beastly traffic muddle it certainly is. Tokyo-Yokohama enjoys the civilized world's most hellish balls-up of motor cars, buses and lorries."

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His cheeks and generous nose rouged by the brisk wintry weather outdoors, UNIA Director 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 and waxed his hands to warm them. "Apologies for the delay. The after-dinner speeches dragged on for an eternity, and the drive over here, which should require minutes, kept us snarled another half-hour. Tokyo might well be renamed Gridlock City." While grumbling, Daniel had been appraising the stocky, dapperly clad gentleman standing beside Pastoria's desk.

"Hideko Matsuda." The supposed ex-tycoon dipped his head deferentially. "Meeting you is a genuine pleasure, Daniel-*sama*."

"The privilege is entirely mine." Daniel continued his appraisal. "You're a most reclusive gentleman, sir. Having you agree to represent our interests in the coming affair, as well as those of your homeland, is a distinct honor, Mr., uh . . . Forgive me, but with all this dashing about your cover name has escaped me."

"Ishikawa," informed the Japanese agent. "Masahiro Ishikawa."

"Yes, yes; quite. Then, to keep things properly tuned, I imagine we'd best address you as such, eh? Here, let's all sit down and be comfortable, shall we? I'm certain John has filled you in on the essentials of what's in store. You no doubt have a number of questions."

Puzzled at the need for a cover name, the other felt it useless to equivocate. "No questions, Daniel-*sama*."

“Really?” The director’s smile came and went with disconcerting swiftness. Then he sobered. “You of course realize how precipitately this opportunity has overwhelmed us. It popped out of the blue, so to speak, when your government opted to have a distinguished gentleman such as yourself represent their interests. Serendipity in its purest form, one might say.”

A grave nod.

“In point of fact,” pursued Daniel in the manner of a confession, “we were utterly dumbfounded 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, I daresay it’s an astute propaganda ploy on their part. To my way of thinking, inviting multinational delegates to visit their orbiting sanctum sanctorum smacks of injecting painkiller just before extracting one’s last remaining molar. I do realize, Mr., er, Ishikawa, that your employment by UNIA is purely secondary. First and foremost, naturally, is your obligation to Japan’s national interests.”

The other made as if to voice a disclaimer, but Daniel waved his hands airily. “No, no; we shan’t quibble about peripheral matters. After all, one’s loyalties lodge where they must. Think of your service on our behalf as supplementary, sir. A matter of moonlighting, so to speak.”

Moonlighting . . . ? Perplexed by the reference, the agent nevertheless forced an appreciative smile. “Moonlighting, yes. Nippon’s economy and balance of trade were once most favorable, Daniel-*sama*. Since the Chinese devil’s device went on line, our economy has suffered as much or more than any other. Be assured, sir: the leadership of Nippon will not learn of my actions on your behalf.”

“Capital!” Daniel’s synthetic smile flashed briefly. “Very sensible of you, I must say. No need to burden your government with news of a simple errand, is there? Especially when doing so might lead to severe political repercussions if the Chinese even suspect Nippon of complicity in the coming endeavor.”

Miura-Matsuda-Ishikawa did not respond.

“Enough for now.” The director favored the other with another millisecond smile. “No point chewing more than we’ve bitten off, is there? Please consider your task not only straightforward, but altruistic if viewed in the proper perspective. Any hiatus, however brief, in space elevator operations will help stave off the economic ruin now darkening our common horizon. I myself am convinced that China’s ultimate goal can be stated quite succinctly: the autocratic regime wishes to press forward the economic revolution it has fostered, then follow it with a worldwide revolution of another sort entirely.”

Although he disagreed with every syllable of the utterance, Miura-Matsuda-Ishikawa’s eager head bob endorsed Daniel’s analysis.

“It would be quite impossible,” concluded the director on a note of sincerity, “to overstress the vital nature of the task we’ve set before ourselves. We are counting on you, sir. You shan’t let us down, I’m certain.”

The distinguished looking gentleman bowed low, demonstrating a degree of respect he did not feel.

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