

# COMPRADOR

A Novel  
David Cudlip



# COMPRADOR

A NOVEL

By

**DAVID R. CUDLIP**

**Reprinted by  
Pen & Pencil Press LLC Tryon, North Carolina**

**Also by David R. Cudlip**

*A Moveable Verdict*

*DILLON*



No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the author.

The sole exception to the above-referenced restriction is that any reviewer who wishes to quote brief passages in connection with a review written for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper, broadcast, or electronic digital publishing may do so, and that specific permission is hereby granted.

Revised Edition. Copyright 2011© by David R. Cudlip

All rights reserved.

ISBN 9780984621002

Cover design: Christina Carden

Interior formatting: Kimberly Martin

Images provided by: Sergey Volkov through istockphoto



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

On the next page you'll find a dictionary definition of the word *comprador*. That explanation is a bit on the sparse side; thus, I shall embellish.

The word itself is of the Portuguese language. In its narrowest sense, it means *buyer*.

Deeper meanings were to apply shortly after Portuguese merchant ships first breeched Chinese waters—sailing up to Canton via what westerners call the Pearl River. Making a nuisance of themselves, the intruders were ultimately granted the right to erect a small settlement in Macao; this occurred, roughly, in the 1550s. Thereafter, trade flourished handsomely with greater China: spices, camphor, silk, sandalwood, the famed porcelains, endless other Chinese inventions, on and on. And, yes, slaves were also exported, as were comely concubines.

As commerce rapidly expanded, the Ming Emperor issued a command that all foreign barbarians were to be confined to the settlement area; further, inland dealings for goods must be conducted exclusively by Chinese intermediaries.

In short, no evil-minded foreigners will be allowed to run loose in the Middle Kingdom.

Hence, came the *comprador*—a nametag bestowed by the Portuguese on their Chinese-born merchandising scouts, who, as it turned out, were negotiators with few peers.

Think of a *comprador* as a fixer, a doer of trades, a maker of events, and, generally speaking, one who orchestrates his actions behind the scenes. Publicity, to them, is abhorrent. Its glare has a peculiar way of stirring things up, often causing ill winds to blow.

If winds must be blown, *compradors* much prefer to do the blowing by themselves. One may be dead-on certain they know how. As you may soon see, if you care to turn these pages.

*Tryon, North Carolina, July of 2019*

comprador \ kam-pra-do(a)r \ *or* com•pra•dore, n.  
[Pg *comprador*, lit., buyer]: a Chinese agent engaged  
by a foreign establishment as an intermediary in business affairs.  
—WEBSTER'S NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY

When goods don't cross borders, armies will.  
—FREDERIC BASTIAT 1801-50

## South China Sea Beverly Hills

**W**hipped by bare-knuckled winds, the rumbustious sea had turned milk-white hours ago, and now it pounded against the towering Hong Kong junk. Its sails strained to the breaking point, threatened to rip into shreds. Up and down, bobbing like a loose cork, the big Hong Konger plunged into the twisting troughs of that nervous sea; at times, the wide-beamed vessel, fifty-meters in length, skewed violently before righting itself. No sturdier junk existed in all Asia, she was built mainly of Myanmar teak and fitted out with the latest in comforts and com-sat equipment, making communications to anywhere in the world a nearly instant event.

Suddenly, a piercing shriek.

Another violent sheer of wind? Or from the women, panicking as weather tossed them about in the staterooms?

Jolted by the windblast, Joost Van Slyke, a heaver of a man, almost lost his footing on the fantail. Grabbing for a railing, nearly missing it, he cursed, "Bowels of Christ!"

"And in God's name, why are we outside in this wild storm?" chided Liu Wai.

A man of the North Sea, oblivious to fickle weather, Van Slyke replied, "Fresh air. Good to think in."

"Get sick in, you mean. A dozen cabins below, we could be there instead of this...this martyr's hell."

"Hollanders don't chase women from their comforts."

"Rot in hell. You Europeans know nothing of women. They are dry and warm, and we are out here like castoffs."

Van Slyke boomed a laugh, relishing the Singaporean's discomfort. Sitting in a chair anchored to the deck by a chrome shaft, Liu

Wai fussed like an old crone, squealing bitterly and shaking as he tried to ward off the wind-driven spray. Settling himself again, he continued to finagle a large metals trade with the big Dutchman.

Van Slyke ignored him. Looking up at the creaking masts, he saw how they warped under the heavy pull of wind. “Too much sail for this weather. We ought to reef.”

Liu Wai sighed. His massive belly rose and the thick eyelids closed as he said, “Well, do you want the Malaysian tin or not? It’s the best quality. I can sell it anywhere. The Russians. Even China or Brazil.”

“At your idiotic prices they can have it, though I might give you dollars for it.”

“I use dollars for wallpaper in the toilets of my staff...look at you, a disgrace!”

Van Slyke took the mild insult good-naturedly, and always did whenever the others scorned the red woolen caftan he wore at sea. Or joked about his thigh-high leather boots, calling him the Dutch Devil-Kisser, sometimes Exalted Jade-Gater—this last because he often slept with two women at the same time, with enough stamina, apparently, to exhaust both. Standing almost seven feet tall, he towered over the others, his size enlarged by the pioneer-style cut of his flaming orange-reddish hair and the rusty spade of beard hanging off his prominent jaw. But why should he mind jests? He was Shan Chu—Chief of Hill—of Shang-Magan’s Council of Six. He could do as he damn pleased. Almost.

“It is not the same without him, is it?”

“Culhane?” answered Liu Wai, a note of surprise in his voice.

“*Ja*. Clever and tough where it counts, too. He might know what to do with these damn Russians. They’ll run Europe if we don’t find ways of hobbling them. Soon, I would say,”

“Shang-Magan survived for three centuries with and without the Russians...quit your worrying.”

“I worry plenty, Liu Wai. Their damn armies prowling again. Their claw is poised to take the Suez in Muldaur’s Africa. They

threaten Europe with a crazed currency plan. And your Chinese are not far behind them. A world full of meddlers.”

“Was it not always so,” said the rotund Singaporean and waved Van Slyke off. “We still control the important trade. Culhane’s House is the only true failure we’ve had in more than a century.”

“There is a complaint you were trespassing in North America without his permission.”

Saying nothing, Liu Wai opened his hands in a gesture that might mean anything. “You all thought Culhane was ready to run the American Zone.” Liu Wai shifted his growling gorilla-sized belly. “Too young, though, still a pup. A disappointing pup, as I predicted.”

“He came closer than any of us to restoring the North American markets. Saving all of us millions.”

“Many of us lost heavily because of all the American idiocy. And what hope of recovery? The Americans commit suicide on the installment plan. Market crashes. Mystery bonds they sell to anyone stupid enough to buy. Debts and more debts. They run an asylum. They *are* an asylum. Politicians!”

“Culhane held the North American markets until the very end. Who could ask for more?”

After a pause, Liu Wai argued, “Rearden is our man. Years ago, we should’ve brought him in instead of the pup.”

Van Slyke shouted back scornfully, “Rearden. Bah! He is a known flusher on his trades.”

“Misunderstood, perhaps. A few mistakes, perhaps.”

“More than a few, Liu Wai.”

“Culhane always stood against me.”

“You’ve heard his argument—severe trouble with the governments someday, undermining our reputation He’s against any Shang-Magan trading in opium and the White Dragon Pearl heroin.”

With a loose grin, eyes slitting, Liu Wai said, “I deal with government officials in ways they find pleasing, even their American agents...I need no advice from the infants like Culhane.”

Another slam of wind whacked at the sails, the mast-stays singing tremulously. The Magan flag—six dragons in six brilliant colors against a field of white—cracked loudly, then snapped loose from its shackles. Off it swooped like a gull before disappearing into the roiling sea.

“You will vote to suspend then. Is that your choice?” probed Van Slyke.

“I’d rather vote to expel him and clear the way for Joe Rearden. He’s our best bet.”

“Yes, I’ve heard you several times now.”

Van Slyke thought of Culhane’s humiliation and fierce difficulties, wondered whether the American would ever be seen again in the Shang-Magan.

As if reading Van Slyke’s mind, Liu Wai cut in. “How much do you think Culhane lost, Joost?”

“Another man’s losses or gains are his own business.”

“In dollars, what would you estimate?”

“As you said, you cannot measure anymore in dollars.”

“In Euros then?”

Van Slyke thought hard, working his beard. “One billion perhaps. Hard to figure, and Culhane would never say. Too proud to say it, but then, as you say, he is young and therefore immortal.” Saying it, he smiled to himself.

Liu Wai knew it to be a larger amount, that Culhane had been reamed by Wall Street firms, including Joseph Rearden’s New York Corporation, who had resorted to legal tactics to renege on gold-swap insurance derivatives meant to protect Culhane against losses by a defaulting party on the other side of the trade; indeed various firms on The Street had failed to make good on over \$600-billions of such swaps led by the huge insurance giant AIG, one of the events that eventually led to the American economy nose-diving twice within a single decade. This latest crash, just when America thought it had re-footed itself, had left the nation reeling, with no remedy in sight.

Gazing out at the raging sea, he felt the onset of nausea. Tired, too, and bored. Rather than engage in cat-and-mouse with the big Dutchman, with enormous effort he pushed himself out of his sea-chair. Narrowing his piggish eyes, he said, "Rearden invites me to Cap Ferrat for a fortnight. He's bringing actresses. Perhaps, you will join us."

"No."

"Might take your mind off the Russians."

"No."

"As you wish. If you have no objection, I'll be with the others."

Watching the Singaporean waddle across the fantail, Van Slyke smothered a laugh. Gotten up in black satin pajama pants, scarlet jacket, and mauve slippers, Liu Wai moved as ponderously as a zoo hippo, and dressed himself like a clown in a circus act. No matter, Van Slyke thought; the man was a classic trader, did fine work running the Asia Zone. Until a few years ago, when OPEC abandoned his services, Liu Wai had exacted a two-percent commission on every barrel of crude oil shipped from the Middle East to Japan and Indonesia—a long-standing arrangement entered into years before when both countries had had oil supply contracts with the British. Liu Wai had managed to nullify the contracts, setting up a howl from BP and Shell. Then, in a magical trading maneuver, he had fixed it so that Japanese auto and electronics manufacturers could gain special footholds in the thriving Chinese market.

For that, he exacted another three-percent.

A Shang-Magan inter-zone agreement, it had been brilliantly successful, producing astonishing profits for the Singaporean.

Yet it all came unstuck, ending in a trade war, with Japan, and, to some extent, China grinding on the U.S.A. and then on Europe when the crash came, the last one that nearly disemboweled America.

Like earth itself, trade worked in an orderly orbit, and Van Slyke considered it the first duty of the Council of Six to ensure that it stayed that way. He sighed inwardly, thinking of the hundreds of millions in lost commissions. Tokyo now did its dealing for most of it

oil requirements directly with Iran and Russia, a dangerous and worsening situation.

Van Slyke hunched his immense shoulders over the taff-rail, measuring the swelling sea that was now making the horizon bobble.

War-waters, he thought, as Culhane returned to his thoughts. The most ingenious trader he'd ever met—iron-nerved, daring, a loner and a natural.

In thick trouble now, beaten down clean to the bone. Van Slyke knew that just a few yards away four men waited for him, wanting a vote taken so they could wrap up and return to their respective homes. Hard-bitten traders, the best in the world; with a pad, a few pencils, and some telephones they knew ways of liquidating half the nations in existence.

Van Slyke despised this day. Cursing into the wind's teeth, lurching across the deck, he forced open the door and stepped into the ebony-paneled saloon. Swinging on gimbals, several hurricane lamps flicked their light against the gathered faces. A woman coughed, another tittered, the air smelling sweetly of opium vapor.

He told three women, the curly-haired, angel-faced Senegalese boy-whore of Liu Wai's, and the galley stewards to leave. Feet spread, boots dripping onto a rare red-and-blue figured Baktiani rug, Van Slyke looked around in the barely relieved murk, the only light spearing from flickering oil lamps. He glanced quickly at the Gauguin painting given by Culhane three years ago to enliven the ebony walls. He ignored the art, but not these Shang-Magan traders—the five who were present, including himself.

Over at the mah-jongg table sat Baster Muldaur idly fingering a playing-tile. Tough as he looked, the Afrikaner resembled one of his prize bulls: low to the ground, barrel-chested, thick-necked, and a jaw like a rock formation. Long a bachelor, the African trading mogul had recently married a widow of considerable reputation, inheriting a daughter in the bargain. Easily the richest man on the Dark Continent, Muldaur made some wonder why he served so devotedly as a deacon

of the Dutch Reform Church. Yet a man's religion, if he could afford that sort of mistress, was his own business and his own conscience.

Still...

Across from Muldaur sat the Aussie—Muir Tomlinson, his face revealing its usual bemused expression. Tomlinson oversaw Trading Zone Three, smallest of all, that covered Australia, across to New Zealand, and all other Pacific islands except for Hawaii. The oldest Shang-Magan alive, at seventy-six, for sport he still harpooned sharks off the Great Barrier Reef. Beautifully mannered, shy, and mightily handsome, Tomlinson had inherited a fortune made by his father, who salvaged millions of tons of abandoned materials left by the Americans after their winless 1945 victory in the Pacific. He then had gone on to multiply his inheritance many times over through his trading acuity. Little of that continent's minerals left its shores without the hand of Tomlinson touching some part of the shipments. He knew the buyers, wherever they resided, and sometimes he even owned them through dummy corporations.

Augustino von Grolin Camero, who chaperoned trade throughout South and Central America, leaned unsteadily against a bulkhead. Tall, thin-featured, cool-eyed. With Culhane sidelined, Camero could lay claim to being the world's most potent grain trader. Some envied this aristocratic caballero for his women and his immense fincas in the Argentine pampas. Van Slyke infrequently wondered if the same people would show jealousy over Augustino Camero's sexual affair with his first cousin, better known as His Eminence Tomas Cardinal Camero of Buenos Aires. A trivial matter, though.

As his sight adjusted to the darkness, Van Slyke accounted for Liu Wai. The Singaporean slouched on a divan in the far corner. Smoke drooled from his mouth as he exhaled the delights of his opium-filled water pipe.

As he had with Liu Wai earlier, Van Slyke spoke to them in Mandarin:

"Now we've all had our say. Together and separately, in private, as it should be in a matter so delicate. You have all sworn deep oaths

to Shang-Magan—its code, its traditions. As presiding Shan Chu, I've sworn other oaths to you. To protect your interests, the settlement of territorial disputes, and overseeing our very future..."

Van Slyke paused, wiping his mouth. Moving into the middle of the saloon, he continued:

"Our future depends on bringing along newer blood. No one can deny that Culhane succeeded brilliantly in developing the North American zone for the consumption of strategic metals and materials. We all profited variously but also greatly. His idiotic government, there in Washington, broke promises to him...and thus indirectly to Shang Magan. Can we say he is to blame for all the present trouble? We all suffer for it, but it is he who has taken the first and the main losses. Culhane fought bravely to hold his markets open. He is of wide sight, as some of us have remarked in the past. Also, he is our only American member on Council of Six. If he is to be banished, who will oversee the North American Zone? He has met with misfortune, but then who among us hasn't?"

The rocking motion in the cabin suddenly stopped as the junk luffed into the wind, slowly, burdensomely, coming over on a new tack. The Magans sat stone still, raptly listening to the only authority they ever truly recognized.

"It is time now," Van Slyke said. "Two of you wish to expel Culhane. Two others call for a year's suspension. Afterward, he can regain his Council of Six seat by again posting one-quarter ton of gold or an acceptable equivalent to his reserve account—in accord with our Rule Three provision."

Silence, then, as all crossed glances with one another. Tomlinson sneezed politely into his handkerchief.

Van Slyke fished in his caftan and retrieved five joss sticks: each eight inches in length, of brightest red lacquer, tipped at the ends with platinum leaf.

"If we're here to vote, Joost, which is the issue? To expel or suspend?" asked Muir Tomlinson.

“Only to suspend, I’ve decided. But Culhane is not to know it is only a suspension.”

“Why not!” Liu Wai snorted loudly, but he was powerless to overrule the Shan Chu.

“We vote now, at once!” commanded Van Slyke. “No further debate, if you gentlemen will be so kind.”

Two sticks snapped, held in the hands of Camero and Liu Wai. Baster Muldaur tapped his gently on the mah-jongg table, then rolled it across the playing tiles. Tomlinson placed his stick into an inside coat pocket. They all looked at one another again, deep and searching, before their faces met Van Slyke’s. He still held on to his joss stick, unbroken.

“It is up to you, Joost,” urged Augustino Camero. It’s two against two.”

“Quite so.”

“Does anyone wish to change his vote? Or say anything else?” asked Muldaur. His voice was calm enough, but his chest moved out and in, and not rhythmically. No one answered him, but Van Slyke wondered if the Afrikaner, Muldaur, suspected anything was amiss.

“How vote you, Joost?” asked Liu Wai.

“Soon enough, you will know.”

In the dooming silence, Van Slyke waited, leveling his gaze at the others. All grasped what was at hand; all knew he was compelled to act. For three days, they’d dissected the situation, floating thoughts, trying to marry ideas, bridge gaps—yet nothing of consequence had surfaced.

Trouble, massive trouble: they could all agree on that point. He read it in their faces, and supposed they read it in his. America had come unmoored, was foundering. Had been made into a wreck by an apathetic public and its corrupt, idiotic politicians.

Two immense financial market meltdowns in succession had ripped the hide right off the greatest single economy history had ever witnessed.

## COMPRADOR

As if a fateful reprise of the once great Roman Empire, America had crashed, eaten its own bones—its resources squandered, its freedoms eroded, sunk under mountainous debt, reckless spending, too many wars, too much cowboying by Wall Streeters, and an indulgent people who had lost any sense of prudence.

Left were a nation and a people who had all but given up, and whose vitals seemed twisted in the jaws of an ever-tightening wrench that never let go. And now in peril of being bought up by outsiders who salivated at the fire sale prices.

Russia and the Saudis were jointly bidding for Exxon-Mobil that was selling at a sixty-two percent discount of its former high point. They also were casting covetous eyes at Conoco Phillips; the Germans were closing in on both IBM and Ford. A tech-driven Brazil, having bought up Budweiser twenty years earlier, now had Microsoft in its sunsights.

When payments were missed by hard-pressed farmers in Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois and Missouri, over 11-million acres of prime American farmlands had defaulted to foreigners. Even the fabled King Ranch, in Texas, was now in the hands of an Iranian family who had built a gigantic mosque in Kingsville, forcing the ranch hands, if they wanted their jobs, to worship Allah there.

America, because of the unsustainable cost, had pulled out of their peacekeeping role in Iraq, and the same in Afghanistan, creating a gaping geopolitical void. Imbalances everywhere, now, one begetting the next as if a nuclear-type chain reaction.

Spotting an opportunity to dominate the world petro-oil scene, the ever-aggressive Russians went on the move, muscling into the mid-east's warm water ports, consolidating its oil and gas with that of Iran, Iraq and the Saudis. Europe hadn't the military force to counteract Moscow. America, with a much-thinned military, had sat idly by as a tectonic shift had occurred in vital commodity flows: the prospect of a Russian-Chinese world-trading axis loomed. All that saved it from happening now was an ever-present mistrust between those two nations. If ever they resolved their differences, then the Russians,

unimpeded, could force Europe, instead of bullying it as they did now, to accept the ruble as part of the Euro monetary union; thus, a free ride on the backs of the Europeans who bowed like puppets to Russia's much needed petro resources to heat homes, turn on the lights, operate factories.

Europe, like America, might then cease to be its own trading unit, and Europe stood as the Shang-Magan's Zone One, overseen by Van Slyke himself.

Day and night, a nerve-wearying mess. The solution, far-fetched as it seemed, was to rescue America somehow, restore Europe's gumption, and somehow blunt Russian adventures that threatened to permeate Europe.

Barely credible, he thought. Yet so many things seemed fantasias these days—Van Slyke readily recalled how only thirty-five years earlier the Russian empire had crumbled, slumping to its knees. Vast oil and plentiful gas reserves had saved the Muscovites from dissolving into a second-rate power.

How to do it? How to stop the encroachment?

Perfidy was rampant, and Joost Van Slyke intended a deceit or two of his own. As Shan Chu, he must act, yet the road ahead was murky as a sewer.

Quietly, behind the scenes, he had begun knitting a spider's web; what he needed was the spider to patrol it, one who knew the art of laying invisible traps: Culhane was that spider, the only candidate who had come to mind. The right man at this terribly wrong time.

That lever was about to be yanked; a filthy ruse, to be sure, but it must be finagled.

Abruptly Van Slyke turned, lunged through the door, slammed it shut and bucked his way down a long passageway. Four doors later, he reached the communications room and told the signaler what he wanted.

"Transmission problems today," came the reply. "Everything garbles." The signaler adjusted a knob until an orange dot was centered inside a green triangle. "Might do it, we can try again," he

said, as he leaned over to depress three red and one black buttons on the radio console, fixing the bandwidth.

The marine operator spoke just as Van Slyke motioned the signaler to leave.

The sea's fist slugged hard against the hull again, pitching Van Slyke against the bank of consoles. Shaking a painful elbow, mouthing oaths, he suddenly remembered the voting stick in his hand. He hadn't really voted, had he? He had never intended to. The others needn't know. They could assume whatever they liked; he was the Shan Chu, and no longer could he afford the luxury of candor with anyone. Better this way, he thought, than to forfeit the future. Liu Wai, if he knew, would throw a fit—too fucking bad for Liu Wai.

Waiting, he fumed, wondering if he'd done the right thing in laying a snare for the younger man, whom he much liked. Admiring his gifts, too: a top-notch trader, with the imagination of a Mozart.

Still, little choice had existed other than an old-fashioned force-play to overcome the younger man's resistance to attend to the muddle in Washington, start the laborious process of setting things right and settling the ledgers. The stakes were so sky high that personal likes or dislikes—his own, Culhane's, or anyone's—no longer counted, if, indeed, they ever had mattered at all.

Finally, a sharp crackle of static and then a distant-sounding voice. "Culhane here."

"A close vote, Rushton. I'm sorry to be the one—"

A blast of static, like an angry hornet, intruded; then nothing at all except for a pinging echo until the marine operator queried: "Are you through? The call, is it through—?"

"Completely through," replied Rushton Culhane into the receiver, fighting to control himself. Carefully, he anchored the telephone to its cradle; not so carefully, his hand trembled as though he had palsy. He'd been ousted from the most elite club of traders in the world. A club like no other, and he its youngest member ever.

His nerves seemed to pour out of his body, as he felt the light-headedness that comes with shock. Coils of compression tightened and tightened more around his chest until he sensed suffocation.

Thinking: *Air, I've got to get air in me.*

Walking to an office window, he parted the embossed green drape, opened a set of French doors and stepped out to the terrace. Wilshire Boulevard was almost empty of life. A patrol car, its red light flashing and siren shrilling, was racing off to somewhere. Farther on, two delivery trucks chugged along on battery-powered engines. Only a few passenger cars appeared on the wide boulevard that cut a cement line deep into the gut of the ever-sprawling city.

He stood there for a time letting the cool morning air wipe his moist face. The tightness in his chest began to loosen. Nerves, he decided; nerves wriggling around on an invisible hot griddle.

Minutes later, walking through a hallway, the walls covered with a small museum of paintings, he headed for the deep couch of Brazilian calf leather. Loosening his pale yellow Charvet tie, he sat, opened the lid of an onyx-embedded humidior and withdrew a Cohiba Robusto, lit it and let the taste linger for a time before exhaling. Mulling, he recalled the only golden rule that mattered now: *Those with the gold, rule, especially these days.*

The U.S. government, under an emergency executive order issued by the new president, had suspended delivery of nine tons of the precious metal owed him. He hadn't resources enough to wage a court battle to recover what was rightfully his; a fight against the government could drag endlessly, and they'd see to it that it would. The U.S. had reneged, done it so privately, so secretly, the press was ignorant of it, not that it really mattered. Nine tons was all that mattered to him. It was the entirety of his working capital.

His mind weaved on him, blurry, almost bruised, as if he were some punched-out fighter ready to have his corner-man toss in the towel.

## COMPRADOR

He needed that gold. Needed a lot more, too, but the gold above all else or he was finished. He could not hope to begin all over again and make up for what the government had impounded.

What now? No capital, dismissed from the Shang-Magan. Bedlam. Hardly any other word he could think of would fit the situation he faced, that, indeed, millions and more millions of others faced. It was as if a once great nation had set about digging a mass grave for itself. He was disgusted, and irreversibly worried.

He had done his best to keep the grain markets orderly throughout North America; a tall order, but he could not by himself stand against markets that had been in a crash-state for months. His losses were staggering. No help for others, either, for few were left standing. Other trading houses had either shuttered their doors or had chosen to hunker down, gripped in mortal fear. Grain supplies stood, in the tens of millions of metric tons, unclaimed and unsold. No money, so no customers, other than the Russians gloating over their bottom-of-the-barrel offers. More in the way of insults rather than fair trading offers.

Where would it all end? How would it all end? Left with little else now except his own blood to suck on, and precious little of that left to him.

More, given all he'd been through, all he and risked and lost, his resentment soared after Van Slyke's call...though he had expected nothing less...



From the outer hallway came the sound of padding steps. Then the little man with the island music deep in his voice appeared in the doorway.

For every one of the 3,326 days they'd been together, Rushton Culhane had never seen Herbsant Saxa dress differently for business. Always a three-piece suit, a snowflake-white vestette under the vest, blue shirt, white tie, a red carnation, and patent-leather shoes you could use for a shaving mirror.

And gold trinkets. Saxa wore gold as Nefertiti had, down to the tiny globe of glittering metal piercing his left earlobe. Part Haitian, some French, the rest of him Spanish Jew, with his woolly white hair and short stature he looked like a character actor. And in some ways, he was.

Chanting, he entered the room: “One dollar bid, now two, now two, oh! Now I got three, oh, now you hear four, four be the bid—”

“So early?” said Culhane, forcing a smile.

“I sleep at that Beverly Wilshire. Otherwise, I must change bus three times today. Too old for such nonsense.”

“Expensive, isn’t it?” asked Culhane, a question that would never have occurred to him a year ago.

“Hotel? Ninety Euros or six hundred American dollars. Take choice. And you look shit-zi.”

“Van Slyke called. They went through with it, I’m suspended or worse. The message garbled before we finished. Anyway, another bust for us I’m afraid.”

Saxa’s face shook. Loose skin tinted the color of Drambuie wobbled, the cushions under his eyes almost vanishing. “Virgin Jesus, they know Washington don’t pay us.”

“That’s my problem, not theirs. What’s left of my Shang-Magan bond is in dollars, as you know so well. And those’re nearly worth nearly nothing.”

Saxa rolled his eyes until only the whites showed in the mask of his dark face. It was one of his Haitian voodoo tricks, often done in fun, but not this time.

“Can’t make us a temporary loan of gold?”

“They don’t operate that way. You have to pay your own dues and provide your own capital. Otherwise, you’re out. Sometimes you can petition for a year’s grace, but we didn’t get that far. Anyway, they’ll write it up in Chinese, tinsel it, and probably send it by carrier pigeon.” Culhane leaned over and stubbed out his cigar in a Baccarat crystal bowl.

“Ain’t possible for you recover in year. They must know that.”

## COMPRADOR

“Maybe we can find a banana republic that’ll freight us. Or a church. Know any good churches, Sant?”

“Be serious, Jesus sakes!” Saxa squirmed into the chair facing Culhane, his feet barely scraping the carpet.

“Things were serious when others couldn’t pay what they owed us. I’m stripped now, so it’s no longer serious. It’s done, absolutely fucking done.” Culhane flushed a deep scarlet. He was rarely given to cursing, even in the presence of men alone.

The phone rang. Two more times, yet neither man bothered answering.

“Ah.” Saxa brightened. “But they come to senses soon. Who else they got?”

“The New York Corporation.”

“Everybody take your word on face...Rearden, he be birdshit to them Magans.”

“He’s survived and I haven’t. That’s all the birdshit that holds any water now.”

“Creeping of my mother, the bastard he’s a thug! Never hold to his big trades if markets go against him.”

Culhane shrugged wearily. “I’m going home. Send the closing notices to the office here and in Chicago and Winnipeg.”

“That easy done. Not so many people left,” said Saxa, shaking his head in unconscious protest.

“I’ll follow up with personal letters in a few days.”

Saxa gestured toward the walls of the large room and said, “You sell paintings and them others at house. Easy. I promise good prices in Europe. Safe money, too. Gold.”

“No, Sant.”

“Why not? Is a fortune here!”

“Because they’re history, and that’s the sort of history that *ain’t* for sale.”

Culhane boosted himself off the Brazilian couch, went to Sant Saxa, and gripped the little man’s shoulder, before passing through a door to his private dressing room.

Saxa wanted to go with him, but that wouldn't do. He wanted to weep, but that wouldn't do either. Like watching your only son go through a double amputation; and the son's future nothing more now than a wheelchair and a dose of pity. From here on, trouble; nothing but troubles. With that wife, too.

Sant Saxa stifled a sob he hadn't realized was building inside himself. How could it be? Culhane, beached? They had walked many a path, ever since the Hong Kong years and he had witnessed for himself the year-by-year rise of the best trader in America who'd been harpooned by his own government; a government he had gone to great lengths to help in this time of endless upset and turmoil. They had betrayed him. What shame! But then that was the way of government, this or any other.

## Washington, D.C.

**H**is name: Efram Tremont Halburton, a rancher with a mid-sized cattle operation and four gas wells yielding a nice income stream till the economy had cratered and gas prices had tanked. He had been a quiet, almost nondescript member of the U.S. House of Representatives, voted in overwhelmingly by an Oklahoma rural district where he resided.

Now, President of the United States by default.

A modest man of simple tastes, a church-going Baptist of the wet variety, he'd come to Congress with peace in his heart and a willingness to right the wrongs of his times. He possessed a friendly flattish face, permanently tanned from the winds of the Oklahoma plains. His spotted hands hung loosely from his sleeves; hands that showed the gnarl that derives from a lifetime of staking fence posts. He walked with a loose gait, and dressed as he always had, in calf-leather boots, starched white shirt and a black string tie. His trousers were cut to fit over his boot tops, his suit jackets were cut with a yoked back, in the custom of most cattlemen. Rarely, would he allow his picture to be taken, considering it a vanity. He ate in the way and manner of his peers and friends of Enid, Oklahoma: beefsteak whenever possible, boiled potatoes and two green vegetables of any description and variety. Desserts never varied: fruit pies topped with a single scoop of vanilla ice cream.

In a not unknown but nevertheless surprising turn, he'd been tapped to run as Vice-president alongside an Illinois senator, who had won the presidential election on a platform of promising change and more change for America. Change across-the-board—for healthcare services, for social security, for successive increases in the nation's debt limits for new social programs, and for curtailing military outlays and abandoning weapons systems research in a bid to take the lead for

world peace among the greater powers. A ticket made up of a northerner from the brass-knuckle school of Chicago politics, along with a southwestern rancher-congressman, and they had coasted to an easy victory.

Then, disaster struck with the speed and force of a tsunami.

Wall Street greed had torn a gaping hole in the banking system. On top of which, the newly elected president, as it turned out, was a total misfit for the office bestowed upon him in a raging blunder by the American voters. The “Messiah” as he was called by the media, was laughed at, scoffed at by foreign leaders who had begun to run rings around what had once been the richest, most powerful, most vaunted nation in history. Many of the minions brought in by the ill-fated president to staff the executive branch of government turned out to be either feckless or criminally minded. A massive collision had come about at express speed: the Wall Street crash, the military setbacks in Central Asia, the careening economy, sinking real estate values, and skewered investment portfolios, all of it emptying the bank accounts of too many Americans.

One man’s newly-fangled American Dream for an unworkable, unwanted socialistic utopia was thereby dashed to smithereens.

Instead, in its place, a foundering dystopia confronted the American republic. By year three, amid a cascade of scandal, crookery, failed performance, the youngish president had come apart. On a day when the world situation seemed at its gloomiest, the signal-logs told of a call to the Kremlin at mid-morning EST. A heated exchange had taken place, with the American scolding his Russian counterpart for the tricks and tactics used by Russian oil magnates to corner markets in a time of growing world shortages. America, according to NASA’s climatologists, faced a grim outlook for a freezing winter. So did Europe.

“You Russians,” insisted the U.S. president, “must therefore let up on your squeeze play.”

Though, of course, the log showed none of the details, later on, the facts emerged; of all, the over-arching fact was that the Russian

president had told his American counterpart “to shove it slowly up his backside.”

Facing yet another failure, his nerves exhausted, his energy down to zero, he slumped in his chair. A blinding pain shot through his head.

Absently, he dropped the phone to the floor. Rummaging through a drawer, feeling around for what he wanted, he stumbled out to the Rose Garden. There, on a crystal-bright morning, with the tulips in a rainbow of color and the birds chirping in a joyful chorus, he spattered his brains against a boxwood hedge with an ivory-handled .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver. The weapon had been a ceremonial gift from the gunmaker’s board of directors to the now nearly decapitated president, meant as token of thanks for ordering the Pentagon to restore a much needed military-supply contract.

Three hours later, The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court had sworn in Halburton, who had taken the helm of the most vilified, most unwanted public office in the land. Directly, four months and eight days of dissension, round after round of red hell at the hands of the media, and a nonstop avalanche of calamities, had ensued. The nation was caught in hardbound straits, the public seriously restive if not rebellious. Every week or so yet another numbing, gut-wrenching issue found its way to the Oval Office. Halburton began to wonder if the nation was still governable, and had taken to reading Lincoln’s diaries of the Civil War to console himself.

He did not think the nation would fire up another internal war...but he wouldn’t totally dismiss the possibility, either. Riots already abounded. Shooting, too, and the killings ran at an all-time high in the larger cities.

Today, the plainspoken rancher was meeting with his Treasury Secretary, girding for yet another blow to his already bruised spirits. Halburton longed for the sweeping, grass-covered plains of northern Oklahoma, the chance to gaze with pride at his herd, a taste of his nightly quota of bourbon on the front porch rocker, and a few hands of old-fashioned stud poker with his many friends.

Instead, another shot to the gut: “Go over that once more,” Halburton was saying, swinging around to face Joshua Squires, the Secretary of Treasury he’d inherited and was stuck with. No one else would take the job.

“It was Piegear, head of the Bank for International Settlements, made the call himself.”

“No, no! I mean the rest of it, the critical part.”

“Well, effective ninety days from now, neither dollars nor U.S. Treasury obligations will be honored any longer as bona-fide reserves by the other central banks. That includes our own Federal Reserve Bank. They promised not to announce it publicly until we’re ready.”

“We expected this possibility, didn’t we?”

“Not this quickly, Mr. President.”

“Where does this impact us most, the quickest and hardest?”

“We can’t use dollars to settle our foreign accounts. Nobody else can, either. The dollar is...well, it’s become something of a *nothing*, as you’re well aware.”

“Can we pay our bills?”

“Not for anything we have to import.”

“Lord, God. And what is it that you recommend?”

“No good answer for it. The country hasn’t faced this sort of catastrophe before since the time of the Revolution.”

Not exactly true, thought Halburton. During the American Revolution and the Civil War, it was barely possible to pay the army, let alone foreign debts. Not important, though, and he asked: “Why don’t we just bypass this Bank for International Settlements? Just say the hell with ‘em and go our own way.”

“We can’t,” replied Squires, shaking his talcumed face. “That’s the only method existing to settle accounts among all the government central banks. You’d have to rearrange the whole international payments system. Just isn’t possible. Not by us anyway...”

“No clout, you mean. We’re second-benchers, is that it?”

## COMPRADOR

Squires made no comment, remaining inordinately calm—and concluding again that this President wouldn't get by the first turn against a clutch of turtles. Outclassed, a thorough-going duffer.

Halburton paced twice around the Oval Office. Passing a couch, he felt an overpowering urge to lie down and sleep away this newest daymare. Or to swear down on his God, or on someone. But his sense of order, taken from his Baptist upbringing, taken from his leather-skinned father and stalwart mother, returned him to reality.

“The credit of this country's been unsullied for a hundred years or more. They can't do this to us simply because we've had a bad turn or two. We saved the hides of Europe and Japan...now it's us needin' a break or two.” Halburton's voice trailed off as he ran a shaky hand through his hair. His tired face thinned into a slack chin under a nose taking air at twice its usual rate.

Squires watched as the President shuffled over to the windows overlooking the Rose Garden where his predecessor had bowed to his Maker. Halburton was staring through the glass panes, an uninspired but chiseled look on his craggy face, perhaps trying to fathom the luckless cards fate had dealt him.

“You'd better come up with something, Joshua. Something good, I'd go so far to say something spectacular. I'll want a daily update. Hourly, if necessary.”

“Naturally.”

Halburton's gaunt frame slumped, his senses reeling from all the uncertainty. He found it very curious his call to California had been so blithely ignored.

That very afternoon in every financial market still operating, mostly foreign, rumors had gushed like a rain-sodden waterfall: the U.S. was *kaput*. The so-called American century of supremacy had ended in a whimper, and the schadenfreude of many foreigners was expressed in voluminous press accounts with their biting criticism of American's role for spawning a worldwide maelstrom.

The dollar, once a barometer of stability, had become the un-touchable green leper of international trade.

## Bel Air

Culhane loped along, going easily, as he rounded the corner of Rodeo Drive. He barely noticed Giorgio's shredded yellow awning, the smashed front window of Gucci's, or the boarded-up doors of Hermès. He dodged litter everywhere. Spilled trash receptacles, soiled rags, a torn work boot, bent beer cans—every day it seemed filthier.

Later, sweat darkening his jersey, he dashed down Sunset Boulevard, pushing himself, blood thrumming in his ears. Hearing them now, he slowed his pace, wanting to take a look before having to elbow his way through.

The mob, rabbling and cursing, seemed larger today. It spilled across Sunset Boulevard, staging its protests outside Bel Air's east gate. Arms hoisted, obscenities shouted, some threw stones at the helmeted guards dressed in black SWAT-team uniforms.

Chanting, "Bread...bread...bread, you fucking rich bastards!"

A young black woman, her hair dyed ocher, shirtless, with her tattooed breasts brazenly exposed, spat at one of the guards. A bearded older white man threw a brick at another guard, hitting the guard's knee. The guard, yelping, cut loose with an aimless burst into the air from his Uzi machine gun, which did nothing to quiet the crowd.

Recognizing Culhane, the guards separated and made a quick and narrow opening. He sprinted through, ducking as a rock glanced off his shoulder. Screams still pierced the air as he pounded his way up the winding road.

He ran very hard, his anger and fear crowding him all the way. The hungry mob wanted his life—he was Bel Air rich, wasn't he?—

and the sane thing to do was get out of their way. Culhane knew about hunger. He'd seen it many times and in too many places. Hungry people he understood, but not their politicians. Those he despised. The mob was stoning the wrong targets.

His children. Culhane eagerly wanted the feel of them right then. Those faces, innocent and fresh for a kiss, were the only solid hope he seemed to have now. Sara, eleven, slim and golden-haired, and showing signs of her mother's beauty. The boy, Rush junior, just turned eight, the little heller for whom Culhane planned endless adventure and a strict upbringing. He loved them both with a depth that sometimes actually frightened him. To fear anything, he knew, was to lose it.

Or to lose to it.

White-bricked and appearing low-slung under its tiled roof, the huge residence rambled across the highest ledge of a glade sloping lazily toward the blue Pacific. Stonewalls edged the vast lawns. Oak and Monterrey pine stood in copses against the land, and there were towering firs with fanned boughs reaching skyward. In these tallest trees, the birds nested, and on this morning they sang out their piccolo notes to the passing breezes.

By the eastern stonewall was an immaculately kept cutting garden. Squatting barefoot on his haunches, a Taiwanese tended a row of vegetables. Later in the day, in another part of the garden, he would snip fresh roses or freesias or perhaps chrysanthemums for the many rooms of the residence.

The garden was the Taiwanese's life. He knew every living thing in it and exactly how it survived. It was as close to the Kingdom as ever he would experience on this earth. The old man stood now, rubbing his plowman's hands on a dirt-streaked apron. He waved as Culhane trotted up the pea-graveled driveway, making a sound like teeth crunching on celery.

Culhane stopped, his chest heaving and sweat beading his face and neck. He came toward the Taiwanese, saying in the man's dialect, "Your earth blooms are sunrise itself."

Bowing, the old man replied in Taiwanese, “You honor your humble servant.” Pointing to the early sun, he added, “In one hour the blooms will be locked in the cage of gold.”

“And I can hear you bring the happy song to your birds.”

“And they to me. The mouse and the frog by dark. The birds by light. *Ai-ee*, it removes the burdens of a thousand years.”

Yours maybe but not mine, thought Culhane. He said, “Listen for the wisest frog. Watch what he eats and tell me. I must leave you now, old father.”

“And with you, master, take the blessing of the blue cat who sleeps by the lotus.”

“It is my gift to you, old father.”

Culhane returned the Taiwanese’s friendly smile, then headed up the driveway toward the paired oaken doors of his home.

The old Taiwanese watched carefully, thinking of the clouded look he’d observed in his master’s sapphire eyes. Culhane was *Tai-pan*, a chieftain who understood how to dignify even a poor man and a poor man’s work. Generous, too, at the time of New Years, American and Chinese; now there would be no more of it.

Much more had angered the old man lately. From kitchen gossip, he knew these were lusterless times for his master, that trouble loomed everywhere. Even trouble with that goddess to whom Culhane was married. Was it not only three nights earlier that she could be seen running naked in the moonlight? Uttering strange, perhaps dangerous sayings while the master slept. *Ai-ee!*

Seeing Culhane disappear through the high-arched doors, the old man slowly inserted his warped fingers into his baggy, mended shirt. Searching there, he extracted a gummy brown pellet of opium. Lodging it next to his toothless gum, moistening it, he began slowly to suck its dream juices.

Another troubling thought entered his head as he leaned over to trowel the radishes. His days of steady rest, for which he’d worked these many years, were moving beyond reach. In cold fury he remembered how the American bank had swindled him of his life’s

## COMPRADOR

savings. One day the little book had said forty-six thousand dollars, and then, without slightest warning, he was told by letter that while his money was insured he must still wait for it. Even so, the money was almost worthless, would buy little or nothing.

He'd waited, and while he waited, the value of his life's work had turned into the droppings of an earthworm. Soon it would be time to return across the ocean to his place of ancestry and prepare himself for death. Now, nothing but a dimming hope. Highest insult, threatening to break a centuries-long chain of family tradition, and now only lost-face and grievous humiliation.

His wages were now paid in food, shelter, and some silver coins. The joy weed and snow powder he'd secretly sold in this wealthiest of neighborhoods were now things of the past. No money. At least not enough gold money to satisfy the man who had brought him the precious cargo, when delivering milk for the children of this big house.

The old man counted on one thing: Saturday was soon to arrive. He'd take the necessary three buses to downtown and walk the remaining distance into Chinatown. He would visit his social club, his tong, and there, among old friends, he would implore favor by cagily insisting upon his rightful claim to respect. The respect due an elder, to a person of age and honor.

Then he would ask his tong brothers for errand work, anything that would help recover his losses at the cheating bank. Surely, they would understand. His fidelity was unblemished and his dues, until lately, were always promptly paid. One very long turn of loyalty deserved at least a short one.

Annoyed, the old man slashed out with his Wyoming skinning knife, neatly severing a beetle nursing on a radish's leaf-milk, the lightning-quick slash bringing instant death. He took pride in the simple, death-dealing motion: no bank could steal his eyes, or his hands.



Culhane stepped through the foyer into the spacious front hall. A massive crystal chandelier hung from the cathedral ceiling, throwing its dancing rays across the black and white diamond shapes of the marble floor.

Difficult now to see the color nuances of the Dufy, the Renoir, the other Pissarro, and the three works by Monet. Even in the dark, he knew them down to their smallest brushstrokes. Lasting friends, each representing one of his great market coups of the past; vanities that he loved looking at.

He looked up again, hearing Karin Culhane's silk pants make a swishing noise as she descended the spiral staircase. She was all in white today, except for the green bandanna that bound her auburn hair. A finely sculpted face, gently Nordic except for the mouth, which was almost Arabic with its finely sculpted, sensuous lips.

Quite stunning, though with dark circles under her eyes, she was tall, willowy as a palm in a breeze. Once her looks had been described as truly extraordinary, but now, since her setback, she looked too haunted, too hollowed out, her sight never quite focusing on the outer world, perhaps because she was so distracted by the heaviness of her private wreckage.

Culhane said, "You're up early, darling. Are the children up?"

"Gone to school. Tuesday is the early session."

Now he remembered. Tuesdays and Thursdays, they went very early for classes at the once fashionable and now converted Bel Air Hotel; the public schools had closed the year before and the hotel, with too few paying customers, had leased the premises for schooling and a medical clinic that was opened every other weekday.

"Long night. I lost track of the days."

"Where's my kiss?"

He held her for a long moment, saying, "I'm perspiring. Didn't want to muss you."

“What difference does it make?”

“It does to me, darling of mine,” he said, trying to keep the smile on her face.

“What would I do without you?” asked Karin, looking into his ice-blue eyes, feeling the raw strength of his arms pulling her closer.

“Continue as Norway’s greatest princess.”

“Not a real one.”

“Ah, but for me you are the one and only. Any food around?”

“Some tea and fruit.” Then, in one of her oddish deflections, Karin added, “There’s a new baby next door. Maybe we could buy it.” Her eyes glazed, then dilated suddenly.

“Sounds okay to me,” humoring her, “but I’m starved.” He took her hand, walking her down the long hallway toward the kitchen.

“Another one of those awful doctor’s bills came yesterday. I’m sorry.” A quake in her voice.

“Worry about nothing, Karin, and forget all the rest of it.”

“Remember when you had your *Eastern Star* and we could sail all night? And we had our stables. Wasn’t it fun? Now, what we have is nothing. Can you tell the bank to get my jewelry out?” Karin tugged at his hand. “Can we go to Santa Anita this afternoon and watch them run?” She was pitched up, nearly breathless with excitement, her eyes sharp now and aglitter.

Sweeping an arm across her shoulders, he drew her to him. “The track is closed today, darling.” For two seasons now, he thought, and your jewelry is probably around the neck of a solvent duchess.

“I’m going to throw up.”

It was an act. She pretended to gag and Culhane wanted to shake her back to reality, walk out, hold her, calm her somehow—a dozen reactions at once. Chill tested his spine for the third time that morning. She went off like this sometimes; the doctor warned him it would happen, usually unexpectedly.

“Let’s have tea,” he suggested. He’d not eaten since yesterday’s lunch.

Karin turned, throwing a brilliant smile at him. “I did Perdita from the *Winter’s Tale* last night. Want to hear me?” Before he could answer, Karin began: “*That wear upon your virgin branches yet your maidenheads growing, Prosperina.*”

A heavy thunk in his belly, as if an anvil had dropped on it. “Karin, Karin!” He gripped her arms, shaking her very lightly, then whispered, “Do Perdita later. Tea, let’s have the tea now, and maybe take a swim.” Anything to get her senses straight.

“There’s no tea, there’s no anything!” she screamed, a hand pulling loose and flying to her mouth as if seeing some incredible, sudden horror.

“Okay, let’s just go easy.”

Now the same hand fell to the top of her blouse. A quick yank, a sound of fabric ripping, and she stood there naked as the young black girl Culhane had seen at the gate. A low keening moan came from her mouth; that face no longer beautiful, but fierce and harsh-looking as if she were about to go killing. A long minute later, she regained composure, but her eyes seem empty as he had seemed empty when hearing Van Slyke’s unfinished decree.

“I did it again, didn’t I? Oh, Rushton!” Whimpering, collapsing into his arms. “I’m so frightened all the time.”

“It’s all right, s’all right.”

“I’ll go ba-back to the clinic.”

“Not ever again.”

“I’m no use to you,” sobbed Karin, her head shaking. “My God, we can’t even sleep together!”

“It’ll come right, Karin. It needs time, that’s all.”

They had spent twelve years together, the last of them in a purgatory. He wanted to tell her of Van Slyke’s call: what it really meant and that Culhane & Company would be forced to shut its doors. But that can of herring couldn’t be opened now. Not in her state, and not on top of the other shocks she’d endured. Worse, Karin adored the flamboyant Dutchman. She would never understand any of it. And he’d not chance another worry for her to bear.

“That call last night?”

“What call was that?” he asked, surprised but careful to say it gently.

“From that White House, trying to reach you...I called you about it?”

“Oh, that one, yes. I’m a little beat and just forgot,” said Culhane. What the devil was she referring to? He’d been there all night, awaiting Van Slyke. No sleep, not even a doze, his nerves jumping around like loose power lines. There had been no call from Karin. Of that, he was absolutely certain.

The White House? From whom? He knew no one personally on the new President’s staff. Even the man himself was an enigma. In office for only a few months or so, chased into the chair after the other one slaughtered himself with a well-earned bullet. Arkansas. Wasn’t this Halburton from there? Arkansas or Oklahoma, one or the other. Maybe a better breed than that corrupt Chicago mob, and maybe not. Impossible these days to know whom to trust. No one in Washington certainly.

He felt Karin turn in his arms. A composed smile spread her mouth as she modestly began to cover those breasts he had once known so well. Her silk shirt wouldn’t fasten. Giving it up as a poor try, she moved to the kitchen counter where a large Chinese tea caddy was kept.

He doubted any call from Washington was to inform him that the government had relented, that they would now pay over the gold for the cobalt he’d secured from Zaire—a very tricky three-corner trade where he’d beaten the Russians to the punch, leaving them in a cold rage when they learned Culhane & Company was the counter-party to the deal, and the scarce and sorely needed metal would be denied Moscow.

He tried to wipe the gold loss from his mind so he could concentrate on Karin. But it was the same as trying to wipe away a birthmark with your finger.

## Zurich Moscow

Nothing to celebrate about, but not really so bad either. The numbers tied out correctly, too.

Satisfied, Ambros Piegär initialed the ledger sheet and tossed it into the auditor's tray. He was chief foreign-exchange trader for Braunsweig und Sohn, a private bank catering discreetly to a very rich clientele, corporations both foreign and Swiss, governments, banks everywhere, and a group of drug lords and white-collar criminals who were rarely mentioned and never admitted to. It was Switzerland and money was just that—money. A commodity; not more, not less.

Another erratic day in the markets. Yet, with the help of his four assistants, he'd still swung a profit of two million Euros for Braunsweig. A few more months like the last one and he'd earn enough bonus to buy his own bank—albeit a very small one.

Yawning, rubbing his stiff neck, he stood and walked to a nearby window. Rain had doused the city a half-dozen times that afternoon, and from the looks of the dull, aluminum-like sky, more wet could be expected.

Eleven stories up, on most days he could easily see over the old part of Zurich, across the grayish steeples and gabled roofs, all the way to the Zurichsee. Today, a fogbank. Just like the money markets, he thought.

He turned for another look at the black electronic trading board, glancing at the quote for South African rands. Some-

thing's happening there. The exchange-rate had been skittering around for days. Who was up to what, he pondered?

Maybe, thought Ambros Piegar, I'm off to the right place to find out why.

Touching a yellow button on the intercom, he asked his secretary to call the garage and have his Porsche Carrera delivered to the Limmatquai entrance.

In the elevator, he wondered again why his father was here in Zurich, unannounced. Life must be getting soft at the Big Bank, or maybe he was homesick, thought Ambros wryly, though God himself knew that Zurich offered few, if any, diversions over Basel, and never did his father bring his flashy Belgian mistress here.

Ambros was sure his father believed that that secret was safer than the numbers of a Swiss bank account. His father, Hans-Otto, was a very secretive man, always had been, but more so now that he headed up the Big Bank. The Big Bank was Ambros's somewhat scornful term for the Bank for International Settlements, the citadel that acted as the clearing house for the world's central banks—the government owned institutions that issued all the currencies and helped underwrite and manage the oceans of debts plaguing the world's financial system.

How his father captured that prestigious post had dumbfounded Ambros, whenever he cared to think about it, which was as infrequently as possible.

Traffic crawled through the jammed streets and Ambros could only slug his way along until reaching the outskirts of the city. When getting there, closer to his family's estate, he was again thinking of his father, when a blast of thundering sound rocketed through the bowl of mountains, shaking the Porsche's windshield. Ambros responded with a smooth double-clutching of the engine. Snaking through the lighter traffic, imagining he was skiing the Piste slalom courses at Davos with Panzi, his

love, his center, his waking dream and sometimes his sleeping dream.

As the Porsche streaked through the arched stone entrance of the driveway up to his family home, Ambros speculated wryly about this hurriedly called meeting. A good word? Doubtful. A complicated errand? Probably. An argument? A certainty.

With Panzi off in summer training, whatever the reason for the summons, it might even relieve another dull evening by himself. No, probably not, thought Ambros; it would be more like a very long hour with a tedious preacher. Grueling, nerve-racking, full of brimstone. And no laughs at the end of it, either, since he knew that his mother—one of the liveliest women in Zurich—was inventing every excuse imaginable to prolong her holiday in Burgenstock. He envied her.

Leaving the car, he sprinted up the front steps and walked through the vestibule, brushing raindrops off his suit. The door opened and an old Alpenseiler, bent with age, his green loden-cloth jacket hanging loosely, greeted Ambros with a welcoming grin.

A hallway like very few in all of Switzerland: it was the hallway of a castle. The floor was of gray limestone, with a thick runner of Oriental design covering its length. Outsized yellow candles fixed in wall sconces bounced their light off iron maces, truncheons, and fighting lances hung against the walls. Overhead were flags of all the cantons in a glory of pompous color. Reaching the hall's end, Ambros braced his shoulders, was about to knock on the oak door, decided the hell with it, and walked right in. .

Hans-Otto Pieggar stood with his back to a fire flaming high inside a small cave of a fireplace. Perched above it, on the long mantel were mounted hunting falcons, beaks opened, wings flared, talons curled for the kill.

Erect, even-featured, though with a florid face, the elder Piegar's thinning yellow hair was streaked fast to his broad head. A skilled tailor had stitched up prize-winning work to camouflage his girth.

Hans-Otto Piegar waited: it was his son's duty to pay out the first greeting.

"You look well, Father," said Ambros amiably. "I was surprised to hear you were here in Zurich."

"So," said Hans-Otto Piegar, "you're punctual for a change. Care for a drink?" Piegar lifted his glass in invitation.

"Thanks, no."

"Unlike you, Ambros. Going dry this week?"

"For the past fifty weeks. I'm doing wines this year."

"Are you now? A new leaf, is it? Still seeing that barmaid or whatever?"

Blushing, Ambros puffed his boyish cheeks slightly, answering: "Panzi is the best woman skier in Switzerland. She'll get silver for sure in the next Olympics, possibly a gold." Wishing now that he'd been witty enough to invent an excuse to avoid this get-together. Jesus! What a welcome, he thought. The old cockhead never changes, not for five minutes.

"You'll never run Braunsweig und Sohn unless you get your duty and your standing straight. Sit down. We've business to discuss, and I've a plane waiting."

"Going to Basel?" asked Ambros as he lowered himself into a wing chair across the room as far as he could get and still be heard.

"To Warsaw, then Moscow."

"More Russian roulette, eh?"

Hans-Otto Piegar's fingers tightened around his glass. "You'd do well to listen for a change, Ambros!"

"I've been trying that ever since puberty."

"Ambros..."

“Go ahead. Sorry.”

“You’re not to repeat a word,” warned Hans-Otto Piegar, pausing until Ambros nodded. “There’s every chance the Russian ruble will be banded together with the Euro soon.”

“Why?” Ambros’s face drained to a lighter shade.

“The EU’s interests are changing. We’re dependent on Russian oil and gas, and the U.S. is no longer a good market for European goods. That’s why. We require a sound currency to replace the dollar.”

“And the British pound. I’d better know, if they’re to be included.”

“No, they’ll be left out of this.”

“And Switzerland? Surely not us.”

“I speak as president of the BIS, not as a Swiss. But this country’s neutralism may have to change.”

“Never. And you’ll never get the Americans to agree on a currency like the one you’re talking about.”

“America’s finished. It’s vital that we find a stable international unit to replace them,” said Hans-Otto Piegar. “Russia is one-step forward, and the Chinese may join in conditionally.”

Tongue-tied, Ambros barely heard his father. The dollar might be finished, yet it was staggering to think of some new international currency, slicked up with Russian promises behind it. Comic opera, I’m hearing—he thought, alarmed.

“Are you listening?” demanded Hans-Otto Piegar.

Hear came the heat, Ambros thought. “Indeed, I am. It’s a lot to gobble down in one pass. I know you shouldn’t be telling me all this, why are you?”

“Because I want no missteps at Braunschweig.” Piegar came away from the fireplace. “Be damn certain you absorb this—tomorrow, and every day thereafter, until told differently, you’re to begin short-trading the dollar again. You’re to take short

positions for all of the Rearden accounts and all of our family's. Your own, too, if you have any sense."

"I think I'll personally pass...at least for the time being."

"After shorting dollars...you'll go long the Russian ruble."

"In what amounts, may I ask?"

"Yes, you may ask. Five-hundred million Swiss francs to start with. Afterward, we'll see..."

My own father, thought Ambros. The entrusted guardian at BIS for international credit and currency. He's supposed to keep a long distance from personal dealings in any currency. He could be disgraced, jailed even, and he wants me to front for him. Chrissakes, he'd scuttle us if we were caught acting on this kind of privileged information.

"Would this include the St. Gallen Trust as well?" he asked.

"Of course it does."

"Just wanted to be sure. How about the other American accounts?"

"Not advisable. We don't want to attract too much attention, do we?"

"Possibly I'll switch them into South African rands," said Ambros, hoping to draw out his father without giving himself away.

"Do that, and you'll have your head handed to you. Just leave them be."

"Any particular reason?"

"None I care to discuss."

"I don't like this, not a bit. Run it through one of the other banks, why not. You know them all."

"And you know I can't do that."

"What you're suggesting is highly illegal. I'm not looking to spend two years in jail eating last week's bread."

“You are a huge currency trader. No one would bat an eye if you weighed in. A few hundred millions is a blip. Not more than a blip.”

“Too big a blip for me, Father. Thanks anyway.”

“I don’t want your thanks. Your cooperation is what I ask. You’re my son.”

“You’re my father, but I’m not taking a chance on walking the plank for you. If you’re in cahoots with the Rearden’s, and it sounds as if you are, then get them to handle the trades.”

“You stand to make several millions out of it yourself. Are you so well off you can pass that up?”

“I can retire tomorrow. I’m not going to, but I could. When Panzi gets back from Chile, we may marry. I’d prefer not to do it from prison, and I’d bet anything she’d back me up.”

“Don’t be smart-alecky with me, Ambros.”

“I’ll behave. Just so you do your shopping someplace else.”

“You’ll do as you’re told.”

“Not this time.”

Ambros was getting sick; though impressed by the news he was hearing, it was goring his insides. How much wasn't he hearing? Plenty, he decided. “Russia doesn’t have the right reserves to back her share of a new currency. Europe would end up carrying all the luggage for Moscow. You must know that.”

“Russia produces more gold and platinum than anyone else in the world. Those are prima facie reserves. Her oil and gas combined dwarf any other exporting nation.”

“If they’d officially pledge them, you mean.”

Hans-Otto Piegar sighed. “Leave those matters to us at BIS. Are my instructions clear, Ambros?”

Ambros nodded, then asked, “Do you suppose the Reardens would sell their interest in Braunschweig und Sohn to us, or to a Swiss syndicate?”

“It’s the key to their empire. Why in the devil’s name should they do something so idiotic?”

“You know, the bank is handling some very strange money...we ought to change that, clean it up. Before it cleans us out.”

“Any sensible Swiss banker has blind eyes to the origin of money. Any money. Money is money, just as air is air.” Hans-Otto Piegär stepped over to a trolley-bar and refilled his whiskey glass. Miffed, trying to calm himself. A thirty-five year old son who took life a day at a time, often frivolously, his mother’s pet. A woman-slayer, to boot, until he tumbled into this vixen-skier, and had become deaf to his seniors, whenever he felt like being stubborn.

As Hans-Otto returned to his chair, Ambros pressed him again: “One further point, Father...those secret American accounts? If the dollar continues to fall, really slides, they’ll all be wiped out. Those that’re leveraged. And Braunschweig, under your plan, stands to gain at their expense. Something quite like what happened to the Jews after the last war, when the Swiss banks made off with all the funds of the dead.”

“A dead man can hardly reveal his account number, can he?”

“Except these American clients won’t be dead.” Ambros looked at him, thinking, he’s a for-hire money-gun gone power-crazy.

“They may as well be. Most Americans deposited money with us to avoid taxes. If they protest, they’ll reveal their tax dodges. There’s enough trouble on that front already.”

“And what of the Mafia’s deposits and the Unione Corse’s. You think they’ll play dead? Those’re dollar-based accounts mostly.”

Hans-Otto Piegär flushed. His fists smashed against the table; a rose-colored glass lamp teetered, crashing against the floor.

“Never use those names. Have you learned nothing, damn you!”

“I like to know what side of my back to watch. You’re at the BIS, safe as the sun maybe. I’m here and I’m vulnerable. I’ve got other plans for myself.”

“And you’re well paid for your work, I might add.”

“Nothing I haven’t earned by the sweat of my ever-weary brow.”

“Always the comeback. You were sassy as a kid, too. A smart-aleck from the time you were teething.”

“You were rarely around so how would you know?”

“That’s quite enough! Quite goddamn enough from you!”

“Better watch that blood pressure, papa.”

“You’re aware, are you, that you’re getting something of a reputation for being a gadabout. A playboy. Your mother’s spoiled you rotten.”

“That’s why we have such a loving interest in each other. Mutti and I, we’re very fond of life...I’ll admit I do polish my act every chance I get. My policy is to enjoy sin whenever possible and never to stray far from temptation,” he commented smilingly to a father whose eyes had gone ice-cold.

Just like that it ended, with nothing more to say to each other. A set of instructions, illegal or, at best, highly questionable and absolutely unethical. Fraud and underhanded dealing was afoot; the sort of mess the American banks had created a few years earlier. Ambros debated whether to throw in his resignation, here and now. Throw it right into that drink going down his father’s gullet.

Hans-Otto Pieggar strode toward the door, stopped briefly to bone-crunch Ambros’s hand, and warned once more, “Not one damn whisper of it. You’ll stand to make millions, remember that...”

## COMPRADOR

For the first time all this year, Ambros yielded to the desire for a strong whiskey. The hell with the ulcer, he decided—I've just heard something only a handful of people in the world could possibly know. I could ruin Braunsweig and wreck my own father. Myself, too, but I know how to make enough money to hide in the African veldt with Panzi forever. The dirty, greedy sonofabitch is going for me again. Be his patsy, his fall guy, his bagman.



Zurich was still gulping rain early the next morning. The digital clock on the wall facing Ambros displayed 07:04. He fingered a switch; the video screen flickered to life and the latest rates for the world's prime currencies were quoted in Hong Kong. Another flick of the switch and he now saw that the early rates posted by the Moscow Nvrodny Bank were somewhat higher than Hong Kong's. He might try a little arbitraging. He placed a call to Munich, another to Brussels, finally one to Amsterdam. A little too early. No action yet. The night traders had gone home, and their replacements were shooting the breeze with one another until Europe's and the frazzled American markets woke up. Picking up the morning's sports page, he searched for news of the Swiss women's skiing team, training in wintertime Chile.

Panzi. Missing her as if he'd suddenly lost a kneecap or his right hand.

She's lucky, thought Ambros, to be well out of his father's schemes. Family or not, Ambros didn't like getting used, and his back rode up as he thought about resigning. Panzi would resonate with bubbly pleasure if he quit the bank. She'd rag him without remorse to come live in Davos. Besides, he thought, there were still a few things worth watching from other places in this world, so why not watch them hand-in-hand with a woman

he was crazed about? He had half a mind to catch a plane for Santiago, surprise her in Portillo she was in training. Just might do it. He was tired, even bored with currency trading; day after day of it. Ranked among the top four or five money-traders in all Europe, he made mints for Braunsweig every year, and a fraction of a mint for himself. Still, the killing grind and the ever-present possibility of taking a financial bath had earned him an ulcer. Mostly, he neglected his ailment and the medics had been insisting he take a few months off.

Thinking now of their suggestion, and thinking of Panzi made him think of sex—strong sex, lovely lavish lush sex, a divine specialty of hers. If he were absent for a time, his father would be forced to take his nefarious shenanigans elsewhere, an ideal almost as appealing as joining Panzi

Cruising the currency markets in Paris, Geneva, Berlin, Vienna, Milan, Moscow, and a few others, he couldn't get Panzi off his veering mind. Nor did he wish to. What should he do? Defy the old man, bastard that he was? Damage certain valued clients? One thing for sure, he'd be certain to look after his much-loved mother, who had no time for the intricacies of money swapping but was a major force when having fun spending it.

*A blip!*

A message, then, as a window flashed on the monitor, notifying him of an e-mail message from a Panzi Molitor. He opened it: a love note, accompanied by a photo of her in a sauna wrapped in a towel though with her sumptuous breasts exposed.

*A photo taken by whom?*

That does it, he thought, half-gone with swelling desire. He'd phone for air reservations when taking a break from his console, where he now spotted a beckoning green light. A direct-wire call from Julius Baer & Company, an age-old private bank, across town, with a reputation for shrewd dealing. Pleasantries, a

raw joke, then the Baer trader asked Ambros to quote him the buy-rates for the American dollar against Chinese Yuan. Ambros quoted slightly below the current Hong Kong market.

“How many will you take?” the trader wanted to know.

“All you’ve got,” answered Ambros. Julius Baer & Company rarely dealt in sums over fifty million on a single trade in any currency.

“One-hundred eighty-million?”

“Sorry, I can’t go that high without an okay from the risk management boys.”

“What can you handle, Ambros?”

“A hundred is the tops.”

“Done at one-hundred.”

Ambros scribbled the trade on a ticket and handed it to a clerk across the trading desk for entry in the money-position ledger. In quick succession, he laid the dollars and Yuan off in Paris and Rotterdam. Lights were flashing rapidly now and he was immersed in another day with the Philistines.

What the hell would Julius Baer & Company be doing with a mitt-full of dollars, he wondered. Big players today. One-hundred eighty-million. A fool thing to do, even hinting they were carrying a larger than usual position. Likely, they weren’t; likely, they were fronting for an international client. Well, hell with it, he had bought and he had unloaded at a small profit.

“Schroeder Bank calling.”

“Morning,” replied Ambros.

“Quoting dollars today.” A worn joke by now.

Ambros hesitated, then quickly said, “I’ll buy dollars against South African rand,” disregarding his father’s warning.

“Rand!”

“Yes, rand, R-A-N-D,” spelled Ambros.

“I’ll get back. Five minutes, okay?”

“Sing or sink,” said Ambros, trying to gauge the Schroder trader’s appetite.

“Your quote?”

“Five-hundred to the rand.”

The Schroder trader whistled. “Size?”

“Four-hundred million.”

“You think I’m the Prime Minister of South Africa, you fucking comedian. You’re balmy. I’ll do a third of it maybe.”

“All or none,” said Ambros, a feeling wading into him.

“You’re done for. You’re nuts!”

The light disappeared.

Unable to contain himself, Ambros doubled over in peal of laughter. Hearing it, a dozen traders took notice, startled, trying to figure out what possessed one of the heirs to Braunsweig und Sohn. Ambros didn’t care. The world was going mad, so why shouldn’t he?

Ambros knew the news—*Braunsweig is buying dollars!*—would fan throughout the continental money markets where two-trillion in Euro equivalents were traded daily. And when word was out, the market for dollars would inch upward. A feint, of course, and he’d soon sell short the dollars Braunsweig und Sohn didn’t have. Classic and dangerous risk-taking, as were all short-trading operations. Up to a point, a very nearby point, he’d carry out his father’s black plans. He had other thoughts about his own.

He didn’t know all the shades of legal larceny that central bankers were capable of, but Ambros thought he knew something about America, where he’d spent three years off and on. Instinctively, he was certain that others might be making another historical error, and he had no intention of being burned by it.

Hitler had tried it in an earlier century, making Europe kneel to his whims. Now it was Moscow’s turn. Control, iron-fisted control, Genghis Khan style. The four winds were blowing, none

of them warm, and his father was sailing his kite on the wind that blew from the other side of the Urals. Who could trust Russians? They'd screw you to the ramparts any time a chance came their way, and send you a case of cheap vodka so you could drown your sorrows.

One thing he would do for certain: make a thorough review of his mother's portfolio to ensure its safety. Another light flickered on the board as Ambros wondered: *What's to become of my American friends?*



In Moscow, a bell pealed the hour at nine into the darkening night. A night no darker than the talk going on in the Kremlin's largest office, where Gregor Metzilov—the Kremlin's top planner for modernizing its outdated, underperforming economy—was coating his latest scheme with a certain glee. Unwise, he decided, to push any harder, risk a rebuke or even a flat turndown. Not with Piegear as good as netted, a big fish too, the biggest among the world's central banks.

Across the green baize table sat Kyril Nyurischev, immobile, pensive, all the clues of his feelings masked by an immobile face. Heavy eyebrows crawled like caterpillars over the frosted slate-gray eyes that sometimes put the coppery taste of pennies in Metzilov's mouth. A face etched with grainy ravines, deep, old, yet still hard. Hard enough to have sent thousands of Russian dissidents to an arctic gulag, or, if they were lucky, into the stillness of deep earth.

Metzilov shifted in his chair. He had posed several questions, and Nyurischev was taking his time answering. He rubbed his knobby nose as Nyurischev finally decided to speak.

“I would not underestimate the American response.”

“Most of their banks are closed. Their financial markets are a mere dribble. What can they do?”

“Open them.”

“Please, Comrade President, let me repeat. These Eurodollars were part of Europe’s credit structure. All we have to do is instruct our Russian banks to keep selling dollars short. We’re bound to make a huge win. It has the further advantage of discrediting America’s standing. A good thing for us.”

“This *shorting*, go over that for me again. Sounds foolish to me, selling what you don’t own. Gambling, that’s what it amounts to...”

Once again, Metzilov explained the trading device, long accepted in Western markets, for selling what you had never owned in the first place. Those who judged any currency, commodity, or security as overpriced would sell to investors who thought differently. If the seller was right, and prices eventually dropped, he stepped in and bought at the lower price, thereby making good on his earlier sale. Profits were often enormous, and the beauty was that you could arrange the whole business with very little money up front, though you did make a full and outright gift of your nervous system.

“Our nerve,” said Metzilov, his manner silky with persuasion, “is stronger by far than the U.S. dollar.”

“I say again and again, you are talking of gambling billions in Russian rubles!”

“Except,” argued Metzilov, “it is not a gamble. We will sell the dollars to European banks, forcing them to sell back to us later if necessary at some fraction of our cost. The difference we pocket. And the difference is what we’ll contribute to the Bank for International Settlements as part of our reserve pledge behind the new currency...in other words, we go in for free.”

Nyurischev, with his trademark chilled smile, answered, “Nothing is for free, Gregor.”

“We can put the blade to the Americans again. Unbearable pressure. I’m sure of it. Crack them for good, eh?”

“They could always abandon the Eurodollar.”

“And what little credit they have left would be forever ruined. Besides, their pride wouldn’t allow it.”

“I don’t see why European banks will cooperate in a venture like this.”

Metzilov made a small twisting motion with one hand. “They either go along or we threaten to shut off their oil. It’s quite simple, really.”

“And the British?”

“In time, Mr. President, we’ll deal with them,” said Metzilov, his face beaming with triumph.

“And the details of this plan. Have they been thoroughly reviewed with the Finance Ministry?”

“I’ve personally gone over every point with them.”

Nyurischev slid a small rectangular silver case from his coat pocket, opened it, and took out a brown Turkish cigarette. Tapping its end against the case, he waited for Metzilov to light it.

Then he asked, “What of their bullion?”

“Europe’s banking gold is still held in New York at the U.S.’s Federal Reserve Bank. Some of it is in Switzerland. The rest is kept in the custody of the various central banks in various capitals.”

“How will it be moved to Russia, then?”

“That’s stage two. Once the dollar is flushed out of Europe’s system, the *last* financial link with America will be broken. Then we and the Chinese can squeeze Europe for its bullion. A great battle won without firing a shot.”

“There must be some risk to it,” said Nyurischev, breathing a cloud of smoke across the table.

“No one says where it is. We’ve gone over it and over it. Though I will admit I understand your concern...”

Metzilov left his reply hanging in mid-air. A subtle dig was enough. Nyurischev was a practiced survivor. He wouldn’t care to be on the wrong side of a good thing.

“Tell this Piegar we insist on one-third representation at BIS. For the time being, the European bullion can remain where it is. But we reserve the right to open that question in the future.”

“And the operations against the dollar?”

“Go ahead, but you’d better be right. Altogether right. Any losses and it’s your hide. I’ll want a letter from you that I’ve never been informed of what you’re recommending. Make the letter to the Finance Ministry, but I’m to have the only copy.”

A loop formed in one corner of Metzilov’s mouth. Smiling, he gratefully replied, “It will be a grand coup, I assure you, Mr. President. Another shining hour for Russia.”

Nyurischev’s nod was mere. Still uncertain about the mechanics of the plan, even the need for it, he decided to approve it anyway. Anything that spelled more trouble for the Americans was bound to be greeted eagerly by the Federal Assembly—the Duma.

Shuffling some papers together, Metzilov was about to arise from his chair when Nyurischev stilled him. “I’m not through yet.” The caterpillars over his eyes flattened into a furry line. “These grain-production reports. The shortages are unacceptable.”

“It’s the weather, Mr. President. The rainfall shortage. We’ve been unable to divert sufficient irrigation water from the Volga and Dnieper—”

“What are you doing about it? Who are you coordinating the problem with? And when do I see options and solutions?”

“The army has first priority on the necessary mat—”

“Get more materials.”

“We’d have to purchase them abroad.”

“Do it.”

“Perhaps after we complete the dollar operation—”

“You are head of State Central Planning, Metzilov. Get moving. Our citizens aren’t bargaining for hungry winters every year.”

His wind slipping, Metzilov answered, “We can buy grain from Australia or Canada, perhaps the Argentine. It all depends on the dollar operation—”

“You will drop everything until the grain problem is settled,” warned Nyurischev.

“I will assess it again immediately.”

“Good,” said the glowering Nyurischev, rising now. “Your future depends on it.” Then he turned and limped toward the door that led to his private office.

Gregor Metzilov sank back into his chair. Wiping the corn-colored hair off his troubled brow, he reconsidered his position. Hard to gauge Nyurischev’s true support for gutting the dollar, cutting away the last of that cancer from Europe’s financial system. This grain business was a problem that might require hellish amounts of credit. Or rain. Everything else is going so smoothly, why in hell won’t it rain on time?

So far, he had planned everything with immense care. His arguments were the telling ones that had always counted: step by step, grab the vital unprotected resources to the south. America? A worry? No, she would never fight thousands of miles from her shores again. Not after the bloodshed and cost of Iraq and Afghanistan, and with a public objecting so vigorously to any more offshore military forays. Besides, the withering America needed her army at home to quell unrest. Nor could her Indian Ocean navy pose any sustained threat. Navies can’t fight armies; not ashore they can’t, not hundreds of miles inland.

“How, comrades, how...” he had argued, time and again, to the Kremlin doubters.

He’d been heard, then heard again when laying out his plan for disabling the American banking system. Making utter fools of the Wall Streeters had taken nothing more than sowing discord among the OPEC cartel members, pitting them against one another, causing a modest price war. When oil prices fell, but the dollar plummeted faster and deeper, the OPEC nations and other third-worlders had paid off their American credits for pennies on the dollar. It had decimated the U.S. banks. And when forty crack Russian divisions had rolled into Iran, then Saudi afterward, no one was there to stop them. Oil shipments from the mid-east declined by half, and, in a swoop, Russia, with its huge petro reserves, jacked up the price to twice its former level. Money flows almost stopped. The dollar got killed in the process, and gold again became king.

Metzilov knew it for his finest moment, his most brilliant coup, winning loudest praise from his confreres and promises of higher promotion when the time was right.

At a distance, when possible, he had studied the crafty methods of the Shang-Magan. Of how the weight of this world was swung by those controlling its truest wealth—the raw materials, the stuff of industry that kept machines humming and wheels turning. Russia had armies to secure her needs. The Magans had no armies, only their cunning trading tricks.

Soon, Metzilov reminded himself, he’d have to supply Monte Carlo with another report of some sort, one craftily and carefully phrased. A Russian specialty. Monte Carlo was his secret, a most profitable secret that, if revealed, could cost him his balls, more likely his life.

Rain, you whore, he thought.

Nyurischev wants grain, does he? What better way to finance it than with the bullion in Europe’s bank vaults? No gold, no oil,

## COMPRADOR

no gas, no anything. But it was time now to do some raining on Hans-Otto Piegär, cooling his heels at the Metropole across Red Square, for the past four hours. A lesson for the Swiss banker, as to who ranked whom these days.

## Washington, D.C.

**G**roggy after all the hopscotch flying, needing a shave, Culhane's attitude toward niceties was subzero and dropping. Tired, too, of the months of stonewalling. He wouldn't beg, though. Burn maybe, as now, but damned if he'd beg from this crowd of political-hackers and jobbers.

Nearly missing a step, he followed the blue-uniformed guard up the bluer-carpeted stairs into the West Wing. Then the guard pointed and stepped away as Culhane entered an anteroom that led to the Oval Office.

Entering, going directly over to Halburton, he shook his hand, speaking a few pleasantries. Then he was re-introduced to Joshua Squires, whom he had met before but couldn't remember where.

One glance at the complacently superior look on Squires's face, the Racquet Club tie and Sulka shirt, the dyed hair and unsteady eyes, and Culhane's misgivings about the man were confirmed. A Rearden man, the New Yorker's masquerading doll, who had been artfully manipulated into Washington's hierarchy through sheer politics. A payoff, thought Culhane, probably to Rearden himself.

"You're very good to come all this distance," said the President quietly.

"With no more direct flights, you can see a lot of country."

"Very inconvenient, I hear."

"Tiresome, anyway," said Culhane, who continued to study Squires. A Back Bay fop, he decided, and probably with watermelon juice for blood. Squires looked away.

Halburton moved closer, seating himself in an Eames chair facing the other two men as they also sat down on a facing couch. "I was

discussing a situation with Secretary Squires when you arrived. I asked him to stay on for a few minutes”

“I’d prefer discussing my business in private,” said Culhane, observing Squires clench at the very direct reply.

“Yes, but first let’s clear up this misunderstanding over the gold you claim is owed.”

“Misunderstanding? Zaire shipped cobalt for this government’s account and the terms were for gold and nothing but gold. I had to pay them when you wouldn’t.”

“Yes, I know, and perhaps Secretary Squires can explain our problem.”

Both men looked at Squires, who fidgeted, then began, “Under the Emergency Powers Act, the President is lawfully empowered to suspend any contract that runs counter to the national interest...it was that same act that enabled us to establish the Gold Commission to determine whether our currency should once again be backed with gold specie. Congress agreed to go along only if all further transactions in gold were stopped pending the findings of the Commission. “

Culhane swiveled his eyes from Squires to Halburton, wondering which of them was the greater fraud. Thinking: *You sons of bitches ought to hang for a while, then be shot at first light.*

Instead, he insisted, “This government has a gold obligation to me. Period. It is a lawful contract.”

“The Treasury’s lawyers don’t consider it binding,” said Squires, offended by the Californian, trying to guess exactly why he was here anyway.

“Without first advising me or the government of Zaire?” asked Culhane of Halburton.

“An oversight. You’ll remember that the White House was in transition then. After the...well...untimely death of President Frame. “

“The government broke its word. Hardly an oversight, is it?”

“There was no choice in the matter, I assure you,” said Halburton, testing, still wary, still recalling the words of Joost Van Slyke.

“Welshing is always a choice,” countered Culhane.

Halburton’s back arched. He was saved from a reply as Squires said: “You can always file an action in the Court of Claims.”

“I haven’t got five years to dawdle away.”

“Well now, that’s your problem, isn’t it?” replied the sullen Squires.

Culhane covered Squires with a grapeshot look. “You may become my problem.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Squires, unnerved by Culhane’s stare.

“Just that I’ve every intention of collecting what I’m owed. Treasury lawyers or not.”

“Not very quickly you won’t, but then, you could always accept cash and be done with it.”

“After you and that motley crowd of Chicagoans destroyed our currency. Not very likely, Squires.”

“All right ... all right,” said Halburton nervously, standing up, trying to dampen the tension. “Perhaps, Mr. Secretary, you should leave us now.”

With Squires gone, Culhane asked, “Am I supposed to accept that drivel? Is that why I’m here?”

“I’d say you have a case, since the Pentagon has the cobalt. I do agree, though, it would take years in court—”

“Sorry, Halburton. That whole trading arrangement was done through the back door so the Russians wouldn’t get wind of it. I don’t need written contracts, and I had the word of the Pentagon. It was confirmed on the phone by the man you replaced.”

“Quite possibly you did. But this is now, isn’t it?”

“You’re reneging again, is that it?”

“I’d like to explore a possible solution.” Halburton rubbed his palms together, searching for a place to begin. Then he told Culhane of Squires’s report of a week earlier about the Bank for International Settlements’ drastic ruling on the dollar, finishing with, “It’s extreme-

ly confidential, what I'm telling you...however, have you an opinion on this?"

"No, I don't have one."

"Try a guess, then."

"Someone's pulling the chain tighter, forcing this country into isolation."

"Who besides Russia? You must have access to—"

"I'd guess the European banks are involved somehow," said Culhane somewhat idly, unwilling to say more.

"You think they can make it stick?"

"Ask Squires and his banking geniuses. They pumped a couple of trillion dollars into Europe's money pool. Europe's just now returning the favor."

"How we got into such a mess, I don't know."

"Time and again, Washington's been warned about reckless spending, about trade wars that take place behind our back. I believe you once served on the U.S. Trade Commission, so you must have seen it coming."

"Did you, Mr. Culhane?"

"Put it this way—I *thought* I went into gold. Not dollars. Only a fool trades in dollars."

"I'm told you know a great deal about commodities. Grain, particularly."

"I'm a trader. Or *was*."

"Maybe we can arrange a bargain, then," said Halburton, very cautiously, before adding, "I realize I wasn't expected to have this job, but I've got it, and I don't mind admitting I need help."

Culhane's attention sharpened. "Is that why you've got a lightweight like Squires around?"

"He was already here. And I can't get rid of him without offending the Reardens and the New York congressional delegation. Nor can I readily find a replacement."

"Why are you telling me this?"

“So you’ll believe me when I say no gold can be released until the question of a new currency is decided. I’ve been trying to get the Currency Reform Act out of Rearden’s Senate committee for weeks now. Throwing Squires out won’t solve anything.”

“That’s your fight, not mine.”

“Oh, I beg to differ. I think it’s yours too. Your interests and mine are quite parallel.”

“You mentioned a solution of some sort.” Culhane stretched, his muscles still aching after zigzagging across-country from Los Angeles, making seven stops. He needed a shower, a shave, and some uninterrupted sleep. Mostly, though, he wanted to hear Halburton’s offer.

Halburton pointed over to two thick volumes lying on his desk. “I read those reports you prepared for the government three years ago. Also, the speech you gave before the Club of Rome . . . you predicted it all, mostly.”

“It made its loudest noise, when it hit the ash can.”

“Just so,” said Halburton softly. “In your report you stated that eighty percent of America’s minerals must be imported.”

“Less now. You have forty-eight million people unemployed, and half the usual rate of industrial activity.”

Halburton tapped his reading glasses on the desk in a series of impatient clicks. Coming out of his chair again, he said, “How long would it take to remedy the nation’s stockpile program?”

“You’re short platinum, manganese, chrome, antimony, vanadium. Short across the board, I’d guess. You’d have to barter for everything unless you use gold. Hard to bring off...damn near impossible.”

Pacing, Halburton turned around, stopping suddenly. His face went taut, as thin white splotches appeared around his mouth. “Some of our military are threatening war without the approval of Congress or me. They’re afraid we’re getting cut off from our allies, isolated. They want to act while they can.”

“If you try that sort of muscle, you’ll lose. In the shape we’re in, you’re a powder-puff. I’d guess our military couldn’t go longer than a month before running out of supplies.”

“I’m determined to avoid war,” said Halburton. “All war—including the next civil war this country is headed for if we can’t soon find solutions. That would spell the end, the end of it for us, the end of democracy, our liberties, everything we’ve stood for. Brother killing brother again just to eat, survive. The socialists are waiting in the wings to seize control, even without an election. That’s why I must keep the army primed and ready...but not too ready, if you see my meaning.”

“Oh, yes. I see it, all right.”

Abruptly, Halburton stopped in the middle of the room, looked up somewhere on the ceiling, and said, “I’ll be back...and remember, this is *your* country too!”

Culhane surveyed the empty room. It seemed like some worn-out mausoleum. A man could bury himself in here, he thought, and under problems he couldn’t really see, touch, or even smell. How had any of them ever operated a nation while locked inside this place? A place where you could play with yourself, or where Kennedy supposedly played with his girls, but always you were fenced out from ordinary life, and insulated by toadying assistants telling you what they thought you wanted to hear.

Halburton is wrong about this being *my* country, he thought. One’s country, any country, is an accident of birth. Some place that stamps you with its citizenship, gives you a number, regales you with its myths. Taxes you to the grave and beyond, and steals whatever it can’t tax.

Six times now, he’d been in this room, never once really understanding any of its occupants. The place needed sprucing up, too; the blue-and-gold carpet was coming apart around its edges; a brown stain shaped like Florida marred one wall; the curtains were faded and the windows smudged.

Still, the remains of his fortune were in the clutches of this very house. And, beyond a doubt, he knew his trading leverage was nil. So if Halburton's got a deal to offer, why is he padding around on cat's feet?

Coming back through the door, Halburton went to the windows overlooking the Rose Garden. Near the windows a door was ajar, admitting air thick with humidity.

"Would you clarify something for me?"

"I don't know, try me," Culhane said.

"I've been told you helped engineer the OPEC oil embargo against America."

Culhane let the statement hang as he studied Halburton very closely, hoping to detect a reaction no matter his reply. "It's the Russians who call those shots now."

"You did it, though. You were said to be a large-scale speculator who stood to profit from the OPEC price gouging."

"I've no comment on it, Halburton. I value privacy and I never discuss my business operations with outsiders."

"Dammit, man, I'm the president of this nation."

"I know, and you have my pity..."

"Well, it is right to say you had a hand in private talks with the Middle-East countries about forming their own trading bloc? Joining the Arabs and Israel into one sphere?"

"Something like it," Culhane said. "It went off the tracks when this government, along with Europe and Japan, got scared and poked their long noses where they didn't belong." He remembered it all quite clearly. Bitterly, too. We could've fixed anything that needed fixing but, as usual, government knows best till everything crashes around everyone else's head."

"Who do you mean by *we*?"

"The Shan-, an organization I belong to...or did..."

"A matter of opinion, I'd say as to who and how the mistakes were made."

“You think so? Here’s a matter of fact, then—we almost had a first-rate deal glued together. One that would have settled old scores and made for a sparkling future. Instead, you got another Sinai war and no oil for a while.”

“You really think governments, this one anyway, sidetracked you?”

“They were afraid. Washington thought it would lose Israel as a front-line ally...dumb, really stupid, but there it is.”

“Afraid of what?”

“None of you wanted several hundred million people forged into a new world power . . . not one with all that oil, and with lands that could be made arable, and with the real possibility of becoming industrialized, like Japan or China. This government feared a new trading bloc, too, one bigger than, say, Europe. “

“I see.”

“I doubt if you do. But your problem isn’t what I think or don’t think, is it?”

“In a way it is.”

“Why?”

“I need you here in Washington to restore the strategic stockpile reserves. Help me get the materials this country needs to survive and I’ll sign an Administrative Order authorizing your gold payment when the time is right.”

“You really expect me to get waltzed twice?”

“Perhaps you don’t have the stomach for the fight...the only fight making any sense at all these days.”

“I fight alongside people I trust. Unfortunately, that doesn’t include most governments.”

“Why not try me?”

*What’s he really asking me for?* To bail him out, and with what? Violin music? I’d need the whole Magan system, the Monte Carlo Inspectorate, all of it, to even have half a chance. Culhane lit a Honduran #7 panatela, thinking more, trying to figure out the other side of Halburton’s offer.

“I might try you, if you try me with the nine tons,” he told Halburton through a bent ring of smoke.

“I can’t go against Congress. When the climate changes, I will sign a release. You’ve my word on it.”

“I’m afraid you’re whistling. It’d take a miracle to bring it—”

“Those speeches you gave”—Halburton pointed over at his desk again—“I’ve copies of them. Chamber of Commerce and so forth. You said it could be done. I read them.”

“That was *then*.”

“Nine tons of gold, Culhane. Anyone understands those numbers. Just help me and I’ll do the same for you. Tell me, what would someone need to even attempt what I’m asking? The stockpile.”

Culhane decided to risk some truth on him. “A very good map of the unknown. A blue-ribbon method of putting key information together. A crack staff. Credit or a freeing up of sufficient U.S. gold to trade with.” Culhane aimed another stream of smoke toward the fireplace. “And you’d need very, very good dice. In the end, on the last roll, everything comes up your way. And you never know when it’s coming. Maybe it’s our turn for the win and we don’t know it. Maybe not. The odds say *not*.”

“Are you a defeatist?”

“Only when I’m in Washington.”

“And if there is no U.S. gold to trade with?”

“Probably impossible without it. I don’t know. What else is there, certainly not dollars. You only need gold for certain entry transactions...after that, you can trade with any number of commodities.”

“I’ll keep my promise,” repeated Halburton, “if you’ll get behind me on this. I come from a place where your word and handshake is all it ever takes.”

“Me. Too. Still, I don’t find Washington’s promises very reliable. Not at all, in fact.”

Halburton went to his desk and wrote a note. Afterward, he walked over to Culhane, offering his hand and saying, “Think it over.

The gold is temporarily impounded, pending an audit of the nation's gold inventory."

"When is that to happen?"

"It's up to Treasury."

"Who oversees them? You?"

"Me."

"Will you see to it? Make it happen?"

"I won't be going out to Fort Knox, if that's your question."

Culhane examined the man's lined, weathered face. Halburton's mouth nervously twitched, as if he were about to spit out something distasteful. His eyes and the flesh around them were hounded, and his handshake was given with spare strength. He looked frail, and timid as a defrocked bishop.

"Now, let me ask you one," said Culhane. "Is it true the Russians have offered to let up, if you'll agree to dismantle the entire U.S. missile capability?"

Halburton tensed again, seemed almost ready to shudder, saying, "That's a corner we can't get backed into, and why our military is so frightened. The purest sort of extortion. And where did you get that information?"

"I get or I used to get a great deal of information from many places. Information is what I deal in, and act on. I could tell you things you wish I didn't know. And I wish I didn't, either."

"What information is that?"

"I'd rather not."

"I can take it. Whatever you've got, I can take it."

"All right, just don't get upset."

"Well..."

"Here's an example. Your daughter is having an affair with your secretary of state. Someone I'd replace if I were you. He's a nitwit."

"How...how did you...where did you hear that!"

"I heard it. That's all I'll say. Didn't you know about it?"

"I know. I wonder how many others know."

“As I said, it’s only an example. I’ve information pipelines that’re not available to many people. Very few, in fact.”

“Are you meaning to blackmail me?”

“I’ve a lot of personal faults, Halburton, but I’m not a criminal.”

“Will I hear from you soon as to whether you’ll come to Washington?” said Halburton.

“I’ve got a very ill wife. But, yes, you’ll hear from me.” Culhane moved toward the door. “Maybe you should try the New York Corporation.”

“No. That wouldn’t do at all.”

“Who knows? I hear they at least have options on certain—”

“No. I’ve enough Rearden problems at present.”

When the door closed behind Culhane, Halburton leaned against the back of his desk chair. He felt cheapened somehow. Culhane is entitled to his fair due, and we’re doing him out of it. A false bargain I’ve offered, and therefore one with no standing whatsoever. Yet I need to noose him. To regain nine tons of gold most men would cannibalize their own mothers, commit treason, sell out their most sacred beliefs.

*First, trust him. Tell him everything important. Drive him, push him as if you were all the elephants in Africa. You will see...*

Halburton remembered Van Slyke’s words exactly. Asking questions, then, of Van Slyke, and for other references, and cautioned to stay calm, keep silent. Culhane was nobody to trifle with. And of the laws against extortion and conspiracy to defraud, the towering Dutchman had only told him, and rightly so, “A President must turn that coin over for himself.”

Coin. The very word hoisted Halburton’s worries a notch higher. Quite aware, he was, that the U.S. Government had no reliable count of how much gold it really held, free and clear. Still, greatly he needed a man who could navigate unknown waters. Do things under the radar, stay out of the limelight and deal...deal...deal. The national strategic stockpiles were in a shambles.

## COMPRADOR

With so many of Wall Street's institutions shuttered, few, other than the Rearden crowd, seemed to know how to do pull the oar on a globe-girdling scale.

And, quickly Halburton recollected, it was Van Slyke who had strictly admonished: "*Stay clear of those New Yorkers. When things get thick, they'll run on you.*" And they had, too, when the U.S. banks went over the abyss for the second time within a decade. The moral imperative no longer held, and the idea that any bank was too big to fail hadn't stood up.

At moments like this he was left to wonder how long he could stand up himself? What would it take to corral Culhane? More than the gold he was owed? A nearly fault-free operator, that's what Van Slyke had said of the Californian.

A tough talker anyway.

## Chicago

**F**ourteen hours and two flight delays later, Culhane arrived at O'Hare in Chicago. His suit hung on him like a mussed blanket. He'd slept on a bench at LaGuardia, then on the tight-seated American Airlines 787 operated, as were all commercial flights, by the Air Force. All he'd had to eat was a bowl of greasy chicken soup, some tea, and a hardtack biscuit.

The terminal tunnels were empty, the illumination intermittent and bony due to energy cutbacks. Billboards on the walls were stained with graffiti. One bit of scrawl, *Jesus Saves*, had been amended to *Jesus Sucks*.

Going through two security checks, Culhane found no coffee shop open, no newsstand, not even a bar. At the counter for check-in to Los Angeles, a listless agent told him to count on a four-hour delay. And, yes, all airport hotels were shut, had been for months now. That was it. You flew the Air Force version of commercial aviation or you didn't fly. He found a bank of empty seats and flopped out on three of them.

Culhane groaned inwardly at the folly of it all. Only a few years ago, when the country was bailing itself out of the worst trouble since the Thirties, he had pleaded with Washington to stop it. Stop the drunken spending, quit squandering the nation's assets, and please Christ put the precious strategic stockpiles right for a change.

Polite and distant smiles from that crowd of Leftists. They knew everything.

And begged every top industrialist he knew to look down the line, over the horizon, fix on the future sensibly when it came to accumulating the raw materials needed to keep operating. Few did.

## COMPRADOR

Once Washington got into the act, after shortages abounded, with bureaucrats sniveling and delaying, he would have needed to pray up a long litany with the Council of Six as to why Washington was falling out of its tree again. So he hadn't pushed it, and should have, when the chance was dancing right there in his hands. How you learn, always the hard way, he thought, as the sin of omission scolded deep inside his ear.

He sorely missed the Gulfstream VI that used to run him anywhere in the world on a moment's notice. To Chicago even, once a month, to talk with his local grain traders, and attend the Board of Trade meetings as a governor. Closed. Hard to believe the greatest trading market in the world was boarded up now. He missed the boisterous hollering of the trading floor, all the friendly cursing, elbowing, even mild hysteria as the brokers traded billions of dollars in futures contracts each day. Nothing had ever excited him more; neither winning ocean races with *Eastern Star*, nor his horses capturing the big purses in California, New York, or France. Now the horses and the yacht were gone, just like the Board of Trade.

Halburton had asked for a *guess as* to who, besides the Russians, was behind the operation to finish the dollar off. Seven, no, eight months earlier, Culhane had seen a report done up by the Monte Carlo Inspectorate. Very revealing, too, as it detailed how Moscow, using third-party agents, some of them in the higher circles of American banks, had favorably influenced massive loans to Romania, Poland, Nigeria, Argentina, Mexico, and other wanting countries. And how the Russians were busy plotting stronger strangleholds on those same countries, in turn forcing loan defaults and leaving the banks with huge losses.

Clever maneuvering from the Moscow sidelines—not a shot fired, none necessary—the trap working perfectly.

China was in the mix, too. Not as apparent as Moscow, but there somewhere in the shadows pulling strings, meddling about. They'd been the largest creditor of America, taking brutal losses when inflation had blitzed the dollar's value. They still smarted. Who

wouldn't? Anger was everywhere, directed especially toward Washington.

Is Halburton naive enough to think he can jump-start the economy by playing with the strategic stockpiling program? Be like catching Niagara Falls in a paper cup. Yet Halburton must act. With a lady's maid like Squires at his side? No help there, and "no gold for you unless and until you play my game" is what he had implied.

The obscure chalk-lines of an idea worked their way into the corners of his mind. There is always a way. *Always*.

Glimmers of thought, then, about the Strait of Hormuz, that passageway of water formed like a liquid question mark, through which a quarter of the world's oil moved every day. Inside, his pulses ticked away. Knowing the signals by now, suspecting later on they might tick even louder and with a more coherent pattern. Cause some incredible mess, he thought—turn the world's lights out for a while. Would Halburton have the guts to do it? Unlikely.

He rolled over, trying to find a comfortable position on the iron-hard seats.

Hungry, God, yes he was hungry all right. But he'd been hungry before many times when a youth in Honolulu, so he stopped thinking about it.

World oil supplies: the prime lever, wasn't it? Oil and grain. "Always trade for the main lever" was what Ken-chou Ming had taught him in Hong Kong those many years ago. And beautiful honey-skinned Jia and her brother, Richard, who were in Shanghai now and probably knew the gospel of survival by heart.

He had to get his gold somehow; impossible to begin again without it. A haze overtook him. His head sunk away, almost as if he'd been decked by a sucker punch.

## NEW YORK

An eyeful, moving gracefully as a swan.

Clay Flickinger saw Andrea Warren crossing Fifty-Eighth Street; something, no matter how small, would always move in him whenever he observed her. Much like her mother: classic breeding, nicely educated, a clever way of winning confidences from others. Perhaps, it was cleverness, perhaps it was because they thought her genuine, trustworthy.

He had once heard of a comment made by the Duke of Abruzzi at a pigeon shoot years before in Seville: “That Andrea, she’s the finest woman wing-shot in America and got the best balls I’ve seen—thank God they’re on her chest!” A chorus of laughter from the other gunners, who had stood impressed as Andrea Warren wiped-the-eye of every one of them; she had shot seventy birds inside the ring without a miss, besting some of Spain’s finest wing-shooters.

No denying she was frivolous, even wayward at times, and maybe it was the residue of her bluish blood. Her mother could be like that, yet Flickinger didn’t care just then to think about Andrea’s mother, or her father either.

Andrea wore sky-blue silks under a wide-brimmed straw hat with a flowery scarf tied around it. A breeze molded the dress against her breasts and swirled the filmy material around her long-striding legs. He watched her sure glide, how she walked in a straight line, head high, moving so lithely.

Andrea Warren came closer, smiling. Flickinger stood up, answering her with his own smile, which needed more mouth and less chin.

“Clay, oh, you!” Flying the last few steps, she took both his arms in her hands, pressed, then hooked her arms around Flickinger’s rigid

neck. The straw hat tilted up, and he could see the canary hair feathering across her brow and, underneath, the bright green eyes.

“You look like an ad for danger.”

“I’ll do the flirting here, thank you,” Andrea said, cutting another wide smile. Releasing him, she went on, “What brings you to Gomorrah? Awful, isn’t it?” Her voice was honeysuckled, though quite deep for a woman.

“Been over a year now. How’s your mother?”

“She’s in Florence mooching off the Count Valfiore. She just couldn’t take it here anymore.” Andrea’s smile vanished. She found it slightly embarrassing to discuss her mother, especially with Clay Flickinger.

“So,” Flickinger said, “tell me what goes on with you. Sit, shall we?”

“Living my life in the closet, like everyone else. One of the nouveau poor. There’s scuttlebutt the *Times-Herald* is thinking of closing down the New York bureau. Food lines, the UN gone, crime waves—all that stuff isn’t fresh enough to print anymore. That’s what goes on with me. And you?”

“I’ll come to that, presently.” He might as well tell her now. “The *Times-Herald* will be closing its bureau here.”

“God! If that doesn’t ring the last bell. I don’t want to seem rude, but is this meeting going to take long?”

“I doubt it. Why?”

“Someone in the office lifted my food coupons. Right from my purse! I have to sign a thing at the Control Board to get replacements.”

No trivial matter, but she wasn’t whining about it, and Flickinger liked that side of her. “A situation’s breaking in Washington that’s tailor-made for you.”

“Move there again? Uh-uh. Nope.”

“Why not? We might land you a slot with another newspaper. What’s to hold you here?”

“A nice sportswriter I know who just lost his job. That’s all...it’s all so damn depressing. Everything in such a goddamn shambles, isn’t it? You’d think the government could do something.” Andrea placed a thumbnail against the edge of her teeth, looking past Flickinger to a strolling police officer, staying silent.

“That Tim Rearden business still got you corkscrewed? Is that it?”

“Done and gone years ago.”

“Still got your father’s...I mean your apartment in Georgetown?”

“The last tenants beat me out of three months’ rent. State Department people! Can you believe it? Can you!”

Flickinger smiled sparingly. “Teach you not to consort with the enemy.”

“Yeah. Tell it to the mayor, if you can find her. And why me in Washington?”

“Does the name Rushton Culhane mean anything to you?” Her supple animal presence aroused him, and Flickinger shifted sideways on the bench; he couldn’t help it.

“From California? We did a piece on him once, I think. Big deal speculator, right? Married an actress, as I recall.”

“The same, yes. Halburton signed him on as an adviser to run the strategic stockpile program.”

“What’s that? Materials and stuff?” She frowned, a thin furrow showing over her nose.

“Yes, exactly. The country requires thirty-six types for industry to even yawn. We produce only eight.”

“And how do you get involved?” Andrea asked directly. An ingrained journalistic habit by now, but still a nervy question.

“I’m to be Culhane’s batman,” Flickinger replied dourly, “run errands and smooth the way for him inside the government.”

“How am I supposed to fit in?” asked Andrea, hoping she didn’t.

“Same sort of thing. Just like drawing up those profiles on the UN-ers. Start interviewing Culhane, develop him as a news source, getting as close as you can.”

“Clay, I don’t think this is my gig. Not at all. Really I don’t.” The large straw hat partly hid the perplexed look on Andrea’s face, but Flickinger caught it anyway, and could tell more from the tone of her voice.

Flickinger’s thin arrogant face hardened. “Your New York bureau closes, then where’ll you be?”

“Up shitto creek,” answered Andrea stiffly, “and of course you know it.”

“So let’s get down to it. Here’s some background material on Culhane,” said Flickinger, pointing to a blue vinyl folio on the bench. “Some of it’s public, some’s not.”

“Well, *there*,” said Andrea, “looks like quite a lot,” eyeing the thick accordion-like folder. “Is he one-legged? Anything juicy?”

Christ, how fast they change. Threaten their security and then it’s all milk to the puppy. With no real need to cull his memory, he answered her with: “Born illegitimately in Honolulu in 1973. His mother came from North Dakota, and she tramped around Honolulu as a prostitute. We don’t know about the father, could’ve been anyone, of course. He was raised for a time in an orphanage, later on ran off to sea and he showed up in Hong Kong, where a Chinese family, name of Ming, taught him a thing or two about trading in world markets...he came back to America, starts out in the grain business, wheat and corn, eventually marries a middling-to-good Norwegian actress. Three children, I think, but one died somehow. A real gee-whizzer, they say. Speaks five languages, and reputedly is a member of the Shang-Magan. They say that’s the largest trading club in the world. Maybe it is. It’s very secretive in some ways. We’ve never penetrated it. Culhane’s made and lost the kind of money I never heard of before. Racing stables, jets, even his own ocean-going schooner. Somehow he had stayed clear of the bored-and-beautiful set. Matter of fact, he’s anonymously financed fifty or sixty Hawaiian orphans through college every year and supported a starving tribe in the Sudan...those are the short and cracked ribs of Culhane’s life. There’s more in the file.”

## COMPRADOR

“Yachts and racehorses, is it? Interesting,” said Andrea, thinking that she’d have to reread the *Times-Herald* article. “What’s his...his personal signature like?”

“Very unpredictable, they say. We don’t know much. We need to get him profiled. Attractive chap, I’m told.”

“You’re the one who’s going to be working with him. Why do you need me?”

“Better that way, that’s all. We like added opinions, the female view of life. It’s standard procedure.”

With one large capable hand, Andrea picked up the blue folio, moving it to her lap. She could feel the jaws of something or other slowly closing. She was going to need a livelihood. Flickinger had been of momentous help in the past, giving her leads on stories, some of them prizewinners. Washington, though. She didn’t like Washington anymore. She liked her sportswriter friend, though he was next to broke. The oath she wanted to utter stayed put behind her generous mouth.

“Am I supposed to spy on this man?”

“Just learn him, and tell us.”

“Supposing, I can’t? Supposing he ignores me.”

Flickinger smiled. “Just waft a few of those spectacular Warren pheromones about. They seem to work wonders.”

“I could take that as an insult. I’m not easy trade, Clay.”

“Don’t bridle, Andrea. This isn’t a tough job and the money is excellent.”

“To be a snitch? That’s what it sounds like.”

“You’re a journalist. Half of your writings are snitching on some thing or somebody. We need to know what Culhane’s up to. Inside and out. It’s an opportunity to serve your country, besides, and at a harrowing time. I’ll be close to him, but not close enough on some things that we need to know. Now, can we expect a yes?”

“Are you asking me to...well, you know...bed this dude? Is that what this is about?”

“You decide.”

“Clay, I mean really. Come on!”

“These are murky, mucky times, Andrea. Where are you if you lose your job? And you will. We can protect you in many useful ways. Who else can or will?”

He’s right, she thought. A pink slip was never more than a day away, even though she had had excellent annual performance reviews. “When does all this happen?”

“Next week is sufficient.”

“Oh, c’mon! What about my clothes and all the other—”

With a dismissive gesture, he said, “It might be healthy to get out of New York.”

Flickinger pointed up to a large belch of smoke staining the sky. They were burning refuse over on Park Avenue, and the drifting odor smelled faintly of fish oil. Andrea’s nose wrinkled as she stood up, taking another look at Flickinger’s wiry narrow body, short gray hair, gray suit, almost gray eyes. Neutral gray, she thought, the perfect human advertisement if you were selling very old chrome. She said nothing more, just regarded him coolly, then got up and walked away with that walk that better poetry sings about.

He sat there quietly for several minutes, estimating how to find his way back to LaGuardia. Taxis were scarce and buses never went out there anymore. A caravan of Salvation Army trucks circled through Sherman Square, coming to a stop near the Plaza Hotel. Soon, the noon-hour feeding of the worn and weary would begin—hot soup in exchange for a cold food coupon. Five police officers formed up in a rank on the corner; they wore white helmets, and batons dangled from their wrists for controlling the often unruly crowds.

Flickinger wondered about Andrea Warren. Was she pretending she didn’t know, just keeping close enough to him to ask for the occasional favor, like a word or two with the higher-ups at the Herald Tribune, and let the past be the past, lie dormant on its thin layer of dust? The one killing had barely escaped the looking-glass as it was. Two would be unthinkable. Then there was her mother, an old fling, a woman with her own history: redoubtable, too, and a resilient bird

## COMPRADOR

when she had to be. A survivor of the first rank. After her husband had been disposed of, she could've had a decent job at the agency but instead had chosen the high-life, chasing after wealthy men. Hadn't found one, however, who would chase after her. Probably too many men of the past in her scrapbook for another man's comfort.

Still a looker, a genuine neck-twister. He'd happened into her here in New York a year ago, bought her a drink at the St. Regis, and would've taken her upstairs had she been so inclined.

Old times die hard sometimes; he well recalled the days in Berlin and Switzerland. Sexual napalm, for a few months anyway.

Culhane. Still a continent's distance away and the son of a bitch was already a nuisance, reflected Flickinger, looking around two times, seeing nothing unusual, then suppressing a cough brought on by another cloud of hovering Park Avenue smoke.

People were streaming into the streets, coming out of the high-rises on their way to the soup kitchens. Idling alone on a park bench, he suspected he would be noticed; an event that never boded well for a man, who made it a point to blend into life's shadows.

## Bel Air

Anyone lucky enough to be invited to the Firehouse Club, male or female, didn't quickly forget all the fun to be had. Some remarked that it was the closest thing to a salon that existed in Southern California. Inspired talk was encouraged, notions of the bizarre were explored, and the gatherings themselves were intended to be fun, exhilarating fun, and somehow the Culhane pool house seemed the ideal hangout for the get-togethers held every month. Roomy, comfortable, no matter where you sat, or lay down in the pool house. It was as if you were living on an overstuffed pillow, or riding smoothly on some kind of magic balloon to a place exotic.

Two rules obtained: no talk of politics or religion, and any insulting behavior meant permanent exile. You could drink as much as you could hold, lie as much as you were believed, eat until your liver rebelled, play cards for high stakes. You could dance, lecture to yourself, even slip upstairs with a companion if you were sly enough. The regular members, who met on the third Thursday of each month, were a hazardous bunch: four of the more sane members of the Hollywood mob, three good painters, the maestro of the Los Angeles Symphony, the chiefs of the police and fire departments, a scattering of industrialists, a blind poet, a top novelist, a professional stuntman, a retired astronaut, Willy Shoemaker, two professors from Cal Tech with Nobel prizes to their credit, Sant Saxa, Pepe Ruiz, who ran the bar at Chasen's. The list lengthened. No politicians were allowed, and few lawyers, since their well-known penchant for arguing when drinking ruined the fun.

## COMPRADOR

Even when Culhane was traveling, the festivities, and the laugh-talk and even the serious sort, flowed till the early hours. On those occasions, Karin and Sant Saxa had directed the traffic. Quite skillfully, too, and they kept a sharp eye out for anything that would make for any newspaper talk.

The pool house stood on a flat of ground just below the rumpy ridge occupied by the main residence. An old firehouse, once, with a mansard roof, and brick walls, the pool house was now painted white. Culhane had bought it years earlier at public auction, moved it to his land, restored it, then altered the interior to its present style.

Sliding glass replaced the old wooden doors. Inside, where flashy red engines once rested while awaiting the next fire alarm, the refurbishing included a marble-topped soda fountain, a sizeable wet bar, a small kitchen, several groups of lounging furniture, and a grand piano. He had kept the brass sliding pole that ran straight up through an opening into the second floor, which was now divided into two large bedrooms, a huge bathroom with sauna, and yet another bar. The Culhane children had insisted upon the pole, and he agreed with them whenever he could.

Early evenings, like this one, and fresh breezes usually skipped through the live oaks and the taller firs; boughs and leaves rustled, but otherwise a quiet had descended. One could readily imagine themselves in faraway countryside, instead of up there in the Bel Air hills and canyons.

In stark contrast, below, in the flattish basin of Los Angeles, you were reminded of a battleground. Vicious gangs roamed. Hospitals were in trouble, schools vandalized; watchdogs were fed better than many people. On the ocean-rim of the city, no morning passed when bodies, snarled in sea kelp, failed to wash ashore. Suicides. Murders, too, even of infants. The law hid, when it could no longer cope. City dwellers went out into the night and stole crops from enraged farmers in the surrounding counties. You survived by agility, or by training and instinct, the way a jungle fighter or a smart wharf rat did.

Karin Culhane knew about the trouble down there, though she rarely left the property. She'd been in the hands of so many clinics, doctors, and healers that when the day arrived to come back here, she'd sworn never to leave again. This was refuge. Culhane was her rock. Her children were all the other melody she wanted or needed.

She loved this room. It held a thousand memories, the ones of intimacy, the many laughing nights, the cliques of amusing people who had trooped through its doors. For now, it was a comfortable patch where she could go back, back more, and relive past times.

Across the room against one wall hung a rare collection of Comanche wood carvings under a row of feathered war bonnets. By her side was a chrome-bordered glass table mounted on elephant tusks: a gift from an Ivory Coast chieftain, a houseguest, who had once made a serious offer to buy her. Checkering another wall were eleven framed studio photos commemorating feature films in which she had appeared in major supporting roles. Among those glossies were others of directors, some producers, and a few big-time male box-office draws, each picture inscribed with a flamboyant signature.

She had become quite good at blotting out the unpleasant, cruel images.

It was so easy now to invent one-act plays in her head. She could act out anything up there. Alone, no critics, not even a script to learn; it was much better than playing out scenes with some psychiatrist. Or she could remember the lavish parties that had once taken place up in the main residence. Nights a sultan might envy. And of how some of the younger actresses would sneak down to this pool house, go to one of the upstairs bedrooms with some producer, there to hear a string of lies and promises that, as the Gershwin lyric said, no Russian playwright could dream up.

With no more cocaine to fuel her fluffed-up dreams, the memories and invented plays in her head were the best party in town.

She heard his sounds then. Her smile widened as she thought of another scene, far away in Paris, a long time ago.

Stepping out of a dressing room, toweling his thick dark hair, Culhane asked, "Where'd our little party go?"

"Sant and the children took the dishes up."

He walked over to the bar and poured the Mendocino Zinfandel into a balloon glass, then heard Karin ask, "Play it for me, Rushton. It's been ages."

"Like some?" He raised the glass. "It's good. Nice and crisp."

"Just the song."

"On my way."

He crossed the room, stopped, kissed her, then went to the piano bench. Leaning over, he turned a switch, then a dial on a synthesizer that replicated snare drums and reed instruments in six different sound combinations.

No glaze tonight in those haunted eyes peering from that haunting face. Classic beauty, badly bruised mind. He looked at her and thought: *It would take a very good painter to capture those delicate hollows in her cheeks and that smile with the chandelier in it.*

Clinging oyster-white satin traced Karin's slender body. Thin puffs of white fur bordered the collar and the bottoms of three-quarter-length sleeves. From the light glowing behind her, Culhane could tell she wore nothing underneath the gossamer frock. With her coppery Norse hair, it all seemed so perfect, so right. But it was a dream smashed, and they both knew it.

Fingers strolling across the keyboard, he waited for a moment to mesh with the drumbeat. Then he nodded to Karin, who leaned against the piano.

*"I remember you...you're the one who made my dreams come true...a few kisses ago. I remember you..."*

As she sang, his memory swept back to that night at Maxim's in Paris when first he'd seen her. Two tables away, surrounded by some hotshot Hollywood types and two well-known European film directors. Loud talk of making another film together, then laughter; other talk of how the film they'd just wrapped up was bound for rave

notices (nervous laughter then); waiters gadding about, corks popping, two table captains preparing flambés.

Among them, only Karin had seemed bored, her wonderful mouth looking like a stepped-on worm.

He'd been alone, passing through Paris from Beirut on the way back to Los Angeles. Seeing her that way, lovely and so sad, he called a table captain over and sent her the oldest bottle of Champagne in Maxim's cellar. With it went one dahlia from his table vase, and his card, on which he'd written: "Nobody Ever Died of Laughter—Beerbohm (Max)."

A smile, like a diamond spray, lit up her face when she read it. Two or three shy looks later, seeing that he was alone, Karin had excused herself and come over. They talked. They talked and made a circus of other talk for four days straight. Cutting heaps of red tape, bribing a magistrate heavily, they married in Venice ten nights later.

Twelve years ago, almost to the night, a slick Algerian pianist had played this song, and Karin had claimed the lyric as if it had been written only for her. Maybe it had, thought Culhane, as he worked across the treble keys.

*"...and, baby, when those angels ask me to recall...the thrill  
of it all...then I will tell them I re-memmm-ber you."*

Clapping his hands, Herbsant Saxa came through the glass doors, moving like a blue ghost. With his cinnamon skin, a frilled blue shirt, a dark velvet bow tie, and a midnight blue smoking jacket, he looked like the stick-man at the craps-table in one of the old Havana nightclubs. But he gave it away with his gold ear-bead and the rest of his glittering trinkets.

Culhane stopped playing. She would sing only for him. No one else, not ever.

"I'll go up now," said Karin.

"Oh, but no, my lady," said Sant, moving into the room. "More song. God asking for more, and so does Saxa."

## COMPRADOR

Karin smiled, slipping out of the brighter light, replying, “The power goes off in an hour. I’ve things to do for the children.”

“I’ll walk you up,” Culhane said.

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to, babe,” then saying to Sant, “be back in a minute.”

They went out to the pool, climbed up several flagstone steps, up the brow of the ridge toward a gravel path leading to the big house. Early stars showered the blue Pacific night, the last orange rays of sun having slipped well to the west at this hour.

Reaching the path, she turned, saying, “A wonderful afternoon. Sorry about the eats.”

“I don’t really miss those big dinners anymore. Do you?”

“Sometimes, though, I get damn tired of rutabaga and parsnips.”

“Sant says he’s got a line on some beef and—”

“Kiss me. Kiss me hard, darling man.”

She took his lean face in her cool hands, brought it to hers, then ran her fingers through his coal-black hair, smoothing it, smoothing him. Her hands built a cup under his squarish chin. Afterward, when they broke, she told him, “I’m sorry that we couldn’t be in bed tonight. I’ve been a terrible woman to you.”

“Nobody can help it, Karin. It’ll all come right, you’ll see.” But he knew it never would or could. Only a half lie, Culhane hadn’t minded saying it.

“Just hold me for a minute. I can’t bear to see you go, Rushton...”

He whispered to her, “Just a month or so. And Sant will be here.”

“Maybe we can try. I don’t mind if you—”

“I’ll come up later.”

“If we’re just careful or you lock the door.”

A hundred doors, he thought, and Culhane met her mouth again.

Still in the pool house, Sant Saxa had tripped the last of the Zinfandel into a balloon glass. He sat on one of the lounge chairs, thinking, recalling, and staring absently at the pictures of Karin and the others.

Sixty-four years of life gone by, he thought, and the haywire of it all, the soaring superb times, and now this, the dogs of night are howling their warnings of lurking unknowns.

Rolling the wine in his mouth, Sant Saxa remembered the Hong Kong days. Almost twenty-two years ago. *Jesu Christo*, flown where?

Damn lucky to make it...luckier that Hong Kong take me after the gunrunning in Venezuela and the real estate stunt-sales in Mexico. Would have worked too if bitch of governor's wife not so greedy...on the run I went...had to...and if not for Ken-chou Ming giving me job there in his trading house, I still be pushing second-rate textiles... then the kid comes...a star-walker from the start and we run it good until come this fuck of crash...Ken-chou tell me go to California with the bright one...help him, restrain him, old Ming say to me...what a thing we put together...too big, maybe...beautiful Hong Kong... women...be forty or thirty year old again for only a month, and be with those women...young women and old whiskey...their mother teach them those wonderful things ...grandmothers too...

Saxa heard the panther-soft sound of Culhane's bare feet coming through the glass doors. He turned, saying, "Jesus, I have old dream of Hong Kong come back. Right in my head, like one of those." Sant pointed toward one of the photographs of Karin.

"I'll bet anything it was of girls."

Saxa's grizzled head nodded vigorously. "Maybe you get soft-pricked old man a hard drink?"

"Some Izarra?" A liqueur that Culhane favored, a nail-hard fluid distilled by the Basques for igniting holidays, strong enough to stop army tanks.

"Your horse piss. Make me want to eat hay. Let me have double portion please." Culhane went to the bar and made drinks. He was running low on the Izarra, a case or so left, and couldn't get it anymore. He said, "Sant-o, we've got business to discuss. You ready for that?"

"Twenty-two year I be ready for you."

“That you have.” Culhane brought the drinks and the bottle over across the thick green carpet. Sitting down, he looked steadily at this man, who was a hundred hands and with a wise head to go with them.

“Pray up me, all mothers,” said Sant, who went into conference with his drink, sliding the Izarra into his impatient mouth.

Going more easily on his, Culhane said, “Tomorrow or the next day I’m off. So we better square away now.”

“How you get there?”

“An Air Force courier plane. They shuttle them back and forth with stuff that’s not for the mails.”

“Ain’t be the same,” said Sant.

“Just for a couple of months maybe. A damn nuisance, but Halburton has played it fair so far. And you know why I must go.”

“We done okay so far. Thank to Jesus the red phone they put in.”

Culhane nodded. “The big thing, Sant, is that I’ll be able to get my hands on the government grain reserves. That may help a lot, you know.”

“I don’t like,” said Saxa, finishing another tilt with his glass. “They bastards, you know. All governments like that...”

“Halburton is the only keyhole we have.”

“Ain’t you the one, though? I think Shang people can’t mess with government positions. Shit in horn, man, they got you—”

“I’m not taking any pay from the government. Just a place to live while I’m there.”

Saxa slumped forward a little toward the table. He poured more Izarra, the strength of it catching him. The idea of government, any government, bothered him. He’d run from at least three of them, and still had four passports, two of them bogus, in case he had to run again.

“You already know what’s up with Tomlinson in Australia,” continued Culhane, “and Baster Muldaur in Johannesburg. You’ll have to keep all the dummy companies straight. I’ll have some more for us to use when I get to Washington.”

“Whose?”

“CIA has a book full of them, I’m told. We’ll get ten or twenty and use them just once, and only for the three-corner trades.”

“Them bastards get too close.”

“It’s just an option, Sant. And they have information sources we might need and no longer have.”

“Why not Shang-Magan help us? Christ, you do plenty to set up Monte Carlo.”

“No.” Culhane shook his head wearily. “You’ve got to get it straight, we’re out of it for now. We’re like any other outsiders,” said Culhane gloomily, still finding the situation hard to accept.

“Shang-Magan have Russian agent?” asked Sant Saxa. He’d never before explored these matters with Culhane, knowing how sensitive they were.

“Piped right in to Nyurischev, as a matter of fact. Last I heard, anyway.”

“Make any sense me to go see him?” asked Sant, quite seriously, and quite serious in the amount of Izarra he was knocking into the back of his throat.

“We might never see you again . . . The key, Sant, the best play, is to keep working through Richard Ming in Shanghai as much as we can. Then Muldaur and Tomlinson.”

“I guess CIA fronts work,” observed Saxa, frightened a bit. “We mark up trades some and catch a profit.”

Culhane shook his head again.

“Don’t be damn fool,” argued Sant. “Why not? We doing the work.”

“It’s a government game. It’s their stockpile, their assets. It’s not the same, and you know it.”

“They owe us, and they never know if we mark up.”

“I don’t want the slightest chance of any trouble, Sant. I want the gold they owe us, that’s all.”

Saxa went for the Izarra again, splashing some into Culhane’s glass this time. Some of the clear fluid dripped onto a magazine cover before he uprighted the bottle.

“I appreciate, beyond word, that you’ll stay here with Karin and the children until this thing is over.”

“Tomorrow I go for beefs and milk,” Sant said.

“I’m leaving two rolls of gold Krugers for you. I’m taking one, and that’s the last we’ve got.”

“I got some gold.”

“You’ll use mine, Sant.”

“Only I take charity from who I hate.”

“It’s not charity, dammit.”

“We all in a hurt, Rushton. Why you not let me sell paintings...Christ, I get a bank of gold in Europe.”

Sant Saxa’s olive-dark eyes moistened, their lids drooping slightly, and he rolled his eyes until only misted ivory showed; he was thinking again.

“We’ve been over that, so do me a favor and let it go.”

“Don’t be pig in the head.”

The art was a deep-down part of Culhane, for keeps, a very high article of faith. He said, “They’re our poetry, Sant. How can you sell the house poet? I wouldn’t sell you for anything.”

Saxa’s eyes went white again, like miniature ping-pong balls, and Culhane couldn’t tell whether he’d really been heard or not. It didn’t matter. The art was a sort of legacy and would stay put, except for those paintings from the office that were crated to go with him.

Again, the dark hand around the neck of the squat bottle. Culhane hadn’t seen the aging wirepuller take it in like this in years. The little man toyed very briefly with his drink before throwing most of it down the hatch.

“Save some for tomorrow,” Culhane said.

“I fine ... fine.”

“The stuff explodes at that rate.”

“Karin, she look-a fine tonight.” Saxa threw open an empty palm, sat up, tugged at the Izarra with his other hand “What do if she strip, run bare-ass again?”

“Get her inside and call Frank Henry on that list of phone numbers in the library,” answered Culhane.

“Some sight, a woman that beautiful.”

“That’s not so funny, Sant.”

“Sorry... she jus’ so damn boot-i-fool. Ah’ll be awful good with those kids.”

“Thanks.”

Culhane wondered how much of tonight he’d have to repeat in the morning. Sant’s head was weaving now, the eyes hooding heavily. He had intended asking the little man to keep an eye on the old Taiwanese groundsman, who ran off frequently and was showing signs of returning to his old habits with opium. He had warned the Taiwanese once that his neck would get shortened if he pushed the narcotic toward Karin again. He’d go over it again with Sant tomorrow.

“Y’ever think of Hong Kong?” asked Sant.

“Lots of times, I do.”

“Best time, eh? Think of Jia?”

God, how I remember her, thought Culhane, who tried to imagine what that narcotic of womanhood looked like now, what she was doing, how she lived in China. Married? Children? What?

“Ri-chad say you talk.”

“It’s just twice now we’ve talked. Just business.”

“Jes-ush, you had good women.”

“A taste learned at your knobby knee.”

“Stay indoor, I say. Fuck for your country so you don’ have to go fight for it!”

The words floated out without a missed beat and hardly a slur. But Sant Saxa toppled to one side, his glass of Izarra falling to the floor, his head angling awkwardly on the armrest. Out. He *was* out like a swirl of dust in front of a broom.

“Good night, you little genius,” said Culhane to the elfin’s deafened ears.

He went over and began to tidy Saxa up. Soft snores oozed through the raspy breathing. Culhane stripped off Sant’s velvet bow

tie, opened his shirt, and struggled the dinner coat off the slumbering, lifeless form.

Going to a closet, he took two beach blankets from one of the shelves. After two vigorous minutes, he had. Saxa swaddled in wool, safely tucked in for the night, and maybe for the whole of the next morning. Culhane knelt beside the couch and looked down into the tired, sad, wise face of this man he loved. He kissed Sant's forehead.

He stepped outside under the blue canopy of night. Stars shone radiantly, dense paths of them chasing high over a quarter moon. He walked to one edge of the patio, turned, and craned his neck slightly so that he could see over the lip of ridge to the rambling house above. No lights were on in Karin's rooms. He ached, ached for her.

He remembered, then, the last time. Nearly a year ago, on Karin's first return from the clinic in Santa Barbara, and they'd made love one night. As they found each other, she had rolled abruptly from beneath him and cried out like some scolding child.

Racing for the door before Culhane could recover his senses, Karin had vanished somewhere in the vast house. Later, after a search, he'd found her downstairs in the library, huddled naked in a desk chair, telephone in hand, bawling, telling the West Los Angeles Police she'd been raped.

Culhane returned to the pool house, listened for Sant, found the other blanket and the other couch. He wouldn't think about the rape ever again, a promise he'd made before and knew was useless. He tried not to think of anything just then.

An hour later, he was still trying. The thought of leaving his family was grinding stones in his heart. He gripped the blanket, then a seat cushion, knowing how bad it would get, being alone again. He'd have to watch it or it would seize him the way it had in the past. If he couldn't stay close to his own blood, what the hell was the reason for anything?

And fudging it with Karin, telling her he'd only be gone for a month. Three or four of them was more like it. A sorry bitch of a job back there. Much easier if he had the old commercial-intelligence

team at Culhane & Company; easier yet if he could access the Shang-Magan's Inspectorate in Monte Carlo, the best system ever built of top researchers, like having a hundred Rolls-Royce brains pulling for you every minute.

Still, with Sant here handling the ropes, it might work for a time. They had swung a four-sider last week: U.S. metallurgical coal against forty-seven million board feet of British Columbia plywood, the plywood crossed against Malaysian tin, the tin traded to Mexico for silver, the silver bartered back to China for titanium. It took a whole week, though, for a deal that would transact in a few hours in other days.

None of it possible, either, without Richard Ming in Shanghai agreeing to stick his neck out. A stroke of luck there. China would help, the way he'd tried to help them in the past when few others in the West lifted so much as a fingernail.

Mings. No matter the odds or then complications, they bounced back like rubber boomerangs. Some special strain in the blood, a genetic immunity against defeat.

Unable to sleep, his thoughts kept reverting to Ken-chou Ming and the Hong Kong of other times. The city was wide open, awash in deals and more deals. Twenty-four, seven, around the clock. A fairyland of excitement. You could bargain anything except your name. Lose it and you were through. Learn, learn, work, work, and getting richer by the month and never having time to care or count it...and Jia swimming him through the nights in her arms and thighs of purest bliss.

Fabulous, and I'm fabulously out on my canetta, Culhane thought, rolling over and yanking up the blanket. He was afraid. Hollow, cold, and fearing of the days ahead. He'd enjoyed a hard-won reputation as one of the world's top commodity experts, and now, betrayed by a government he'd tried to help, he was nearly washed up. He had gone to long lengths to skin the Russians, beating them at a deal for a huge supply of cobalt needed for U.S defense purposes. The Kremlin, so it appeared, was doing all they could to cut off America from Africa's

## COMPRADOR

strategic materials; he'd had to call in a passel of favors to pull off the trade.

Anything could happen. Times were vicious. Karin needed him, so did his children. He hated the prospect of being under someone's control, especially a president of a faltering nation. A president who seemed at bay, indecisive, flailing in a morass of quandaries and setbacks. A forgotten man facing his god-forgotten hours.

Culhane hadn't felt this troubled since running off to sea as a teenager: to the unknown and the uncertain, fortified by his wits alone and the cards fate had dealt him.

Since returning to California, he had done some checking on Squires, Halburton's treasury chief, and a Rearden man; correction, a Rearden toady. A second-rater, all the way through, Culhane had verified. Talented men had refused the job, so Halburton was stuck with whom he had inherited.

## Washington, D.C.

“Some nice pictures you got here, mister. Better’n those old lithos we took down,” said a maintenance man, standing back to admire the Cezanne. “That sumbitch could handle a brush all right.”

“Move to the right and the light will show his blues and oranges better.”

The buzzer droned again.

“That be all?”

“You’ve been a real help,” said Culhane, offering his hand.

“Anytime. And thanks for this,” said the man, thumping his pocket with a stained hand, then stooping to pack his tools in a canvas case.

“I’ve got to get the door,” said Culhane, and he moved off as the maintenance man looked around at the rest of the pictures he’d been hanging, believing that they must be copies, though he had no idea of the artists’ significance.

Opening the door, Culhane looked at the burr-headed man standing there, carrying a woven straw hat and a briefcase, to go with a face that carried a blank look.

“You must be Mister Clay Flickinger,” said Culhane, whose attention was diverted as the maintenance man came into the hall from the suite’s other door.

“I am.”

“Come on in. I’ve been rearranging the furniture in your place. At least I was told it’s yours.”

“It’s leased by us,” returned Flickinger, stepping past Culhane

From habit born of long training, Clay Flickinger observed Culhane with a scientist's passion for detail. Mildly surprised that Culhane looked younger than his reported age and struck, too, by the raw presence of the man. He looks like he could dance with heavy-weights without using a mouthpiece, thought Flickinger.

"Those must be yours," said Flickinger, pointing at one of the paintings, glancing at the others.

"You like art or music?" asked Culhane.

"Never had much time for either one," said Flickinger with a slight edge in his words. "You've managed to get settled fast enough."

"They said you'd be out of town for a couple of days, so I thought I might as well put the laundry away."

"Loose ends in Florida," said Flickinger.

"How are you called? Clay... Flick...something else?"

"Mr. Flickinger' will do."

So it's going to be like that, thought Culhane. Well, have it any way you like.

"Your trip go all right?" asked Flickinger in his flat monotone.

"My seatmate was a mailbag, though I appreciate you getting my gear here."

"You were Class A priority, Mr. Culhane. You have to know four bureaucrats with the right pull to get that tag," said Flickinger, who looked with barely concealed envy at Culhane's bench-made shoes and the immaculately cut line of his suit.

Taking a chair, Flickinger leaned over and unsnapped his briefcase. Fumbling for a moment, he withdrew a slim envelope and laid it on a table.

"That's a White House pass, four books of food coupons, and some gas stamps. You've already seen your office, I hear."

"Yes," said Culhane, "though I don't know how much I'll use it. Tell me, how do you fit into my life? Who employs you in the government?"

“I’m something of a hybrid. I’m on the payroll of the CIA but I’m detailed to the National Security Council at the White House. Liaison work. I’m also supposed to be your facilitator, you being new to the scenery around here. I can usually get things done, if there’s a good enough reason connected to the request.”

“That’s good to know, Mr. Flickinger. Here’s a job for you. I’d like a secured phone line installed between this room and the White House signal board.”

“You’d need an okay on that from the Man himself or his staff chief.”

“It’s in the works, and I’d appreciate it if you’d sort out the details. Also, I want it checked every day for security.”

“Anything else?”

“Quite a number of things. You’d better get pencil and paper.”

Flickinger fished in his briefcase for paper, then pulled a pen from the inside of his suit coat. He made the movements leadenly, chafing now, feeling strangely cowed.

“We’ll want systematic watches on all primary and secondary ports and airfields in Africa. If you can get them, copies of the bills of lading for everything that’s shipped out of that continent to anywhere in the world. I’ll give you a list tomorrow of European trading companies to study up on.”

Flickinger looked up and asked, “Where would they be located?”

“Luxembourg, Switzerland, Lichtenstein, and London. I’ll take care of Singapore and Hong Kong in another way.”

“We may already know about some or all of them.”

“Maybe. But I want to compare what you have with what I already know. For example, one I left out is Rearden’s New York Corporation. I want everything you’ve got on that operation.”

Flickinger shook his head, pursing a smile. “That’s domestic. Under law, we’re not permitted to gather domestic intelligence without specific permission. Or didn’t you know?”

“I used to brief some of your analysts. They certainly knew plenty about my company’s operation.”

“Universal data collection. Background stuff, pure and simple” lied Flickinger.

“See what you can scratch up anyway.”

“I’ll try. Anything else?”

“Care for a cigar? Honduran?”

“I chew on a pipe sometimes. I’m trying to stop. Go ahead, though.”

“Yes, of course, I’ll go ahead.”

Culhane went to another room. Flickinger gazed around at the paintings, the two long davenports against the walls, and the deep-sided chairs flanking the small fireplace. He’d never been in this suite before—plenty of others, but not this one. He didn’t particularly care for this discussion, the way orders were getting rapped out, and he wondered if the paintings were hoax art. Probably. They said this bastard went broke, so they couldn’t be the McCoy.

Wisps of smoke from the panatela and the sounds of a recording of Hoagy Carmichael’s “Stardust” trailed behind Culhane as he returned. He crossed the room to a window, opened it, and looked briefly across Lafayette Square to the White House.

Measuring Flickinger again, deciding the man ought to be retailing funeral services, he told him: “I’ll need a terminal strung directly to the computers of the National Security Agency. And I’ll want to interview at least three of their systems and programming people.”

“You’ll be better off using us.”

“I’m told their equipment is more advanced.”

“Why the computer access? What’s that supposed to do?”

“Probability games, regression analysis if there’s enough data to base them on. Things like that.”

“We can do that sort of work quite easily. We’ve got the people,” claimed Flickinger.

“Much of the time I don’t know what I’m looking for,” evaded Culhane “So please set it up the way I’ve asked.”

Miffed, Flickinger recoiled inwardly at the scorching he'd be getting from the Director. Culhane was trying to cut them out of the feedback loop already.

"I want you to set up a linkup," Culhane was saying, "to the best and the friendliest of foreign intelligence services represented in Washington."

"I'd advise using only one. The British," said Flickinger, thinking rapidly now, why this request from a civilian, and that, on the other hand, it might even be advantageous.

"Fine. We can start there."

"I'll need to know your purpose."

"When I know, you'll know. Meanwhile, just get it going, if you don't mind."

"That's hardly an explanation."

"Have to do for the time being."

"You might be overstepping your charter, you know?"

A circle of silence as Clay Flickinger realized he didn't know very much about Culhane's authority or of what limits, if any, Halburton had put on the man.

"I was told you want the use of our corporations of convenience."

"About twenty of them," Culhane said.

"Outside the United States?"

"Yes, and with no possibility of an ownership trace."

"I'll need more details."

And so began Clay Flickinger's limited education on how multi-sided bartering trades worked. Culhane took him through several examples, though he made no mention of what he was doing with Richard Ming in Shanghai. He explained how very large commodity trades were often broken up into smaller ones, and the why and wherefore of dummy companies. That tax dodges had nothing to do with it. But keeping, say, the London market guessing about the availability and price of Chilean copper did. The dummies, opening and closing them, were intended to camouflage various moves in the

commodities market. People contacts were critical, as was the role of Sant Saxa, who would orchestrate the details.

“I work in the dark,” Culhane told him, “just like you and your compatriots, or I’d run the risk of getting skinned at the stake. It gets tricky sometimes.”

Intent now, Flickinger was absorbing it all like a sponge. Culhane had rung the bell of familiarity. What he had said, so far, bore a resemblance to the tradecraft of intelligence work—the manipulation of knowns against unknowns.

“This man Saxa of yours. We’ll have to get a security clearance on him.”

“He’s my responsibility. Forget about him.”

“Sorry, that just won’t fly.”

“It’ll have to,” said Culhane, giving Flickinger a look that would bruise stone. “There’s no chance, none, of handling this problem without him. Wouldn’t think of trying.”

“That’s your business, but we’ll have to check him just the same.”

Check all you want, if you can, but he’s in to stay.”

Flickinger didn’t comment. His pained expression telegraphed his feelings. Control, he was thinking of control, as, for example, controlling a foreign agent; not liking it, either, when recalling how Culhane had been described as a *wayward*.

“Now here’s the easy part,” said Culhane, running a thick smoke ring into the air. “Do you know the Metropolitan Chief of Police?”

“No, I don’t. How in hell does he fit in?”

“Meet him. Find out who’s the best black-marketer in the District. He’ll under police protection, so they’ll now his identity.”

“You’re missing me there.”

“This hotel is short on food, and this hotel is where I currently live. They need some help.”

Flickinger’s mouth opened; an astonished look made its slow journey across his narrow face. “It’s a very, uh, irregular way for a government employee to do things.”

“Correction, I’m not an employee...my question is, can you do it?”

“Why can’t you?”

“I suppose I could, but I thought you were supposed to help me.”

“Not that way, I’m not. And it could get embarrassing if the word got around I was catering to black market crooks.”

“Look into it, please. Just get the name and whereabouts of the right person,” said Culhane. “I’ll handle the rest.”

He eyed Flickinger evenly. He didn’t want to alienate the man, or falsely nourish his hypocrisy, either. The sigh he made was hidden by another pillow of smoke.

“When the CIA buys information, turns a foreign agent, or plants one of its own agents abroad, you call all of that Sunday-schooling?”

Flickinger shifted uneasily in his chair. Feeling put upon, his imagined grip on the situation fading, he said, “It’s different. You know it is.”

Culhane sat there as quietly as a sphinx. A locking of wills, with the turf and rules different for each of them. One man a spy, the other a speculator, who cared not a whit about espionage shenanigans. Child’s-play was how Culhane regarded it mostly.

“Is that all?” Flickinger asked.

“Just one more thing,” said Culhane, getting up. He waited for Flickinger to come out of his chair. “I’d like a full dossier on you. You’re going to be working in close contact with me. So I’m going to need to know how you think, what you win at and your screw ups. You can have the same on me, if you don’t already.”

“It’s simply not possible.”

“Make your choice, Flickinger. Either help me make this thing work or go away. I’ll tell Halburton you’re trussed by a bunch of rules that I’m sure your agency breaks by the hour. Which way do you want it?”

“I’ve had enough, thank you. I’ll be on my way.”

## COMPRADOR

“You do that. By this time tomorrow, I’ll want to know the name of the black market operator. When you find out, set up a meeting. Otherwise, you and I don’t need each other. Savvy?”

Flickinger reached for his hat, crushed it onto his head, and bulled his way to the door. As it slammed, Culhane was thinking about his family. How was Karin bearing up? The children? He went over to the telephone. For a personal long-distance telephone call, he’d have to get the operator to reserve a time.

In the corridor, Flickinger leaned an insistent finger into the elevator button. No response after two minutes. Tense, angered; his scalp crawled. Like some schoolboy, he’d been consigned to the corner, a pants wetter, and then shown the door. He pressed the button again. A moment later, stiff-legged, he went down the hallway until he found the exit door to the staircase.

Comes this assenheimer, this whore’s son, thought Flickinger, and I’m getting poured onto the scrap heap, laid aside, because some poseur gone broke comes to Washington. He’ll make a balls of it. Going outside normal channels, telling me what to do, making the whole sideshow twice as hard to follow.

As he reached the lobby of the Hay-Adams, still moving at pace, his blare of thought turned to Andrea Warren. She’d better come across this time; nothing halfway now. Flickinger glanced at his watch. There might still be time to stop by the bookbinder’s.



Andrea Warren was jotting a note to Italy, telling her mother of her reassignment to Washington. Everything was fine, distorted Andrea, except that the autumn heat was a killer without air conditioning and the light and power were shut off promptly at ten every night except in a few government buildings. Naturally, the fertility rate was reaching unrivaled heights; she drew a comical happy-face at the end of the sentence.

A soft peal from the telephone stalled her closing lines. Unconsciously, she buttoned the top of the frilly wrapper she wore, concealing her perspiring breasts.

“Hello.”

“You’ve been out.”

“Shopping. Four places to find decent soap.”

“You settled in?”

“So-so. Have you met him? What’s he like?”

“I think the bastard is nothing more than a well-connected crook,” Flickinger said.

“How divine.”

“You remember the little bookbindery on Eye Street, close to your office?”

“The funny little Bulgarian man. He’s still there?”

“He’ll have a diary for you. Put your observations in it. Drop it back there whenever you have something for me.”

“That’s all?”

“I’ll call when there’s anything new.”

Back at her desk, Andrea unlocked a lower drawer and drew out the file Flickinger had given her in New York. She read part of it again, reminding herself what it felt like to have a mother who sold her allurements, and that she might, more or less, be doing the same for Flickinger to keep her job. Well, so had half the countesses she knew in Europe, and not a few American women she could put in the same category. Now me.

Thumbing to the back of the file, she scanned the photographs of Rushton Culhane. Taken at a distance, they showed little detail, though she could pick him out in a crowd without difficulty. Tall and dark, thought Andrea, and probably a pain in the *canetta*. And I’m tall and blond, and I’ve handled bigger men than you, Culhane.

She snapped the file closed, plotting options about ~~o~~ how to get next to the Californian. Why not the direct, no-holds-barred approach, she asked herself. Not too fast or pushy! An inside curve, sort of.



Weary-eyed. Plagued by a sharp headache, too, Culhane three-gunned it, going hard, doing mental wind sprints.

From dawn's light until after midnight, he worked in the cubby-office in the White House basement or in his suite at the Hay-Adams. Endless streams of visitors, everyone pleading for materials—always the ones in shortest supply—and they cooked up and embroidered the most patriotic arguments heard since Patrick Henry's time. They needed it all, everything.

One man from General Electric arrived with elaborate charts and argued that if he couldn't get tungsten for carboloy-tools, then half the nation's remaining heavy-machinery industry would shut down. Culhane gave him a third of what he needed.

Others, like the trained pros of the Pentagon, hollered for the whole basket. An entire, faltering military machine and its supporting armaments industries would crash unless action was taken with emergency speed. Not tomorrow, now! A list of materials as long as an arm.

All argued, wheedled. On occasion, they threatened him, because they felt threatened by the palpable dangers of events still invisible, still ungraspable. Listening patiently, making notes, he sometimes but not frequently signed an authorization to release materials from one of the stockpile warehouses. Shipping problems were serious; terms of payment added even more hours of haggling. Some wanted credit terms.

"Me too," he advised. "When I get 'em, so will you..."

Halburton wanted reports.

He wanted reports, too, different kinds of reports. He'd been getting the first of the computer hard copies he had asked for from the National Security Agency. The trouble lay in deriving timely input data from CIA to feed into the NSA's super-computers. Flickinger advised that the Agency was moving the moon to get reliable

information on port movements in Africa. No quarrel with Flickinger on that one; a tall order, and Culhane knew it.

But he wondered why there'd been nothing about Joe Rearden's New York Corporation. Three requests had ended in three run-arounds.

Sant Saxa was getting limited cooperation from Baster Muldaur in Johannesburg. And Muir Tomlinson Ltd. of Melbourne was helping. Both had agreed to act as agents for certain of the dummy companies Culhane operated, disguising that the U.S. Government was the principal behind these vital trades.

Culhane was now talking to a client, as he eyed a two-inch stack of urgent messages piled up next to the telephone.

A beefy Air Force colonel from the Air Material Command, his chest splashed with battle ribbons, sat on the other side of the desk. His wide buttocks were pinched into a narrow chair, small enough to fit into the crowded office.

"We need vanadium, and we can't have you tying strings to it," complained the colonel.

"We're down to a hundred-thousand pounds," replied Culhane, "and the Navy is in line for one fourth of it. Go get the priorities changed, and I'll see what I can do. But no promises."

"Yeah," growled the colonel. "Unsnagging kites at night from tall trees is easier."

"Give me your surplus aluminum at Wright-Pat and I'll try, *try*, to get the vanadium for you."

"You got any idea the amount of paperwork that takes? I'd have to clear it with three layers of the Air Staff."

A valid complaint, yet Culhane stood firm. If the departments and agencies wanted greater access to the stockpile, they'd have to agree to return any surplus materials. It was a constant skirmish.

He met the colonel's eyes levelly and said, "My offer stands. You agree to swap and I'll get you your vanadium, if I can."

The colonel stood, absently kicking a battered brown briefcase. "We might have to zing this one over your head."

“Go to it, Colonel. I intend to go over yours and get the aluminum back. I was just trying to make it easier.”

“How do you know we have it?”

“I call God every day. The connection gets bad, but the story is usually straight.”

The colonel strained his shoulders until the ribbons moved a good inch. “You’re shaking your cold stones if you think we’re giving up anything we’ve already got.”

“Scarce stones,” said Culhane, “and I’ve got ‘em, so get used to it.”

“No way. We wouldn’t do it.”

“Betcha. Use some ingenuity and we’ll put you in for another of those ribbons. The better-judgment ribbon, maybe.”

“You’re a real laugh, Mr. Culhane. You oughta do jokes for the USO, like Bob Hope used to.”

“It’s an idea all right,” replied Culhane, standing, ready to show his visitor out of the barren office. “I wouldn’t need his writers, not with all the laugh-tracks walking around this town.”

“If we can work out something on the aluminum, how soon could we expect the vanadium?” A change of tactics now.

“With luck, in two weeks. Not including shipping time. You might hurry it up if you can get the Canadian Air Force to do an end run and help out.”

“I’ll get back to you.”

On the desk, on the floor, and on one small table were reams of paper. Requisitions, delivery schedules, orders for release of warehouse materials needing his signature. Halburton had insisted he use a White House office, to be close by. But it wasn’t big enough, and he felt like a cave rat on some days. Before the Air Force officer had arrived, he’d been leafing through a report of the National Security Council dealing with estimates of Eastern Europe and Russia’s grain production and livestock ratios, and the outlook for both.

In one word: grim. In two words: very good. It opened up several possibilities.

He sat back, loosened his tie, and read more. After an hour or so, he switched on the video-display terminal at one side of the desk, wired through a modem-system to the ultra-secret National Security Agency's super-computers at Fort Meade. With this setup, he could retrieve and manipulate certain data almost instantaneously. Dodging Flickinger's protests, he had met with the NSA people several times, showing them what he wanted in the way of an information book; what the computer programs should do; and what else would be nice although not essential.

Tapping at the keyboard, making three entry errors, he finally called up the program he wanted. Punching away, referring to the grain and livestock report, he eventually got what he was looking for. The powerful computers at Fort Meade made their nano-second computations, whirling precise rows of green numbers back onto the video screen. He kept going at it, comparing what he knew with what he guessed at, and then both against several assumptions.

Next, he called up agricultural statistics for Canada, Australia, and the Argentine that, each year, were toted up in the CIA's Fact Book. Tapping on other keys, he grouped and compared, looking for patterns.

He locked in the information, called up yet another analytical factoring program that would cluster, then separate random data, like cream from milk. He worked away in silence, concentrating fully at his favorite pastime—trying to manipulate U.S. economic and production indicators into a credible yet false format.

The red phone purred twice before he picked it up.

"That you, Sant?"

"Think maybe Ghost of Christmas come back?"

"Karin and the kids around?"

"They come in minute. Good news for you. That tantalum. Tomlinson in Australia get it and dummy it through Djakarta...a big hitch. We got to take back seventeen troy ton silver, too."

Culhane thought for a brief moment.

"You there?" asked Saxa

“Partly. Tell him we’ll need thirty days on the silver, and tell him thanks.”

“Dunno, Rush. He tell me he rifle bank to get tantalum for us. Ain’t too easy over there, he say.”

“Remind him of Libya three years ago, when we got his buttons back for him on those oil trades.”

“I try.”

“Sant, see if you can get hold of Richard Ming in Shanghai tonight. Ask if they’ll front another trade for us in vanadium. If they’ll do it, then put the trade through Baster Muldaur in Jo-burg with shipping instructions to follow.”

“What for the pay?”

“Four million pounds of Argentine beef.”

“Jesus! Send here. I buy California with it.”

Culhane laughed, then asked, “You all right?” Saxa didn’t sound right. There was a deep hacking sound in the middle of his voice.

“Fit as whorehouse cat. This place too goddamn big. I feel like I running in old Santa Anita Handicap to make one trip down hall...here they come. I talk you later.”

Breathlessly and vaguely, Karin came on the line, and after her the children. One by one, they clamored out what news they had for him, asking for his, and he almost had to make it up. When the call was over, sadness worked unsparingly, though the pleasure of their voices still sang beautifully in his ear.

Karin had told him the old Taiwanese had wandered off for a few days. Probably on a drunk in Chinatown, thought Culhane, giving it no more attention. And she had said there was some woman reporter who’d been calling the house. He let both thoughts pass.

Though with the call, he felt pangs of loneliness. Too lonely. It was getting to him in the night, and he was sweating again.

Getting his mind off his family, he decided to run a test of the markets. Something on the small side so as not to attract attention. By nature and by choice, he was a hard-shooter, a plunger who went for high scores, but prudence bounded him now. Other than the Shang-

Magan and Herbsant Saxa, he doubted if others anywhere knew of his plight: that his capital had been stolen, and, accordingly, he was sidelined as a true player. Probably, he thought, it's a wrong premise on my part. Halburton must be aware of what complications emanated from the cobalt-gold trade; if Halburton knew, likely Flickinger might, too. He would see. An odd thing had occurred only two days ago; in a private meeting with Halburton, the president had mentioned Van Slyke, abruptly stopping for a long moment as if he'd misspoken, made a gaffe.

Curious.

Even after the second meltdown of the U.S. economy, and the unbelievable shenanigans and frauds uncovered in Wall Street, the name Culhane in world commodity markets stood tall. Never a welsh on a trade, never failing to settle contracts exactly on time and always to the last decimal.

He'd do a five-sided trade—a *ping-ponger*—careful not to leave any footprints, but leaving enough spoor to determine if any Washington ears were listening in. If so, if he was being watched, he might use that fact to advantage at some point.

He began. Soon, he'd find out if his "chop" still carried weight.

At the console, trading under the name of Culhane & Company and with two dummy corporations—everything transacted in Canadian dollars he didn't own—he sold a thousand future contracts on U.S.-owned metallurgical coal against forty-seven million board feet of British Columbia plywood; moments later, crossing the plywood against Malaysian tin, the tin traded to Mexico for silver, the silver bartered to China for titanium, the titanium, when shipped, slated for U.S. stockpiles.

Inside an hour, he netted a little over four-million dollars for Uncle Sam. He'd done all this without putting up so much as dime. He could've lost as much, too, but he hadn't. When all the trades eventually settled, he'd have to find out how to transfer the net Canadian dollar credits to the Treasury Department.

He felt like depositing his day's win to his bank accounts in Los Angeles: something of a down payment on what was owed him by the government.

Hours later, he looked over at a desk clock: 9:22 p.m. His day had vanished. Neither was he happy with it, nor unhappy. Just a day, just an interlude till he could set up a market-shaking score, one for the history books.

Gathering up stacks of paper, he fitted them into two black dispatch cases, each the size of a small overnight bag. He left the office, wound his way through twisting basement hallways, up a flight of steps, past the guard seated behind a desk.

"G'night, Shorty," he said jokingly to a Carolina tarheel who stood six-feet-six, speaking with a soft, almost motherly Piedmont drawl.

"And to you, Mr. Culhane. You want some help with them bags? I can reach for one of the ushers."

"I've got 'em, thanks."

The guard opened the door, and Culhane walked into the night, welcoming the moist cooling air that caressed his face. He stood for a moment, drinking it in, then went past the east gatehouse, nodding to yet another blue-shirted guard.

Moonlight, cold and distant, reached its pale fingers down through the starless night, the light working a trick. Blessed with good night vision, he could see how the light made the treetops of Lafayette Square shimmer strangely, making the trees seem taller and somehow wider. The buildings around the park were blacked-out, and only every fourth streetlight glowed weakly. Sparse traffic and few pedestrians made the city seem anemic.

Rain would come tonight; he could feel it, just as he had once learned how to sense it at sea long ago.

Across the Square, he spotted the vague outlines of his new home, the Hay-Adams, looming like an old dowager dressed in faded grays. Chin up, durable, waiting for better days. Her entry lights threw a dim beam back into the murk.

Passing the Jackson Monument in the center of the Square, Culhane quickened his step. La Danielle, the hotel's restaurant, would be open tonight. There'd be nothing interesting to eat, he knew, but at least the food might be warm. He'd find out and have Fredy send something up, while he trudged through the paperwork he deplored, forcing himself to plow through it by the day and often well into the night.

Entering the lobby, he checked for mail, then made for the elevator. Even the light inside was toned a faint russet, and, though the lobby was almost empty, he had barely noticed her.

"Mr. Culhane," she said.

Stopping, his eyes went right to the tall woman with a musical bounce in her voice. "I'm Andrea Warren of the Los Angeles *Times-Herald's* Washington bureau."

He tried to close on her with his eyes, but she hung back in a thin dagger of shadow. "Miss or is it Mrs. Warren?" Blonde, well-upholstered, dressed in denims with a lime-green sweater under the jacket. He could see those things but no real details of her.

"I'm a Miss. One of those. Andrea, actually. I said that already, and I'm fine. Just peachy. But you didn't ask me that, did you? I'm almost fine. I've been waiting for two hours."

"Not for me?"

"Yes, for you. I've been trying endlessly to get an appointment to see you. No one in government seems to know where your office is. So I couldn't call you there."

"What can I do for you?" He moved closer.

"I'd like to interview you for the paper."

"How did you find me here?"

"I bird-dogged. No luck. Then I called your home in Bel Air," she said disingenuously. "And...well... here I am." A tentative grin played across her glossed mouth.

Culhane nodded. Having not the least idea Flickinger had planted her, he recalled that Karin had mentioned a reporter had been calling the Bel Air residence. "It's pretty late for an interview, and I've got

night work to do.” He shrugged his shoulders, and the heavy dispatch cases began to sway.

“Tomorrow. *Please.*”

“Sorry, but I’ve nothing to discuss with the press. No offense meant.”

“Mr. Culhane, my bureau chief is on my neck to get a story, or at least a statement from you.”

“There’s no story to get,” said Culhane, with half a smile, a very quick one. “Give him that for a statement. It’s a hundred-percent accurate.”

“How nice to hear. But no soap, I don’t believe it. You’re not here in Washington on vacation, not with two auditor’s bags in your hands.”

He smiled. “Think whatever you please. I’m somewhat tired, so I’ll wish you a pleasant night and see you never again, probably.”

This woman, whoever she was, had voltage in her. A sugary, low-floating voice and an unwavering look from the eyes, whose color he still couldn’t tell.

“I need a break. They’re talking about a staff layoff. I’m short on seniority. *Please.*”

“I’m sorry. Maybe in a few months I’ll have something for you. Maybe a mildly good joke.” By that time, he hoped, his days in Washington would be history.

“A man like you, with your background, doesn’t come to Washington just for a tour of the monuments, does he? I mean, we know that and—”

“Excuse me now,” said Culhane politely. “It’s my homework hour. Lots of assignments tonight.”

He looked again at the woman. Not a classic Scandinavian beauty like Karin, but tallish and with an aristocratic face of clean lines under the fleecy golden hair. Tailored denims, modish, trying to look hip. Big bosomed, too. Probably a limousine liberal, he thought. Press people! He abhorred them and their inability to measure fact, and he turned toward the elevators.

Andrea watched him go, the drill of anger biting into her. She recognized it for the frustration it was, and, underneath, a raspy feeling of rejection that she rarely knew from men.

*I'll get to you, damn you, Culhane. I'll have your laundry number by the time I'm through with you.* Walking brusquely to the lobby's front door, she went outside, and instantly felt a dribble of raindrops against her flushed cheeks. What kind of man has eyes of that color anyway? Like African violets. A faggot's eyes. Eyes for a necklace, hardly for a man's face.

No taxis were about, nor, she immediately remembered, and feeling idiotic, did she have enough cash to pay the forty-dollar fare to Georgetown, four miles away.

A jagged flash blasted across the black sky; moments later came the deep rumble of thunder.

"Damn...dammit anyway!" she uttered to no one, as a heavy burst of rain sluiced through her clothes, leaving her in soggy rage. She reached Pennsylvania Avenue, directly across from the White House, so faintly lit it almost seemed abandoned. Otherwise a nothing: no people about, no traffic, the night a gaping void.

Had she not cooled her heels for two hours, waiting on Mr. Unobtainable, Mr. Mighty, Mr. Whoever-in-Hell, she could've caught the last bus home. Be in her apartment, dry as the Gobi desert, dry as anything she could think of, including her love life now that she'd broken off with her sportswriter friend in New York.

Cursing fiercely, she sought cover under a spreading oak, dug into her pocketbook for a cell phone and punched in the numbers.

"Flickinger speaking."

"I'm stranded and I'm drowning."

"Oh, it's you! I thought I said never to call me."

"Listen, Clay. I'm looking at the White House. It looks like tomb over there. In five more minutes, I'll need the Ark and I'm not joshing you. You've got to get me home somehow."

"You're violating your instructions."

“I’m violating myself, you mean. My common sense, what’s left of it. Screw the instructions. I’m soaked to my bones and I need to pee before I blow up into a balloon. It’s all because of you, so please do something. Help me or I’ll quit.”

“You won’t quit.”

“Watch me, mister-man. Just watch!”

“I’ll see what I can do. Stay where you are.”

“How can I not? Hurry, will you? Godsakes! I’m going to have to use the bushes.”

“All right, I’ll send someone. Mark your calendar for Friday and I’ll see if I can get you an invite to the Chancery. The Queen’s birthday. I’ll have Culhane in tow.”

“I won’t be available, I’ll have drowned by then.”



At the British Chancery, off Massachusetts Avenue, a celebration was underway honoring the Queen’s birthday. Flickinger passed around the line of cars dropping off members of the diplomatic corps, gadflies, and senior bureaucrats, then eased up the wrong-way lane at the side of the building, turning in to a parking space reserved for service deliveries.

Cutting the engine, he said, “We’ll be using the back way.”

“Would you prefer to handle this?” asked Culhane.

“I’m not even sure what it is you want.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Cowperthwaite’s office was at the end of the third floor. Paneled in waxed oak, with a high ceiling and wide windows, it looked like a room where any prominent London merchant might spend his day plodding about for profit opportunities.

Fiftyish, portly but not short, a lock of his sandy-gray hair slanting over one eyebrow, Cowperthwaite wore a fine-check hound’s-tooth suit and ankle-high jodhpur boots that shined almost as brightly as Sant Saxa’s shoes.

“Tea?” asked Cowperthwaite as they took their seats. Both men declined.

“Ah, well, to the Queen anyway,” said Cowperthwaite. He began to core the bowl of his pipe with a penknife

“As I said earlier, Crispin, this is an unofficial visit,” began Flickinger. “Mr. Culhane here is acting as an adviser to the President. He’d like some help on a matter.”

In concise terms Culhane told the second-Secretary what was needed. It took less than two minutes to get through all four points. Even Flickinger, alert to every word, seemed impressed by the succinct briefing.

Cowperthwaite, setting his pipe down, penciled notes on a pad. He paused, looked up, covered both men with a quick glance. “You want a listing, you say, of the dollar position of all major Europe’s banks. That the size of it?”

“Yes,” said Culhane. “Who’s long and who’s short and by how much.”

“All the banks?”

“Just the major ones.”

“A Treasury matter, isn’t it?” he asked.

“We’d like it verified through a third party,” said Culhane.

“Bit irregular, isn’t it, not to have the request come through your Treasury channels.”

“The times are irregular, Mr. Secretary,” returned Culhane.

“I’ll have to run it by the appropriate ministry.”

Culhane understood both the slight rebuke and the artifice Cowperthwaite was playing at. He said simply, “We’d appreciate whatever assistance you can provide. It’s important.”

Never one to pass up an opportunity, Cowperthwaite asked, “You know the Moncotta brothers of London, Mr. Culhane? I had occasion to talk to one of them today. Told him I expected to see you, and they asked that I convey their respects.”

Culhane relaxed into a smile. “I know them well. The best gold traders in the world. How are they these days?”

“Fine, I should hope. Slow, things are ... still and all, they seem to be weathering the storms. Gold is king these days, what? “

Suppressing what he really wanted to say, Culhane replied, “Moncotta and my group did some interesting things together once.”

“I gather ... And, oh, by the way, I’m curious about something...are you somewhat familiar with this organization calling itself the Shang-Magan?”

The question caught Culhane off-guard. Hesitating, he skimped with, “Very familiar. An informal group of traders founded about three hundred years ago by the Chinese compradors, who had first served under the British and Portuguese, then served everyone needing access to China, and gradually gravitating to the world-at-large.”

“Quite so. I gather it’s not all that informal,” probed Cowperthwaite.

Culhane swept a frozen glare toward Flickinger, thinking: *If you’ve set me up, you bastard, I’ll swing you*, then answered, “Depends upon your point of view, I suppose.”

A high chuckle, like a woman’s, before Cowperthwaite said, “Yes, yes, as in so many things. You must know Joost Van Slyke?”

“Well and favorably.”

“You wouldn’t think of him as a contrabander, or would you? A drug dealer?”

“Not the slimmest chance of it.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Know the man, then you know what he will or won’t do. Van Slyke wouldn’t touch the illicit drug trade.”

“And Liu Wai of Singapore. You know him, do you?”

“I know him quite well. A very important trader. Also of the Shang-Magan, there’s no secret to it.”

“You mean,” asked Cowperthwaite, “you know of his penchant for drug dealing?”

“You’d better ask him,” evaded Culhane, who knew a fair amount about Wai’s drug operations in the Burmese corner of the Golden

Triangle. A very sore point between the two of them for a long time now.

“And, of course, you wouldn’t say if you did.”

“Not about something like that and where I’m short on facts.”

“A pity.” Cowperthwaite cored his pipe again.

“Why the questions, Mr. Secretary?”

“Nothing much. Thought I’d ask while I have this opportunity. You’re quite well known in London’s financial center.” Shrugging then. “Bit of a quid pro quo, I suppose. You want us to run your questions for you, and I thought I’d try a few of my own.”

That seemed to end it. Culhane experienced a clawing feeling that his reluctance to talk might well throw things off the track with this Britisher. If so, he’d find another way. He wouldn’t break Shang-Magan rules of confidence, not for the British Crown or anyone. He had seen documents in possession of the Shang-Magan that implicated the CIA, half a dozen other security services, the Vatican, and plenty of foreign governments in various drug operations, mostly via money laundering. It was as illegal as incest, but done anyway. The rake-offs were too tempting to pass up.

Flickinger spoke up. “I’ve one or two things to discuss, Crispin, if you’ve the time.”

“By all means.”

Getting up, Culhane said, “I’ll go toast the Queen. See you downstairs.” He turned to Cowperthwaite, already rising from his chair, and thanked him

He left as he’d come, feeling uneasy about the whole situation. It was a risk. He didn’t like bringing government into his plans, or anywhere near them. Too much loose plumbing, things draining every which way. Better trying it this way, though, than involving Squires and his bunch over at Treasury.

Leaving the elevator, listening, he went down the hallway toward a reception room. Frills and trills as people milling about, chattering emptily. Culhane edged his way toward a long buffet table at the far end of the room, and found it not worth the effort. The canapé trays

were barren. A long finger-sandwich, as if in hiding, lay tilted against a silver-bellied tea service. A huge tureen offered some sort of fruit punch, with rinds of oranges and limes floating on the surface.

He wanted a drink, but there was no whiskey in sight. The British were too practiced at the diplomatic arts to lay it on in the usual way. Not with the American press fussing about, ever ready to report high doings when others were dodging their rent collector.

A small man with a razored military haircut, wearing a white butler's coat, served him a glass of punch. One thirsty sip and Culhane could tell that the juice was spiked with rum. Lifting the glass, he toasted the Queen, whose portrait hung high on a bright white wall at the window side of the room.

He saw her then, standing in a knot of people not very far away. A vastly different vision than the woman who had accosted him that night at the Hay-Adams, but even then he'd seen enough of her to know it was the same person. She was wearing a pink suit, the pale pink of a child's Easter egg. That was where the child thing ended, though. Her hair was the color of day-old champagne, feathered across her forehead, the rest of it falling almost to her shoulders. He recalled she was about five-eight or so, and she indeed was taller than some of the men gathered around her. An upturned nose, retroussé, and in her cheeks the rose-color of snow crab that you often see in Celtic or Chinese countrywomen.

Sleek, smooth-flowing as a cheetah. And something else, too: that *I dare you look* of mischief in the green eyes. He heard the roll of her mellifluous laugh autographing the air through those glossed lips.

Excitement crackled through him as if a dangerous rumor had just circulated. He turned back toward the table, replacing the punch glass on it, his thoughts running a little loosely.

He wasn't sure if he sensed her breathing first or just the words that drew his attention. "You again," she said to his back.

Turning, he gazed at her before answering, "Hello there...the lady of the night...I didn't mean it the way it came out..."

"Hello yourself. How do you say hello in Cantonese?" she asked.

“*Chao hu*,” he answered without thinking, smiling then and noting, in her slightly parted mouth, a tiny corner was missing from one front tooth. A woman, apparently, not surfeited by too much vanity.

“It’s unfair.”

“What is?”

“Your eyes. Men aren’t supposed to have eyes like yours.”

“I know a man who can actually turn his white. Entirely white, even while he’s talking with someone.”

“I can turn mine red when I’m mad.”

“Too nice a day for getting mad.”

“Just a comment. Whatever brings you to the Queen’s Birthday?”

“High hopes of seeing you again and now I have. Aren’t I the lucky one?”

“Stop it.”

“Oh, I’m just starting.”

“The last time you brushed me off as if I were dandruff or worse.”

“Sorry. I was whipped. I’d had a fifteen -hour day and a bag full of night-work to contend with.”

“What is it that you really do? Here, in Washington?”

“I’m here to study up on how to commit newer forms of mortal sin. Seems they specialize in that around here.”

“How interesting. Any special kind of mortal sin?”

“I’m not too particular. My long-held policy is never to get too distant from temptation...after that, who knows?”

“A humorist, are you? You’re a speculator, aren’t you?”

“Sort of. Right now, I’m thinking of engaging in some sabotage.”

“How fascinating. What’re you about to blow up?”

“This embassy, if they won’t serve me a straight whisky on the Queen’s Birthday.”

“As I said, a humorist. Okay, I’ll bid for them,” bantered Andrea. “Your eyes. How much?”

Taking a chance, Culhane replied, “Two hot kisses carefully applied.”

And he was wonderfully surprised, when she leaned into him and brushed her moist warm mouth near his, all done in one eccentric instant. "I'll settle for an interview," Andrea returned. "I've been studying up on you." Her face very eager now, very alive and expectant.

"Know anything that I don't but should?"

"Just what's in our files. Not enough scandal to be any real fun, but lots of the inscrutable and things like that."

"Bored you backwards, I'll bet."

"El-wrongo," said Andrea. "May I call you Rushton?"

"Call me anything you like." She had moved her hips, and the light on her face changed so he could see the delicate downy fluff on her smooth cheeks.

"In that case, I'll *call* you for an interview and you won't refuse me, because this is Be Kind to Working-Girls' week."

"It always is, they say."

As if on signal, a white-coated waiter passed by and Culhane relieved him of a whisky, neat, with no ice. Andrea had declined a drink but pressed him with another sortie.

"And you'll tell me how you became a big-deal trader and all that goes with it."

"Past tense. I'm on the beach, as they say, doing my patriotic duty here in Washington."

"Won't you...*puh-lease*...I'm accurate, I'm fair, and every punch is thrown in plain sight, and always above the belt."

"But why? What's the interest in me?"

"You're from Los Angeles. That's where my paper is published. Hometown interest and that sort of thing...and besides, you're the only Californian at the White House."

No mystery to where he hung his hat, but Culhane wondered how she'd become aware of it. He knew he wasn't listed in any government directory. He saw Flickinger sliding through the crowd. And was still wondering: how in the devil does she know I speak Chinese?

"Talk to me," insisted Andrea.

Why not? Better than another night alone and so he asked. “Like to come for dinner tonight?” he asked. “We can duck out now or pretty soon. I’ve got a Smithfield ham waiting, and a car and a driver to take us where it is.”

“A ham? Where’d you get it...I mean yes...yes, I’d love to.” Her rise of excitement put a bolt down his spine.

“I get it off the black market.”

“You could be arrested.”

“Arrested? I don’t think so. Do you happen to know who buys the whiskey for these receptions? This is White Label, if I’m not mistaken. Hard to get.”

“I wouldn’t know. You can always call the Queen.”

“Maybe I will. If I can get through to her, shall I tell her you ‘d like an interview at Buckingham?”

“*Veddy* funny.”

Still, he had her smiling, while thinking he had detected a flicker of recognition in her eyes as Flickinger arrived in their midst. But it wasn’t so much that reaction as it was her way of greeting Flickinger when he introduced her to him. She hadn’t said “How do you do” or “I’m delighted” or “It’s a pleasure” or any of the usual exchanges when strangers meet. Andrea simply greeted Flickinger with “Nice to see you,” as if they had already known each other. Only a vague impression, he let it go.

“The lady and I are going to the hotel for dinner. We need a lift. You ready?”

Flickinger arranged a satisfied, even cheerful look on his face. “Never more so. I hate these damn things. A royal pain in the rear,” he said, in a weak attempt at comedy.

They bumped their way out through the crowd. Halfway to the door, Andrea circled away briefly to tell someone that she’d be catching another ride home.

On the drive to the Hay-Adams in Flickinger’s black Buick, Culhane, sitting in the back seat directly behind Andrea, mulled a little. He’d noticed the two of them crossing glances at least twice,

making him wonder if some sort of game was afoot. He decided to play a card of his own.”

“Tell me, Mr. Flickinger, is your friend Cowperthwaite an intelligence officer, too? MI-6 possibly?”

“He’d never say, if I were to ask. So I don’t know and cannot answer you.”

“I’m quite sure you do know and I think you just did answer me...”

He saw the right side of Flickinger’s face jerk a little; a grimace, a telltale.



Dinner talk had traveled in unshaped orbits, mostly of art and music, places they’d both visited in other time and days. Andrea slipped her questions in like a well-trained welterweight. Flick, move, dodge, punch. Nothing had really hit home yet. Still, she peppered away at any part of him that seemed vulnerable. The meal ended on a pleasant enough note and they had gone up to his apartment.

Pretty silky, decided Culhane, finding it enjoyable listening to her interrogation technique. And those dancer’s legs, bewitched by their graceful length and nicely toned shape. She would be stronger than she looked; he tried to guess by how much, and the guess fell flat, but the rest of her came on like censorable poetry: a woman built for the night.

“Whatever has quieted you?” he asked, amused, ready for more.

“I was wondering what it’s like speculating for a living. Like gambling, I suppose.”

Culhane laughed.

“Tell me. I’d really like to know,” said Andrea.

“Roulette with your nerves. Most of the time you’re buying things you never see from someone who doesn’t even own what they’re selling you.”

“Sounds underhanded.”

“It’s every human wish in its first phase...and the hell with this sort of talk anyway.”

“How about college, where did you go for that?” She couldn’t remember if Flickinger had mentioned anything about it and there had been nothing in the file, either.

A blank look from Culhane, who answered, “I didn’t. I was trying to learn a trade, or how to.”

“You get harder to believe by the minute.”

“I could’ve been a good reporter maybe.”

“Bait me some other day...how did you educate yourself?”

“In alleys that have no names and in places where you keep your name to yourself.”

“True? Is that it, really?”

“Partly, though I sent away to Stanford and Dartmouth and to Cambridge in England. I asked for their curriculums. I wrote various professors who taught the interesting stuff and asked for the names of the textbooks they used...and when it was lonely and cold at sea, and there were no dames within a thousand miles, and none at all with legs like yours, I fell in mad love with my textbooks.”

Looking down at her legs, a blush rising on her throat, Andrea said, “That’s remarkable. Self-made, self-educated, self-propelled. Wowie!” Arising from the nubby-textured white davenport, she went over to inspect the small Cezanne again. Impasto, thickened with oil from the artist’s hand, captivating her. She had an urge to touch it gently, though resisted the impulse.

“All these and a dinner of Smithfield ham. I would’ve come just for the etchings,” she said around a soft smile.

“I didn’t know or I could’ve saved on the ham.”

“Pooh!” She made a clown’s face, then asked, “You still haven’t told me what you really do here for Halburton.”

“I run his warehouses. All the stuff you can’t get with food coupons. You couldn’t get it even with cash on the barrel-head.”

“That’s hard to accept.”

“It’s not a secret. Ask the Pentagon procurement people. I’ve got a good half of them cursing me by the hour.”

“Is that right?”

“Yep. It’s your job to get the truth, isn’t it? Isn’t that what a journalist does? That’s the truth, that I’m a warehouse manager. Strategic materials. And you’ve mentioned hardly anything of your own background, by the way.”

“In a single word, Vassar...and that man who drove us here from the Embassy. Who is he?” said Andrea disingenuously, without skipping a beat.

“Flickinger? He’s a grumbler employed by the intelligence community.”

“He must be some grumbler, if he’s entitled to a car.” Ah-ah! thought Andrea, this is going to be some doozy of a report for Mister Clay Flickinger. Culhane doesn’t fib even when I open the door for him with white gloves on.

“The grumblers always get the cars. Way of the world.” He stood up. “I need more music, and maybe a drink. How about you?”

“Is it strong? The drink?”

“Izarra. It’s Basque and you can fuel a boat with it.”

“More of that Diana Krall music, too. Is that included?”

“You got it.” Culhane departed for the small pantry, where he kept the Izarra and the few Honduran cigars he had left.

Strange, she thought, those damn eyes of his never leave you. An invasion of privacy somehow. Art, he knows a lot about art. That Cezanne is genuine, I bet. I’d like to know for sure. And music, too. Eddie Sauter and Fletcher Henderson and Joe King Oliver—God, who even remembers them anymore. And under all those California or Hawaiian easy airs is an unmothered soul on steel wheels. He pumped me dry all the way through dinner and I hardly realized it. A charm-boy, and he is too, dammit! I wonder what a man like him dreams about when awake. Or who he dreams about when asleep. Probably naked grain barges.

No Krall, instead she heard Nancy Wilson trilling “Send Me Yesterday”. Then his footfall and here he came with two snifters of the Izarra, and in one of his hands a cheroot.

Lifting the clear liqueur to her mouth, Andrea hesitated, a brief sniff, then took a wallop of it. Her eyes closed into two tight creases. Shoulders wiggling, she choked out, “*Grrraad*,” then gasped. “Johoosus! It’s Draino!”

“It’s similar to Italian grappa. You’re not supposed to gargle with it,” said Culhane, laughing. “There’s some wine in there, I think, if you’d rather have—”

“No, no! Never let it be said that Andrea Warren failed in her obligations to promote the Basques. I went to the San Sebastian jazz festival twice. Fabulous—”

Suddenly, the lights went out. None of the usual flashing on and off to warn everyone that the power was going off until morning, but just an instant blackness, as if a fuse had blown.

“My God,” said Andrea, “what...oh, God, what hour is it? What’s going on? Don’t they let you know?”

“Feel around until you find the drawer in that table next to you. Candles are in there somewhere.”

“Oh! Bloody hell, there won’t even be taxis now.”

“Relax and find the candles.”

Culhane heard her rummaging in the drawer. His eyes were not yet accustomed to the darkness, and he closed them, while thinking.

“I’ve got them. They’re sort of small, aren’t they?”

“Just hold on. I’m waiting for my eyes to adjust.”

“You think I’m taking off for Paris or somewhere? Damn, how am I going to get home?” Remembering she’d been stranded once before when visiting this hotel.

“Someone waiting up for you?”

“It’s very awkward, you know, outside in the dark, alone and everything.”

“Go easy. The bats don’t fly for an hour or so.”

“I am easy, dammit “

Crossing the room, barking his shin against a coffee table, muffling a curse, he could hear breathing. Close enough now to fix the outlines of her shape.

“Hold out one candle and I’ll try lighting it with my Honduran.”

“I assume that means your cigar.”

Laughing, reaching, he felt the touch of her wrist, then moved his fingers over hers until he got a hold on the candle. Building the cigar up to a redder ash, he met it with the candle’s wick.

“There,” he said, “that’s one. Let me have the other.” And did it again.

Reaching into another drawer, he found two glass holders at the back of it, and planted the candles in them. He smelled her fragrance again.

“Jasmine. From Floris, am I close?”

Startled, she said, “Not one man in a thousand would know that. Does your wife wear it?”

“No.” But he’d known a Chinese woman once in Hong Kong who had.

“You really clam up when it comes to your wife, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. I’m the private type and she’s quite ill.”

“Sorry, really I am sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay. It’s just the way it is. We lost a child and she thinks it was her fault. But that’s not so.”

“I’m sorry twice then... You know, I’ve got to find a bed tonight, and that’s not a proposition.”

Her thoughts just then were much less convincing than she hoped the words sounded; a thrumming feeling inside, and moisture, too. Imagining that a flush was creeping over her skin, she was glad for the darkness.

“I can ring the desk,” said Culhane. “They probably have an extra room. At about seven-hundred bucks.”

“That’s out of the question. Criminey!”

“Or you can use the spare bedroom here. I’ll lend you a robe, and I know I’ve got a fresh toothbrush.”

“Would you? Oh, would you really?”

“Sure. Besides, this place needs a little scandal.”

“It’s no time to be funny.”

Taking one of the candles, going to his bedroom, he found a yellow silk robe that he’d worn possibly twice, never even remembered packing when leaving Bel Air. In the bathroom closet, almost scorching the papered shelves with the stubby candle, he located the toothbrush, still in its cellophane wrapper.

He saw her in the vague light when he returned. “I’ve got the duds,” said Culhane, holding out one arm with the yellow robe draped over it.

“My color even.”

“Some redhead made off with the blue one.” He had meant it as a joke, but could tell she didn’t take it that way. No velvet laugh issued. “Better take the other candle.” Culhane led her across the room and through a short hallway that ended with a door to the bedroom. “Thank you,” said Andrea. “I mean it. Very thoughtful of you.”

“Extra towels are in the closet, and the warm water comes on at seven. It’s never hot.”

Later, Culhane lay in bed, his head creasing the pillow, a candle flickering on the nightstand and the last dram of Izarra in his hand. He thought about Crispin Cowperthwaite, then found his mind drifting toward Andrea Warren.

Amusing, rather innocent, handsome rather than a classic beauty, quite bright. Candid. Christ, was she candid. He had learned some things, finally. Schooled in Europe and America, familiar with Cap Ferrat and Deauville and Capri and many elsewheres. A Fifth Avenue filly, the daughter, as she put it, of some deceased diplomat. Seems to know a hell of a lot of people, but not saying much about herself. Early thirties, he guessed. One of those coy delighters who would say, “A woman who tells her age will tell anything.” Didn’t matter anyway. A jasmine-and-julep kid, really, despite the latent animal lurking in those wildly promising loins.

## COMPRADOR

He blew out the flame, but not the images of her; those continued to flirt, making sleep a stranger.



Moving slowly down the street, an olive-drab Army truck coughed oily exhaust into the clear morning air. A mean-looking Negro soldier, his helmet as shiny as a billiard ball, with a carbine slung on his shoulder, rode on the truck's running board. On his field jacket he wore the joyless yellow stripes of a sergeant.

Otherwise, the quiet of Saturday morning in heavily patrolled Washington.

Observing the bookbinder's store before crossing the street was an unnecessary act. But then, Flickinger's wariness was founded on experience; the experience bought and bought again in the swamp of human perfidy.

Who knew about the Bulgar? In the end, thought Flickinger, who really knows about anybody? Caution was Flickinger's obstinate vanity. Crossing the street, jaywalking against a red light, he moved like the squirrel that never lets anything come between it and the nearest tree.

He knocked at the Bulgar's quaint little factory, and heard the heavy steps shuffling up to the door. A green shade was pulled aside, and Flickinger saw the genial face staring back at him through the glass. A bolt slicked back almost soundlessly, and he entered through the opened door.

The Bulgar stepped back. With the dark brown walrus mustache, the twinkling eyes, and the heavy features, he looked like the gravure on a tin of straight-cut Balkan tobacco. A grappler for a hand at the end of a heavily muscled arm came toward Flickinger. Two fingers were missing up to the second joint.

Almost snorting, the Bulgar said, "Vilkom. Good to see." Behind the strong accent was the stronger breath of garlic.

Flickinger shook the outstretched hand, afterward wiping his own absently on the side of his trousers. The Bulgar made no pretense about wiping his lamed hand twice on the ink-stained apron he wore over black, chalk-streaked trousers.

“Having a problem with the paper, I hear.”

The Bulgar’s face darkened. Stepping around Flickinger to lock the door again, he said, “S’ not good. I make a compare. Not good.” “Exactly what is wrong with it?”

“Cuba goven-a-men paper hasa more rag in it. Leetle more silk also.”

“Where did your present paper stock come from?” asked Flickinger.

“E-spana.”

“I’ll look into it. I’d like to read the book now.”

“Kom,” suggested the Bulgar, who ran his gimp hand through oiled hair of shiny-ridged waves.

They moved across a clean-swept hardwood floor, going by an old-fashioned counter of beveled green glass, through a brown pleated curtain, to the working area behind the shop’s customer area.

Several stools surrounded a long bench. A large smudged skylight poured morning light into a room that smelled of fixing glue, compound oil, beeswax, and cured leather. Flickinger was led over to a stock shelf. The Bulgar reached up and pulled down the diary, which was bound in apricot-dyed leather and bordered with scrolled lines of deep orange.

“Always here, the one mosta to the left,” said the Bulgar, pointing. The shelf held another dozen or so diaries of the same design, their color so bilious that no one had ever bought one.

“Fine. I’ll just ask for some privacy and read it here on one of the stools.” A puzzled frown swept the Bulgar’s gargoyle face until Flickinger added, “I wish to be left alone.”

“Yah,” and the bookbinder lumbered off through the curtain, his broad back and loose shuffle reminiscent of a trained bear.

Flickinger pulled a key case from his pocket, opened it, then inserted a duplicate key in the diary's brass lock. Going to the nearest stool, he sat and read Andrea's neat handwriting:

*I've seen him twice now. No real facts and, if there were, no way to verify them.*

*You listen long enough to the man (and I could do it for hours) and the feeling prints that he is indeed different. Is he the ultimate risk-machine? I don't know. What I do know is that he is no one-trick pony. Yes, he dares, probably thrives on it, searching perhaps for the limit, which he can withstand.*

*Human? Compassionate? I think so. Caught up by art and music, certainly. True hobbies it seems. People with souls of granite don't camp out in museums, and he does or did. I studied art and music in Europe for years (as you well know) and I feel like a lighted match next to his floodlight.*

*Throw the glass on him and you see shades inside other shades. You've seen, I'm sure, that easy and smooth charm of his. I think it's genuine. I think it would work fine on the King or the King's bootmaker. He learned about people somewhere... perhaps in the orphanage or as a runaway to sea, though I somehow doubt it was either of those places.*

*Yet he's coiled, cruising around like a shark in shallow water. Even money or better, I'd bet you he is capable of manipulating events as well as anyone in Washington. Better, perhaps. I get an impression he's got the cold guts of a second-story jewel thief.*

*Women would always find him attractive. He gives off that delirious feeling that makes the little hairs of your neck stand up. Why? Adventure, I guess. And an honest-to-God man for certain. Any real woman would like a crack at taming it all to size.*

*I cajoled him like the very devil to discuss some of those historical speculations of his. Fascinating! I never realized he was the one who broke up the notorious silver cartel attempted by the Texans and their Arab friends.*

*Make no mistake about one thing. You are dealing there with a first-rate brain. Very different radio waves work up there.*

*More later.*

A popping sound as Flickinger snapped the diary shut. He shifted his weight on the hard stool, momentarily thinking that whoever worked in this room would need inch-thick calluses on their ass.

Womb talk! Not a usable fact in the lot. Still, it was early. She'd need time to penetrate, anybody would. She'd done the right and professional thing not to refer to Culhane by name. She'd done the wrong one in mentioning the silver business. The smallest slip could lead to the most serious, even fatal outcome. And he recalled again Andrea's father, who had sniffed at the wrong pot once too often, and caught a bullet for it in Athens.

Arguing with caution, he gave way to it and opened the diary again. Carefully, Flickinger ripped out the pages Andrea had penned so precisely. From his coat pocket, he removed a small blue card with three questions typewritten on it. *More later*, he thought, relocking the diary and placing it at the very left of the shelf.

He passed through the curtain again and reentered the shop's small reception area. Hunched over the counter, the Bulgar was looking through a magnifier into the face of a complicated rubber stamp used for Polish entry visas.

He put the magnifier down, shifted a foggy gaze in Flickinger's direction, and reminded, "Vill see about paper?"

"Vill see," Flickinger parroted in a hard voice, then asked, "Was the book brought here by a woman?" Staying far enough away so he wouldn't be smoked again by the garlic.

"Messa-ger. Wrapped in box. You want box?"

"I'd prefer a surgeon's mask."

A cold one, rarely smiling, this Flissa-ger, thought the Bulgar. And too thin in the belly, which would make him even thinner in the heart.

Flickinger went to the door, threw the bolt; two steps later, he heard the bolt slide into place behind him, a metallic snicking-sound, reminding him of a rifle being chambered with a round of ammunition.

A tense man with tense thoughts. At Langley, they'd want a report, want a fix on what Culhane and Halburton were up to. Flickinger, dispirited, had nothing for them as he faded into the remains of Saturday morning. He'd drop by Diligence, LLC, a company populated with ex-CIA and British Intelligence operatives, who did deep vetting and information screening for worldwide corporations. He consulted for them, on the side, and often they could be depended upon to trick-up useful ideas, when matters became sticky.

*Capable of manipulating events. No one-trick pony*—and for the next block, ambling along, he dwelled on those notations of Andrea Warren's.



In the White House, a harassed Halburton was concluding an unpleasant session with a four-star Air Force general.

“We’re getting our throats cut inch by inch. Half our squadrons are grounded. No parts, no spare engines, and fuel supplies are abysmal.”

“I’ve got a new man here helping on that problem,” countered Halburton.

“A hundred magicians couldn’t solve our problems.”

“Give it a chance.”

“We’re running out of time, Mr. President. You’ve got to decide on the Hormuz question, and soon.”

“Hormuz is hardly a cure-all.”

“It’s part of it. This is a battle for resources, and you take what—”

“You take it a step at a time is what you do. And I won’t have the military pressuring me prematurely.”

The general made a small ceremony of examining his manicured nails, then looked into Halburton’s seamed face before saying, “Sir, that choice may be taken from you.”

“And you’ll all be sacked and worse,” said Halburton. “You’re overstepping yourselves.”

“You can’t fire the whole of the armed forces, can you, Mr. President? We’re at the edge and the headwinds are not lessening. China has six warships in the Caribbean and we’ve not enough fuel to respond and chase them out. Russia’s selling missiles to Venezuela. Jamaica has Russian radar sites.”

“I’m aware. Well aware, in fact. Your colonels are here every day, briefing us. Yelling, too.”

Halburton stood, indicating that the meeting was over, that he’d had enough, but knowing he had no ready answer to the Air Forcer’s last question. He felt as if he were swimming naked among hidden knives half the time, about to be sliced to the bone, his legal authority and the power that came with it being pared daily; rankled too by the general’s not so subtle defiance.

He knew a great deal about the U.S.’s vulnerability, was reminded by the day if not the hour. A hunk of what was left of the American Navy patrolled the Indian Ocean, to the south of the Straits of Hormuz, keeping a vigilant eye on the most vital oil lane on earth. The Navy wanted more ships there; he had had to refuse them. Feelers were out by State and Defense, asking if the Brits, the French, and the Italians could help out.

So far, they all seemed worried, justifiably so; that placing more warships in the Gulf would be viewed as a direct provocation, that the Saudis, Iraqis, Iranians might rebel, triggering a chain-reaction that would lead to a shut-off of Russian oil, the flow westward abruptly ending with the turn of the valves and wheels at several pumping stations. In Europe, the lights would go out.

Allies, where were they? What allies?

## COMPRADOR

As if that were not enough to deal with, the Supreme Court's Chief Justice had paid an unusual call on the White House several hours earlier. The Court, it seemed, entertained heavy doubts over the legitimacy of the past year's legislation passed by Congress and signed by Halburton. In spite of soldiers posted at key points to protect the Congress, angry mobs fearlessly stormed the Capitol buildings. Snipers, never caught, had killed three senators and eleven members of the House. In some states, congressional districts were no longer represented; no one dared or cared to run for office.

Questions arose, at the Court, if the government in the discharge of its duties was conforming to the Constitution.

Yet another brewing crisis.

Halburton had had no answer, nor did the Chief Justice even have a suggestion.

## New York

**J**oe Rearden's nerves are shot, decided Guido Grasselli, as he leaned back into his leather-trimmed banker's chair. Bored, he dialed out the swarms of words buzzing around. Someday he would run the New York Corporation, and there wouldn't be any of this quibbling, either. A few well-chosen words, a gesture, the right sort of look would suffice. Italian-style, with respect, with enforcement if called for.

It wasn't enough, he thought, to have power: you had to use it, you had to plant and grow fear, then reap it for gain.

Why make it so complicated? Culhane wasn't a threat. But look at the Chief skittering around like some hen in heat...and Squires, who considered himself so goddamned smooth and necessary. Even his kid over there, who retained his Senate seat with a smile and money and more money, and had kitty litter for brains.

Caught up in Joe Rearden's steady glare, Squires was searching around for an answer. Grasselli tuned back in.

"Joe, none of us can tell Halburton who he can talk with or can't."

"An Okie," answered Joe Rearden drily, "we get a hick who should never have gotten on the party ticket. And he pulls in Culhane, for chrissakes!"

"Mr. Rearden." Guido Grasselli came alive now. "What can Culhane really do? He's broke. There gotta be ways to enlighten him." Grasselli moved to ease the weight of the .38 Colt Special in his shoulder holster.

"Do! Culhane can block us from selling our inventories into the stockpile."

A wild card of thought, and Joe Rearden leveled his attention on his son. "Tim, can't the Senate investigate? Can't you figure out a

way to bring pressure, embarrass Halburton, force him to get rid of Culhane?"

A dreamy, almost empty look on Tim Rearden's face. "Culhane doesn't even appear on a government payroll. My staff checked it. Nothing. More to the point, the White House hasn't even asked us to authorize gold to pay for additions to the stockpile program. So there's nothing to investigate."

"When was the last time the Treasury audited the gold stocks?" asked Joe Rearden of Squires.

"Years ago. I'd have to check the date. The books don't balance, though. They never have, or so I'm told."

"Be a hell of a row in the papers, I suppose," observed Joe Rearden, standing up.

He walked to a window overlooking Park Avenue, idly rapped his knuckles against one pane of glass. A truck, no cars, and scattered pods of people. Trash in black refuse bags was piled up in front of the buildings across the avenue. Some of the mounds reached as high as the first story, and would stay there until the fire department burned them on the islands separating the wide avenue.

Joe Rearden spoke to the window panes, though loudly enough for the others to hear. "I want Culhane out of there. Now what are your thoughts, if any?" he demanded, swinging around to face Grasselli.

"As I say, the guy is broke. He closed down, didn't he? Plenty of ways to tie rocks to him, sink him."

Squires arched his neck backward. His mouth tightened so that it became the color of his pallid face. Tim Rearden diverted his eyes to a far corner of the room.

Realizing that he'd been misunderstood, Guido Grasselli attempted to smooth it all over, "What I mean is, we make him a deal. A skiff, a sort of silent partnership."

"Cut him in?" asked Joe Rearden in disbelief.

"Sure," said Grasselli, "we splice him in for maybe six or eight percent. And, if we have to, we fix him up something overseas—"

Christ, thought Grasselli, stopping in mid-sentence. I almost recommended we tie Culhane into Braunsweig and Sohn. Damn near said it in front of flint-nose Squires.

“He might buy it,” Joe Rearden said. “Then again, he might not. What then?”

“Let’s see what he says. There’s always other ideas we can think of,” Grasselli said.

“Such as what?” asked Joe Rearden of the lawyer.

“We get him to do a few big buys from us. Without him knowing about it, we credit him with some big commissions. He’s made to look like he’s on the take. We leak the word, we compromise him, and whoosh—he’s gone. He’s finished.”

“We thought he was finished months ago.”

“It’s just a nuisance thing. We can fix it,” assured Grasselli, adding, “Mr. Rearden, I got a meeting across the river tonight. Got to start out soon. It takes a while.”

“On your way then. And check with me tomorrow.”

Casting nothing more than a sidelong glance at Joshua Squires, Grasselli passed by Tim Rearden and said in a lowered voice, “See you soon, Senator. Keep it all the way up.”

Through the door, and Guido’s thoughts leaped to the meeting that evening over in Jersey City. The food, the booze, and the broads would be good. The jokes a scream, but loud arguing over the cut. Two *capos* would be there.

No matter how detailed the accounting records sent in each month, they always had questions. Always the fucking questions, like they’d forgotten how to count. “Why can’t we reconcile the Montreal account?” “There’s no entry for the transfer from Curacao to Switzerland.” “The exchange rate at Braunschweiger”—they never said Braunsweig—“looks like someone cooked it in shit.” In the end, the genuflections done with, the ledgers would square. Maybe a small adjustment here and there, but with the huge wash of money funneled offshore over the years, what the hell could they expect?



As the door had closed behind Grasselli, the agenda assumed a newer direction. Joe Rearden stood by the large mahogany partner's desk, its surface streaked by a shaft of late afternoon light.

"In a month, perhaps two, we should have enough stock accumulated to control Citigroup. How does the bank-refinancing legislation stand?" he asked Squires.

"The Treasury is ready whenever the Senate is. The working drafts of the bill are done."

"Tim?" asked his father.

"All hung up on the question of reforming the currency with gold backing," said Tim. "Halburton wants it one way, the rest of us another." He spoke listlessly, another void look decorating his face.

"What are the chances of getting Congress to reopen the banks by issuing gold guarantees?" Joe Rearden asked.

"Fifty-fifty. All depends on how the U.S. gold reserves are ultimately allocated. You can't consider one bill without the other."

"And what about this *external* dollar you mentioned the other day?" Joe Rearden asked Squires.

"It won't go far. It's an old plan that Halburton wants dusted off again."

"Sorry. What's that again?" asked Tim.

"A two-currency system," Squires told him. "One for domestic use, the other for foreign transactions."

"I haven't been briefed on that one," Tim said.

"It's an old study, Tim," said Squires. "Nothing to concern yourself with...yet the biggest problem is still the enormous pool of dollars in Europe. Unless we get those back, you can't back a new dollar with gold. Europe would have what's left of Fort Knox in its pocket in one day"

"You think Culhane's meddling in it?"

“I don’t see why. He can’t do anything about it. That’s our jurisdiction and the Federal Reserve’s. “

“Check into it. You’ll be wanting to get back to Washington,” Joe Rearden said to Squires. “Talk to Halburton again. Maybe, he’ll change his mind about Tim here.”

“I can certainly try,” said Squires haplessly.

“Do better than *try*, Joshua. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have family business with my son.”

And, like Grasselli before him, the Secretary of the Treasury was dismissed. But then, Joe Rearden had rescued Squires after the New York banks closed. He’d loaned him gold, saved his mansion in Glen Cove, even salvaged the man’s faltering reputation, and maneuvered to get Squires appointed as the treasury chieftain under the former president. In exchange, he only asked for Squires’s soul, and found that it could be had on the cheap.

Sitting quietly in the wing chair, Tim Rearden had hardly opened his mouth. Like a fly on the wall, he saw, he heard, but he didn’t really grasp some of the intricacies that had been exchanged. With none of his father’s cunning, for most of his adult life he’d been a gofer inside the larger machinery operated by Joe Rearden and the New York Corporation. The best staff, a remarkable public relations team, wealth, a real power in the Senate—he had it all, and the all of it was provided by the iron-minded man in front of him now.

His closet sexual life, the foreign-aid kickback schemes, Mafia affiliations—what if any of it were to come under a hard probe by the media? They always fingered somebody who talked. He’d lose the next election, likely, and his use to the family would collapse to zero. His thoughts were rudely invaded, when his father mentioned, “Squires thinks he’s a lead-pipe cinch to come back to Citigroup when we reopen it, eh?”

“Isn’t he?”

“The carpentry for his cross is almost finished.”

“Then why,” asked Tim, “do you want him pushing this second Bank Refinancing Act? He’s bound to look like a savior if it goes through.”

“Let him look any way he wants to. If the law goes through, we’ll be in line for our share of the gold guarantees. We want those, and that’s your end of the business. That’s why you’re a New York senator and not a dress designer.”

Tim Rearden blushed, but said nothing.

Chin hardening, Joe Rearden said, “Just remember we’re in a time of crisis. And out of its ashes will come the greatest empire this nation has ever seen. Better than Morgan’s or Rockefeller’s or Gates’s or Buffet’s or any of them. That’s what the New York Corporation will be. Get the bill passed and I’ll tend to Squires.”

“Is that all, are we finished?”

“We’re never finished. We’re just beginning. If you handle things in the Senate the right way, we stand to pick up the carcasses of some potentially valuable properties. And cheap, too, and we might even get them with dollars. By the way, your mother would be pleased to have lunch with you.”

“Why didn’t you say?”

“I just did, you ninny. I’m already booked for lunch. I’m to attend a meeting of the Archdiocese’s Finance Committee with the Cardinal.”

“Don’t tell me they’re in trouble.”

“Nothing that can’t be handled,” Joe Rearden said, dismissing the question.

Tim Rearden unwound from the wing chair, centered his tie, and calculated how he might dodge a long, boring luncheon with his mother. Endless questions, new charitable crusades to hear of. He would plead some excuse or other. And Grasselli, where the hell did he get off with that snide insult—“Keep it all the way up.”

Horrible, swaggering prick.

## Ukraine

An aging man, curved over at the shoulders, propped up by a wooden staff, gazed sadly across the fallow plains that lay flat beside a village north of Stanislav. His long face, as ridged and dark as a walnut, saw death. The death of the land. Where once there had been an endless golden carpet of wheat, now it looked like an infected carcass. Even the wolves passed it by; and, greatest of all insults, so did the birds.

And he knew in the way peasants always do that, down the length of the Ukraine, it was the same everywhere. Murmurings from the other villages—cousin to cousin and landsman to landsman—were always the same. Another year of scorching, with the sun pounding down like a blacksmith's hammer

A scourge. A saying from his tattered Old Testament: *“Has the rain a father? Who sired the drops of dew?”*

He knew.

Three seasons now. Wagons empty. Tractors stilled. Women sulking, men as hot-tempered as the sun above, and their children bewildered. An old story written many times over the centuries. As far back as man's beginning.

He spat. Nothing but juiceless air came from his cottony mouth. The old man knew he would die soon; it gnawed that he wouldn't see this land in flower again. He was ready to die, and even to see how death would catch him. But the land wasn't supposed to die.

Turning around on the humped knoll, the old man dug his walking-staff into the parched ground, catching it in a small hole. He looked down into a nest of starved field mice. He knelt, the effort painful. With gnarled hands, he scraped baked dust over them.

He thought of his people, and thought too of the Ukraine, the great breadbasket for this part of the world. No grain, no bread. God must be very angry, he thought, to punish us so severely.

## Washington, D.C.

**T**he sound drove deep into Culhane's stupor before he was alert to what it meant. Groping into the blackness, he found the culprit.

"Mr. Culhane?" came an unfamiliar voice over the telephone.

"Um-hmm."

"I'm Guido Grasselli. I'm in-house legal counsel for the New York Corporation."

Strange sensations ran along Culhane's ribs. He'd heard Sant Saxa refer on past occasions to Grasselli, but had never met the man. Rearden either, for that matter.

"What is it?"

"Apologize for calling so early. We've an important matter to propose. Can I see you?"

"Time is it?"

"Ah... five- twelve."

"Up pretty early, eh? What matter is that, Mr. Grasselli?" Culhane sat up slowly.

"Private. We'd need some privacy," said the voice, lowering.

Culhane paused, trying to recall his schedule. Intrigued, too. "Is it about those open grain contracts you hold of mine? Until the markets open again—"

"No, no. Maybe those, but something more important."

"Five this afternoon might work out."

"No good, Mr. Culhane. I've got an afternoon reservation for New York. Impossible to change," said Grasselli, coming across smoothly.

"I'm leaving to go across the park in forty minutes or so. You can walk along if you like."

“Jesus, I ain’t even dressed yet!” The voice not so smooth now.

“Make it an hour. I’ll look for you downstairs at the reception desk.”

“Yeah, sure,” agreed Grasselli. “Okay, see you there.”

Culhane replaced the phone. Curiosity fanned his interest. Joe Rearden obviously wanted something. Untangling himself from the bed sheets, he went to the window, pushed aside the curtains, and looked out across the low skyline. A burst of eastern light, like an immense lemon rind, had begun to peel away at the gray dawn.

Culhane’s eyes traveled down to the statue of Andrew Jackson in the center of Lafayette Square. A smile crept over his mouth as he recalled a crack made by Andrea Warren two days earlier. They’d sat in the park sharing a puny lunch of apples and imitation Grana Padano cheese.

Dangling a bright ripe apple by the stem, Andrea had looked up at Jackson’s face and said: “You suppose Eve could have tempted that tough old bastard with one of these the way she did Adam?”

“If she were cute enough, maybe. Somewhere I once read that Jackson’s two deepest regrets in life were that he hadn’t been able to shoot Henry Clay or hang John Calhoun.”

They’d laughed. Laughs were scarce. On that day they’d been scarcest: Boston was engulfed in another two-day citywide food riot, which even the National Guard couldn’t stamp out, and prairie fires were reported in the Dakota grain lands.

A thought blacker than India ink: there was actual talk of censoring the news to calm the nation. Halburton possessed the authority under the Emergency Powers Act. Nobody really knew whether he’d invoke it to calm the country but Andrea worried about it.

“Don’t fret,” he remembered telling her.

“You scare the water out of me sometimes,” she’d said.

“Why?”

“Because you’re too...I don’t know, cool, I guess.”

“You’re sitting next to the most frightened person I know of.”

“Rarely, I bet.”

“Always. That would be a better bet.”

And that was the way he felt, turning away now from the freshening sky. Alone, he drifted into a loneliness that seemed to squeeze his insides. It had been a long, long time now since he'd had sex and it wore on him. He was no womanizer, but there were limits. He repressed a sigh and headed for the sink and a rendezvous with his straight razor.

Later, down in the lobby he saw who he guessed was his early morning caller. Fairly tall, in good physical trim, and dressed in a dark worsted suit, Grasselli's cold eyes contrasted with the fluffy hair ringing his smooth-featured face. A lean face except for the mouth, which was wide and puffy. Culhane felt the man's eyes cover him like a search warrant, and noticed, too, that Grasselli hadn't found time to shave.

“I'm Culhane.”

“Grasselli. Guido Grasselli.” Taking Culhane's hand, he felt the force of its grip right up to his elbow.

“Shall we go,” Culhane said. “I'm in something of a time-bind myself.”

They left the hotel, crossed Sixteenth Street, and made their way along one of the crosswalks in the park.

“Mr. Rearden sends his respects,” said Grasselli, attempting to break the ice. He skipped a step or two, trying to keep pace.

Culhane, looking into the distance, listened closely to the tone of the stranger's voice. Every so often it seemed to jerk nervously.

“What is it that Joe Rearden wants?”

“An accommodation of interests. Slow down, can't you?”

Culhane braked his step, pointing to the bench near the Jackson monument, thinking of Andrea again. “We can rest it right here for a few minutes, then I'm off to a meeting.”

Grasselli narrowed it down: “Mr. Rearden thinks the New York Corporation can provide substantial assistance to the stockpiling effort. We've still got all of our foreign offices and we've access to materials that're tough to come by these days.”

Culhane dearly wanted to know how that could be, but couldn't bring himself to ask. Pride, hard pride. "Submit a list of what you have, the quantities and prices. If we need it, we'll deal."

"We'd rather have you submit the government's requirements, then we'll do a check-off against our holdings and—"

"No thanks."

Grasselli smiled a boyish engaging smile. "We're not going to let you shop us. We're not amateurs. I wouldn't want Mr. Rearden to know you said that."

"As you wish, then."

Catching Culhane full in the eye, he said, "We can offer credit terms."

"Can you? Nice. Interesting, too. What sort of terms?"

"Depends on the volume of business."

And when you get enough of it, thought Culhane, and I'm beholden to you, and other sources dry up, then you cut off the credit and I'm right up the Sewanee River in a one-way canoe.

"I repeat, Mr. Grasselli, put your offer in writing and I'll discuss it with others."

Grasselli shook his head. "You don't seem to understand, friend. We're offering real help here. Even Congress might get interested."

Ah, the pressure now. Senator Rearden and his cronies. Threats of an investigation perhaps. A play for the media to nose its way in. Culhane could smell it, and he replied. "I wouldn't mind a talk with the Senate Appropriations Committee. Lights. Cameras. I'd like to ask Mr. Rearden's son why they refused to fund the government's need to buy materials over the past three years. Was it to create an artificial shortage so the New York Corporation could cash in. Of course, in those days the government could pay in dollars, and maybe he'd like to explain why that doesn't work anymore either."

Grasselli reddened, and nervously scraped one heel against the pavement. He pitched his last point, "Mr. Culhane, consider this from another side. More, we could even help you personally with some

well-earned finder's commissions. Something like that. Nobody has to be the wiser, you know."

Humiliation scalded Culhane. His eyes turned their telltale methyl blue, uncontrollably, as anger rose. A damn jackal like Rearden, a man who never understood the rules, has sent this bush leaguer to remind me I'm a church mouse now.

"I suppose, Mr. Ass-elli"—he couldn't resist it—"that I can be bought. But tell Rearden if he's got errands with me, next time to come himself."

"You're making a mistake," warned Grasselli.

"This meeting is one of them, too." Culhane arose from the bench. "Send me your list and we'll see."

Grasselli watched him walk away. Fuming, the lawyer decided a little checking around out on the Coast couldn't hurt. Who was Culhane but a has-been? Arrogant son of a bitch, too.



6:05 a.m.

Leaving the elevator, Culhane walked down the second-floor hallway to the Treaty Room. Up ahead he saw the secret service agent who had had the night duty: a hulker, with a neck thick as a telephone pole, enormous sloping shoulders, a former All-South linebacker for the Crimson Tide.

"Morning, Billy Joe. The Man up yet?"

"You bet," Billy Joe Rowels replied. "He did his walk already round the grounds...say, the boss got sent some Panamas the other day. You want a few? He don't smoke 'em."

"Whatever you can spare, I'd love to have."

"Go right in, he'll be right along. I'll have the 'gars ready when you leave."

"I'll owe you one."

Of all the rooms in the mansion, Halburton seemed to prefer the Treaty Room for their meetings, choosing it, and understandably so,

to the commotion of the Oval Office. A staid-looking place, reminiscent of a parlor in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century small town home. Victorian furniture, two tremendous candelabra that reached from the floor to the mantel on either side of the marble fireplace, and a gilded mirror large enough to catch the whole room in its reflection. Green-flocked wallpaper and burgundy drapes against the high windows. Paintings on the wall of Lincoln and Grant in conference, another of Zachary Taylor, and a third of Andrew Jackson. Men who'd done the business of state in here once, and now it was the Oklahoma rancher's turn.

A soft double knock. A serving cart put its linen-draped prow through the door, followed by a tan-coated black man. Greeting Culhane quietly, the steward set two places at one end of the massive-legged oak table in the center of the room. As quietly, he left.

“Good morning.”

“And to you...and to you,” repeated Halburton, courtly of manner. “Eggs, I see, and prunes. How you know you're getting old is when they give you prunes every day. Hear from your family? They all right?”

“Fine, thanks.” He wondered if Halburton knew anything at all about Karin. Probably not; and, in ways, he hoped not.

“Let's fork these yolks, then, and talk. I'll start, you eat. I've been hearing some good things from those Pentagon folks about what you're doing for them. They aren't bawlin' their heads off every five minutes. Appreciate it, I do.”

“That may change, unfortunately. We're getting shorter by the day on many of our strategics, and no one wants to trade anything for dollars anymore. We're on a bear hunt with a slingshot and we'll have to keep tightening up on what we can release. Our stockpiles are insufficient to keep this game up.” Culhane started on the eggs, the first he'd eaten in two weeks.

“Trade the wheat. We've plenty of wheat, have we not?”

“The wheat's too important to trade now that the Ukraine is in drought for the third year. They face a helluva problem. And we can take advantage of that fact...”

“Tall words.”

“A tall mess, that’s why the tall words. We’re deep in the weeds but so are they. If we handle it right, we can yank their rug. That means you’ll have to cut me some slack, steady yourself, and stop changing your mind every time we talk. You’re bad as some fourteen-year old girl sorting out the boys she likes.”

Halburton visibly reddened. “Pretty sharp talk, considerin’ you’re an employee.”

“Employee? Whatever gave you that idea? I’ve got a ten foot office I wouldn’t put a dog in, and that place at the Hay-Adams. I don’t work for you or anyone else, Halburton. I came here because I want the gold I’m owed by this government. I can help, however, and I will as long as you let me alone and don’t get in my way. And I ask you please to keep those half-assed, idiotic politicians out of my hair.”

“What politicians?”

“Those jerks from Congress who say you’re an old crony from your days up there. They call, demanding supplies for their money-backers, and whoever. Constituents, I suppose. I’m going to hang up on ‘em.”

“I’ve nevuh sent anyone to you. Not a once have I.”

“Glad to hear it. I can hang up the phone with a little more emphasis.”

“You don’t want to rile those folks up on the Hill.”

“They, by God, rile me.”

“Well, they’re the Congress of the United States—”

“What they are is pitiful. A pitiful joke.”

“I see. And that goes for me, too, I suppose.”

Culhane didn’t reply.

Mopping up some egg with a slice of toast, Halburton said, “What’re your ideas about this Hormuz business”—faltering then before he went on—“an incident? I should say creating an incident, I suppose.”

“Interesting.”

“That’s all? Interestin’? That’s all you can say? Why—”

“It cuts Europe’s throat is about all it does.”

“Some are in favor of just that. Europe’s been no friend to us. Not lately anyway.”

“Europe can always be dealt with later,” Culhane countered. “Europe, the way things are going, may end up as a fiefdom of Russia. At least, an ally. The Russians are weaker than most people think. They’re bluffers, always have been—”

“Are you some sort of expert on Russia?”

“Nope. But I, at one time, had access to some of the thinking that went on in the Kremlin,” Culhane said, thinking of Metzilov, the Magan’s paid man; in the second tier of government but usually a provider of good, reliable information. “Let me say this,” he went on, “Hormuz by itself is a flat gamble...you’re in no position to gamble, and spilling blood is senseless.”

“You’re gambling, aren’t you, isn’t that what you do with our stockpile?”

“I never gamble. I speculate, when the time is right, the information is right, and the deal is right. A helluva difference.”

“The Navy doesn’t think Hormuz will cost a single life. Very few, anyway.”

“Hormuz might be the right place. But sure as hell it’s the wrong time. At least, now it is. Couldn’t be worse, in fact.”

“They think otherwise.”

“Of course, they do. They’re gladiators waiting for their moment to lunge. I cannot assure you too strongly that unless you tie the Hormuz gambit to other moves, you’ll never reach real pay dirt. By that, I mean we have to fix things so we can blow a hole in the markets, worldwide. Buy ourselves time and room to maneuver and gain heavy trade advantages. We have to up the stakes, and then, only then, Hormuz might be a sensible play. Don’t make it a one-shot situation and throw away your aces.”

“Can you parse that?”

“I will, in a memo. But it’s not to be circulated, or I won’t write it.”

“What about your staff?”

“I could fit my staff, as you call it, in a thimble. I’ll type it myself and deliver it myself. You’ll read it and you’ll shred it.”

“When can I expect it?”

“Noontime today.”

“I should tell you that there’re those over at the Pentagon who think we must confront the Russian soon, or we won’t have the resources to stop them.”

“Let me rework the Hormuz plan. Add to it. The other steps that ought to precede the Navy’s operation. We can make it go very hard on Moscow. It’s not a bullet thing, not anymore. It’s a trade thing. So, you’d better rope in the Pentagon and get ‘em back to the drawing boards. Otherwise, you’re in for hell’s own inferno and Russia will win out in a year or two.”

“Whose side are you on?” Halburton half-shouted, his jaw clenched. His right hand shook, rattling the coffee cup against its saucer.

How could he tell Halburton that he was on no one’s side? His own side certainly, but no one else’s. So he tried mollifying the President with: “The Straits of Hormuz idea only goes part way. It has to fit into a much larger scheme to do any lasting good. That’s all I’ll say and perhaps the memo will say why. And how. And when.”

“I’ll be the judge.”

“I hope so.”

“You’ve not much faith in me, do you?”

“Not so far, I don’t.”

Halburton threw his napkin in the center of the table. Culhane stopped talking. For a strained moment, they stared, frozen, the silence almost ringing. Culhane wanted to discuss his plan for a Blue Dollar—an idea for an external currency. A version of an older Treasury initiative that hadn’t gone anywhere because they hadn’t the guts to execute it, or didn’t know how to write the music for the dance. It had potential for putting the massive U.S. debt on a basis

where it could be repaid, while benefiting the U.S. at the same time. A real trick, if he could get the White House to stand behind it.

“I don’t know how long I can hold the military. They’re threatening to go ahead with or without my approval, and I think they could do it.”

“You’re commander-in-chief.”

“Not always.”

“Well, if you tell to push the pause-button and they refuse, just kick their asses into Kingdom Come. I certainly would.”

“The talent bench in the armed forces gets thinner by the month. Too many have resigned.”

“Timing is all you’ve got. Your only real crowbar, so why throw it away?”

“You always say that, timing about this and timing about that. And I’m damned if I understand you,” said Halburton, pushing back, digging in.

“I’ll bet you understand the importance of timing the cattle markets...I’m saying only that America is floundering, because you damn politicians spent us into the grave. There is no plan of any kind that I’ve seen to get us bailed out, get industry moving again, put people back to work. No anything, no nothing. I’m saying there’re a couple of possible roads out of this jam. You’ve got to give me some rope, some time, and the go-ahead...otherwise, we’re wasting your time and my time.”

“No one else in this administration talks to me this way.”

“I’m giving it to you as straight as I can make it. No sugar coating. You have to listen to someone.”

Culhane reached for the silver coffeepot, seeing his fuzzed reflection in its bright belly as he poured. As in other times of stress, his thoughts went back to Ken-chou Ming: “*You talk trade and you talk peace. You talk war and you bargain bones.*” The Pentagon wanted a dust-up, or more than a dust-up before Americans ran out of resources needed to project power, or possibly use what power remained. No one liked being shoved against a wall and that’s what was happening

to the army and navy. He'd seen the signs of beleaguered men, read the discouragement, even fear, in their faces when the military brass came begging for materials. He could see it across the table this moment, and hear it too, even unsaid.

"Listen, you say. I'm listening to an odds-maker," Halburton jested, with a thin smile. "That's what you are, isn't it."

"Sometimes, I am. And I'd say the odds are looking dismal right about now." Time to leave, he thought. Standing, he said, "There's maybe a one-in-five chance we can swing this thing our way. But not if you move on Hormuz in some half-baked way. You better do it right, Halburton, for you'll not get a second chance, or not for a long time you won't. That'd be a hard one to be seen on your tombstone: the man who sunk America." Moving his chair into the table, he said, "You'll have the memo by noon, as I said. Pay lots of attention to the second part, the concept of the Blue Dollar. You'll probably have to shove it down Squires's throat. I might give you a hand, if it comes to that."

"Would you like his job? Take it over?"

"I'm already doing a job I didn't ask for. I can do more for you, right where I am." Glancing at his watch, he added, "I better get moving, we've got a big trade underway with Turkey. Tungsten for the Air Force's jet engines. Incidentally, well, not so incidentally, an Air Force Major-General told me in confidence at lunch last week that the air-staff has serious qualms about what the Navy is up to on Hormuz. Maybe you should listen to their viewpoint...thanks for breakfast."

Out in the hallway, another Secret Service agent had replaced Billy Joe. As Culhane went by, he was handed a Ziploc bag filled with a dozen cigars belonging to the president.

Recompense, he thought. Since he'd been in Washington, he had increased the units in the stockpile—as measured in tons—by an average of six-percent, and at no cost to the taxpayer. Swift moves, right timing, fast trading. He had Sant Saxa to thank for working the

back end of many transactions, unbeknownst to anyone other than themselves.

Owed nine tons of metal-glitter, if he could only swap it straight up for an equivalent value in the national stockpile of strategic materials, he could deal his way into a world-ranked fortune. He could likely bring it off with no one the wiser and, at times, he was sorely tempted. Acting blatantly, acting illegally, the government had reneged on a contract with him. He suspected, but wasn't sure, that Halburton had more to do with it than Halburton would readily admit to. But it was Halburton who held the sleeve-ace, and so, at least for now, Culhane knew he must kowtow to reality.

The U.S. was not the only government-operated stockpile, and, in the process of swapping materials, he became appalled at the ineptness of the traders representing other governments. Shooting fish in the barrel, as the old saying went. All to the good, for it opened up pathways that could be used to advantage, possibly great advantage. He'd been watching various moves by the Russians in the grain markets. They had tipped their hands too many times, perhaps having no choice; it was, nevertheless, quite apparent they were hurting, scouring everywhere for grain to make up for the pitifully poor Ukrainian harvests.

The notable exception to run-of-the-mill government market-dealers were the Chinese. Keen traders all, something in the genes, he supposed; an art-form they had excelled in for millennia. Lately, he'd been putting a series of tungsten trades through his old friend Richard Ming of Shanghai; Richard was the son of Ken-chou Ming, and the elder Ming had been his own mentor in the early days in Hong Kong after leaving the life of a merchant sailor.

Shanghai was high on the list of places he must visit. Yet another plan he must soon place in Halburton's in-box.

Jia Ming; what would the years exacted of her?

And his children and Karin, pretty much fending for themselves in Bel Air. Karin, in her state, was half-lost to him. But not those

## COMPRADOR

beautiful children, with their Nordic looks, and their much cherished ways, whom he so mightily missed.

Here he was, singing for his supper, and in a city he intensely disliked. At times, his rage knew no bounds; indeed, nine tons of rage.

It was still early. Instead of going down to his basement cubby-hole, he left the White House through its west-wing exit. A chill in the air. He wore no overcoat but felt no discomfort. He lit a Panama Panatela, let the tobacco-leaf taste linger in his mouth, then watched the smoke tendrils vanish in a rising stream.

Heavy thoughts plagued him. In his first imaginings of the day, he saw pieces of a plan aligning. He could do it, was almost certain it would work, if Halburton could be persuaded to brace himself against the possibility of defeat.

Thinking hard, then, of how trading tactics, wrapped in a larger strategy, could pull America out of its death-dive.

Instead of using bullets and steel.

## Washington, D.C. Amsterdam

**T**he flasher blinked excitedly. Picking up the red phone, the one in his office, Culhane motioned Flickinger to keep his chair.

“Good, and you? Cuban sugar...that much? No, ask Richard Ming first, and do the back end of it with Muldaur. Work the surplus with Japan for the tantalum carbide powder they’re offering... do it through Hong Kong covered by Luxemburg-Sirius and then shut that operation down for good...tell them the consignee is Prague, nobody will know...oh, thanks, mine too...I’ll call them tonight after the children get home. You’re doing great, Sant. Like old times again, eh, and we’ll talk soon...”

He hung up and stared into space, then at Flickinger, who with his gray looks and grayer ways had begun to remind Culhane of an embalmer. “Okay. Tell Cowperthwaite we appreciate what he’s done for us.”

“What are you going to do now? With that information?”

“I haven’t decided. Maybe nothing.” *And maybe everything*, thought Culhane. “Do you care?”

Shrugging his narrow shoulders nonchalantly, Flickinger said. “I suppose not...I couldn’t help overhear your conversation. Something about Cuba, I believe.”

“Yes. They’re unloading a surplus. Imagine having a surplus of sugar these days.”

”Would you have any way to obtain a special grade of paper used by the Cuban government for official travel documents? Visas and so forth?”

Culhane paused, then answered, "My interest might rise when I see what you've got on the New York Corporation."

"Oh, yes," replied Flickinger mildly, then lied again, "We're still sorting through the files. If we had anything at all, it might have been purged by now."

He couldn't figure a way to get at it. Elusive, like the dossier the CIA had sent over on Flickinger's service record. The contents thick as boiler steam and about as informative.

"Incidentally, tomorrow they'll have your other office ready," Flickinger said.

"I was notified yesterday. Takes a while, doesn't it."

Flickinger gestured toward the red phone next to Culhane's desk. "Wiring those things is quite a job, you know. The Army accounts for every one of them, and they're all linked through some place in Missouri."

"Really? Well, I'm through if you are," Culhane said, indifferently. Flickinger got up. "I'll be going across the river for the day, in case you need me for anything."

"Pick up the Rearden stuff while you're there. Just find it, or I'll find someone who can."

But Flickinger was almost through the door. If he heard Culhane, he gave no sign of it. Hurrying, he had things to do before catching the shuttle wagon, which went four times daily across the Potomac carrying the White House staffers and Pentagon and CIA personnel. Awkward at times but it saved precious fuel.

On the desk were four sheets of stapled paper showing what Cowperthwaite at the British Chancery had unearthed. Across the board, the story was pretty much the same. All the big banks of Europe—German, French, Italian, Swiss, Dutch—were shorting the dollar to absurd lengths. By the hundreds of billions. Culhane shook his head as he surveyed the list. Only the Brits had helped to prop up the slumping, beleaguered dollar, but finally they had thrown in the towel before the Bank of England—the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street—went down the drain, too.

He plowed into more paperwork, flipping the pages like a bank teller counting notes. Sometimes he paused to check updates on the estimated inventory positions and locations of the scarcer strategic materials: chrysotile asbestos, for one. From Zimbabwe, it was a rare material with superior electrical and thermal conductivity qualities, mainly used in missile and submarine construction.

Rhodesia. He remembered going there on a buying mission for Ken-chou Ming many years before. Twenty-two years old then, and his first real test by that brilliant, generous comprador.

His thoughts moved to Hong Kong, recalling his small apartment up by Magazine Gap. The furtive hours spent with the heavenly Jia Ming, the essence of Chinese femininity; hour by patient hour, she taught him her way of lovemaking. The fragrances, the special foods, the full and filling art of the experience.

A husband? Surely so.

*I wish golden joss*, thought Culhane, for you, Jia, and for Richard, your brother, who is saving my backside at some risk to his own.

An hour later, he left the White House for the eight-block walk to the National Archives. Culhane knew he could have requested the information he was after from the Treasury Department. Yet it might raise eyebrows, and it was a matter, anyway, on which he wanted to do his own homework.

He had become fond of the place. Museums had always been an addiction and the Archives were a special breed. The biggest pair of bronze doors in the world; prime documents on display that showed how a nation was founded. Other things, too, like films concerning everything from tooth brushing to childbearing. The magnificent to the absurd, all of it under one roof.



A pant of warm breeze filled the late afternoon as he made his way along Constitution Avenue, heading for the hotel. His third visit to the Archives, and he had most of what he needed. It was all there: the

payments made by various European countries on their official debts to the U.S.; their unpaid loans from the wars. Only Finland had settled up in full.

Interesting stuff. Useful, perhaps.

Attractive women were on the stroll, some of them housewives, he imagined, bargaining their favors for rationing coupons. True trade, illicit perhaps, but very real considering the times. Some young boys and girls sold flowers and, astonishingly, in Washington, avocados. Transported how, he wondered?

He counted seven bars that were boarded up. Early lines of people formed at the locked entrances to a few bakery shops and grocery stores. Sullen looks, pushing and shoving, angry looks and some scuffling.

Going into the Hay-Adams lobby, he called for his mail at the reception desk. A cheerful-looking girl dressed in a green jacket and dark skirt handed him two postcards and a letter.

“Excuse me,” she said, “Mr. Fredy left a message asking you to please come see him when you came in.” A very nice smile, teeth like luminous chalk.

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“Not exactly.” She hesitated. “I heard the hotel is running short on food again.”

He nodded understandingly.

“You’re new here?”

“My name is Jenny Carruthers, Mr. Culhane.”

“Hello, Jenny. This desk never looked better or brighter.” Now a leaping smile from her that disobeyed all laws of optics.

Up in his suite, he checked on the call to California. Twenty minutes or so, he was told. He loosened his tie, threw off his coat, and sat, thinking up a new litany.

He drew imaginary boxes in his mind, putting problems in various compartments: one for Karin; another for Halburton; a third for Russia and Europe; the Reardens, of course; then China. Mexico he didn’t think would present a real problem, so no box for them. The

grain reserves might become politically difficult to use in the way he thought best. The Blue Dollar would be a test of luck more than skill, a bluff that might fall flat. Or one that would bring on a banshee wail. Possibly Halburton's wail.

He felt like a drink.

The phone rang, startling him. Culhane reached over, wondering if there were problems now with the black-market deals he'd made for food deliveries to the hotel. Was Fredy in a corner again?

The hotel operator said: "Mr. Culhane, an overseas call for you."

"Thanks." Who was this?

The overseas operator came on: "For Mr. Culhane. A call from Amsterdam."

A roll of deep laugh like bass drums before the curtain lifts for the dancing girls. Van Slyke! No other laugh quite like that in the world, or at least *none* Culhane knew of.

"There you are, my friend. In that city of shame and fools. Tell me of yourself."

"Hello, Joost. My God, it's good to hear your voice. How'd you find me?"

"Your man, Saxa, that brown bastard, who trades like a Canal Street whore. And our ambassador in your god-struck city confirmed it. Why are you there?"

"A long story. I'll just be here for a short while, I hope."

Van Slyke's English sounds better on the phone, Culhane thought, less thickened and guttural—though it has never been that bad. Better than my Dutch.

"Are you employed now by government?"

"No, Joost. No violation. But I am advising them...without pay," he added.

"Good!" Now the accent was more apparent. "I hear from Muldaur, then Tomlinson, that you trade together. And with some profit. Is so?"

“No profit for me. But yes, we’re doing some things together.” Damn, thought Culhane, feeling uncomfortable having this conversation over an open line.

“I can hope you would come to me when there is business to be done...nothing personal...you understand the Council’s decision, I’m sure.”

“I’ll come to you first when there’s something very important to be done.” And there will soon be that moment, he hoped.

Another roar of laughter. “Good! Now tell me, Rushton, tell me what you think the chances of you coming back to us are?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

“No better?”

“No better, Joost, but I wouldn’t say that to anyone else.”

“I also call to tell you I have confidence, no matter your trouble. I call to find out what you want done with your reserve account with Shang-Magan. Is netted at eighteen million U.S. Not much, I’m afraid, but even so, it’s yours. I can arrange for a draft on one of the good banks to be sent.”

One-hundred million down to eighteen. His entire Shang-Magan reserve account riddled to pieces, almost worthless pieces. Did it never end? Still, not a half-mile away people were grubbing for food on the streets.

On that soured note, the conversation ended. Emptiness, loneliness set in. A picture of Van Slyke grew in Culhane’s mind. The huge, red-haired human beast, almost a man from another age, with color enough there for a dozen marching bands. He knew very little of the Dutchman’s ancestry. Probably conceived by two earthquakes, and God help the woman who’d had to labor him into this world.

Culhane remembered back to when he was first tapped for the Shang-Magan, the fifth so elected from the U.S. Then his first cruise on the big sailing junk from Mombasa in Kenya, and his surprise at the presence of women and young boys on the boat. An old custom, Van Slyke had advised him, and one that began with the Shang-Magans at least two centuries earlier. The whores and the boys were

there to keep things relaxed, loose, the mind and body free of other needs whenever business was discussed. A safe drug, Van Slyke had told him

Dismissing this reverie, Culhane went into the other room to turn on some music. Selecting a disk he'd brought with him from California, and soon hearing the vibes of Lionel Hampton.

He'd been tempted, sorely so, to ask Van Slyke if the Shang-Magan's Russian agent was still in place. Still Metzilov, was it? Placed where now in Moscow's castles? Bad form even to ask such a question. Van Slyke wouldn't have answered it anyway. If it was still Metzilov—and it might not be—it raised possibilities. Culhane had helped recruit the man, knew how and what he was paid by the Magan to furnish inside advice about Russian trade policy.

Culhane was unaware of the identity of the Shang-Magan's North American agent. Who might that be? None of the Council members knew the government agents placed within their own trading zones. The rule, a good one, lessened suspicions about unfair advantage, or unseemly complaints over conflicts of interest. It was a first-class system for obtaining trading intelligence for use by all Shang-Magans, benefitting all equally.

And all knew only so much about these worldwide agents. Culhane had recruited agent candidates for Europe and Russia; Muldaur for the Far East; Van Slyke for North America; Liu Wai for Africa, and so forth. Carefully laid down, intricately woven, the system of information—for it was a system—worked. All of it tied together in Monte Carlo, at the Inspectorate, kept under tight control by an Icelandic woman who oversaw a pool of talented researchers.

Metzilov!

Culhane remembered the Russian vividly now. A cold cobra, but clever and ambitious, and evidently on the rise. Planning, his specialty. Metzilov had fit the silhouette the Council of Six used to select and recruit its advisory agents—reasonably honest, buyable, never notable themselves but always linked closely with others who formulated real government policy at the top.

What is Russia's choke-price?

Moscow would have one, like anyone else. Russia might be capable of quick military responses. But he doubted if she would act fast in a trading crunch, at the crucial moment, when timing counted so dearly. They were too paranoid, stodgy, inelastic, didn't grasp open-ended speculation, with its advantages and snares. Too slow-footed, too worried about other's motives.

The odds were staggering, but the fascination of his craft rarely failed to bring up his blood when a big play loomed. Any huge trade like those he'd engineered once in the world grain markets, with billions at stake, would run his blood up to nearly the boiling point. To try the greatest trade ever, or the illusion of it, stretched his excitement and curiosity no end.

Culhane snapped out of it. Where was the call to California? He lifted the phone, asking for the long-distance operator. A wait. He looked at his watch. She came on. "I had a call reserved to California," he said impatiently.

"The lines aren't cleared yet."

"When do you think they will?"

"Can't say. We're backlogged two or three hours as it is."

"Goddammit anyway!" he cursed softly.

"I beg your pardon!"

The hell with it. He'd use the red phone. Culhane went over to pick it up. An Army Signal Corps communicator intervened.

"I've got to get through," Culhane said.

"The lines are preempted for military traffic, sir."

"How long?"

"Several hours at least."

"Beautiful."

He replaced that receiver too, went back to the hotel phone, got through to the White House operator. No luck there either.

It slugged him then. Unexpectedly, the way it always did, and his back shook as the feeling down in his feet went away. Culhane couldn't tell whether the moisture on his face was cold or hot. Marble,

it felt like stone up there. He tried to steel himself. More trembles came. It was happening again, and he couldn't force it down. Two deep gasps.

Alone for too long, now the feeling, the desperation throttled him again. Ever since his mother died as fast and as big as you can ever die, in front of his very eyes, these fears had hounded him. He took a step, then two, froze. A scream in the center of his soul. Crush it, dammit, he told himself.

But one of the terrorizing images appeared anyway.

He was back in deepest Africa this time. The time he'd gone there exploring for Ken-chou Ming. Up there in the Congo, where the Luba trackers, who were escorting him, had suddenly gone to ground, vanishing utterly. He'd wandered, lost, thrashing around in the jungle for days. He'd eaten grubs, roots and berries that made him physically sick. The jungle so dense he couldn't find his shadow; so strange with its noises he couldn't listen for water; so thick and heavy he couldn't take star bearings or even see the sun sometimes; so eerily quiet he swore he could hear the heartbeats of insects.

Ostracized, until the Pygmies had found him.

The trembling stopped, the fear passing now as it always did, just after leaving another invisible gash on his core. He shook himself, tasting drops of salt on his lips. He moved. Everything felt all right; sometimes it didn't. Africa! Christ Almighty, he thought.

Pain, like the pain of Karin's sexual frostbite, her fears of getting pregnant again; three psychiatrists had been unable to solve her neurosis. Not this, though. It clamped on him like a lifetime barnacle, the way it did for others who feared heights, the dark, or confining spaces.



Joost Van Slyke sank his lantern-sized jaw into the palm of one meaty hand. *Ach!* A trench of trouble out there. He slammed the flat of his other hand down on an oak table, a huge table, a huge hand, and both

jumped from the impact. With four long strides—seven for a normal man—he crossed the floor until he reached the bowed window overlooking Leidsestraat.

The expensive shops bordering the street were closed now, had been for hours. A pale light emanating from the streetlamps was barely able to cut through the fog slithering off the nearby canals. Through the haze below the giant Dutchman could see the large Golden Cricket circled in wrought iron swinging eerily over the front door to his house. The Cricket, his chop: the most famous in Europe, more respected now than Rothschild's, but not as old.

Standing there, brooding, his wedge of red nose almost even with the top of the window, he barely heard her words.

“Will there be anything else, Joost?”

A west Hollander accent. The tall caramel-skinned woman moved closer, her head almost level with Van Slyke's shoulder. A thick flow of dark hair was caught behind her head in a big bun. A wide face, gentle-looking, watched him through cautious eyes. She'd been with Van Slyke for almost ten years. Highly trusted, his *little mistress*, a sort of good luck charm, only more so.

Van Slyke sat down on the wooden heating grate under the window. It groaned under his nearly three hundred pounds. He crossed one booted foot over his other knee.

“Marit, see to raising Muldaur in South Africa. Wherever he is, I want him tonight.”

She nodded, hardly able to contain the affection she felt for her giant. Not the Golden Cricket at all, she thought, but rather a magnetic lion. A magnetic king, and yet so blind to things at times.

“And after, do you wish the other call to Washington?” asked Marit Toorenaar, a woman half-Dutch, half Indonesian.

“Tomorrow is soon enough. Though I wish you to call the Countess, tell her I'm detained. Give my apologies, tell her to proceed with dinner...I'll be two hours, perhaps more.”

Again the woman nodded, then ventured with, “A word, Joost?”

Van Slyke smiled, although it was impossible to see it through the heavy beard.

“This Countess woman,” she began, irritated, “will only bring us trouble.”

“All women do except you, Marit,” replied Van Slyke, studying her face for the jealousy he knew was in her heart.

“It is madness to invest in those boutiques in times like this. We are not retailers. Besides, I’ve been over her accounting reports a dozen times. Farcical,” said Marit, in the fearless voice of a woman speaking her very clear and certain mind.

“I know.”

“Then why?”

“Because her father was intelligent enough to restrict her income from the trust he left for her. Because she cannot come up with the capital required for this frivolity. But we can...and because, Marit, her trustees control the directorship of Stahlwerken Bruges and I want their steel, all of it I can get.”

“Do not cheapen yourself, Myjn heer.” A term of address Marit used only when provoked.

“These are cheap times. Need I remind you of what is happening here in Europe? We are menaced from the East, which will shit on us when it suits them. Look here, right now, in Europe—your Europe and mine—talking *détente* with Russia again! A whore’s word, meaning, I take you and keep me...and they want to link our currencies. Euros with Rubles. Insanity! My work as Shan Chu is sleepless. And when it is never done, never, I must look to our own affairs in this House! Now I need steel, not words. Steel and more steel, not prayers and not simpering politicians, just the trainloads of hard steel!” Van Slyke thundered the words until Marit Toorenaar thought the shaking leaded window behind him would shatter.

With a firm grace, she said, “I have said my words. I’ll call to Muldaur now and tomorrow Washington again.”

Van Slyke stood now and fitfully tapped the massive chandelier made of a hundred chamois horns. Swaying on its heavy chain, its

lights threw a shower of polka dots against the high bookcases, the massive floor globe, the biggest Eames furniture ever made, and ten of Van Slyke's merchant ships in model under glass.

Culhane, I wonder if you can do all this, thought Joost Van Slyke. *I could not. I do not have your instinct for the big play. I am only blessed to know men and their weaknesses. Now is your test, the biggest. How will you face it? Moscow, the thieves, what of them?*

Van Slyke thought back to his ruse of conversation with Liu Wai, the Singaporean, on that stormy afternoon on the South China Sea. How, as Shan Chu, he'd craftily gotten the Council of Six to suspend Culhane instead of kicking him out of the Magans permanently. Could the American mend the trouble in America?

Where do I find time to meet with the Black Pope, waiting now at the Europa Hotel? The Superior of the Vatican's marines, the Jesuits, had come to Amsterdam seeking a private loan, on the quiet, of fifty-million Euros. The American plate collections were a thing of the past, a rich source of revenue now as dry as a dehydrated apricot. They'd get their loan all right, thought Van Slyke, but not until he could figure out what he wanted in return. And he'd not be bargaining for a Papal blessing, either. It would be in return for choice, verifiable information, the sort that only comes through those Catholic confessional boxes manned by priests equipped with their prying ears that hear almost everything that ever happens: always the worst of it, the frauds, thievery in high places, deeds that must be orally expelled, for they were soul-wracking events too severe, too sin-laden to keep bottled up.

*Yes, my young friend Culhane, we will soon learn if you are made to be a Shan Chu. Then your worries really begin.*

"Are you that shrewd? God help you if you are," spoke Joost Van Slyke aloud to himself, as the call to South Africa was announced.

Joost thought of the Belgian countess staying at his other home, the one he kept for his assignations. She would, he was sure, want one of her tiresome games with the pony whip tonight. She was much fun,

but she wanted marriage, and a harness on him, and he could afford neither. But who would take her on, he wondered?

Now, for the priest, and that fifty-million. He knew now what he'd ask in return: information the Russian Orthodox Church had or could get. Information that would be of use the next time he sat at the table with Moscow.

## Washington, D.C.

Andrea ended yet another note to her mother, who, still peddling her hips on the European circuit, had migrated from Florence to the Capri residence of Count Alberto Valfiore. How very damn jolly for them, she thought, looking over at a travel clock, checking the time.

7:28, and he was late.

In her bedroom, for the second time now, she shucked off the low-cut peasant blouse, unhooking her bra. She hated the damn things, and this one didn't look right under the filmy white material. Too dark, and besides...

Feeling better, she tucked the blouse back into the waist of the full-length sand-colored suede skirt. Pirouetting once before the closet mirror, she thought, *well, if he doesn't like, then he doesn't.*

But Andrea knew she looked enticing, abundantly so. Her blush of natural skin tone, her feathery hair alive and shining, her wide mouth only slightly rouged, the eyelashes barely shadowed. A quick riff of hand fluffing her hair, another glance in the mirror, and her spirits lifted.

Usually so punctual, where was he?

Always there right on the minute for their campy lunches in Lafayette Square. And the other time, too, she thought, when he took me to La Danielle at the Hay-Adams for a private lunch. Only ten people, Fredy's patrons, in that whole gorgeous room, and the fabulous treat of soft-shell crabs from the Maryland shore. Ecstasy, which made the dinner tastier somehow.

She strode from the bedroom through the living room, and beyond, into the small kitchen. The smell of chicken baking in herbs, sherry, and real butter—for which she'd bartered an old litho—wafted

into the air. Andrea grabbed a potholder, stooped, reached into the oven to check on her creation, and found it plopping and smelling divine.

“Ouch, shitto!” she yelped as the edge of her hand grazed the hot grill. Closing the oven door, she kicked at it with one golden slipper.

Cooking eluded her. So many nights in restaurants, palaces, villas, and dining salons; she had learned how not to cook, never considering it as any sort of deficiency.

Candles? Were there enough of those, in case the power tripped off early? She went into the next room to check. Sitting down on a pale yellow couch, Andrea wished there were flowers. Again, him, more thoughts of Culhane. Married to a Hollywood princess-bitch. Watch it! she told herself, and in the next instant, Forget It! Thoughts were sniffing warily at one another like strange dogs who’d just met—I mean, my God, look at him, and the really good mind, so tough and yet gentle, and what he’s been through. But so damned independent, like a biological cell that splits and reproduces itself, again and again.

And me doing notes about him for Clay Flickinger. What if I don’t? Here’s what, you knot-head. You lose your job at the paper, that’s likely, and you lose the tab-off from CIA. You lose your rear-end you are now sitting on, the one that ought to be decently covered with panties.

That cold-blooded humper. A disagreeable memory surfaced then. Andrea was aware that Flickinger had flirted his way into a shabby affair once with her mother. In Berlin, where her father was posted there as the CIA station chief, and where he’d met with a mysterious death.

Oh well, a long time ago and Clay has tried to help, *has* helped, generously. Still...

The door chime rang. Yes! Excitement rippled along her vertebrae, then other places. Nimbly, she fled across the room.

“Sorry,” said Culhane, smiling, as she opened the door. “I had to come the roundabout way and couldn’t stop to phone.”

Wilting, she asked, “What happened, Rushton?”

“I was in Maryland at Fort Meade, and the shuttle was late...dropped off a few people before my turn came.”

“Over there with all those crypto types?” asked Andrea, impressed. Meade was, she knew, the headquarters of the National Security Agency, the holy of holies, so sensitive it was rarely mentioned outside the intelligence community.

“Compliments of Fredy.” He handed her a small sack, brown and wrinkled.

She looked at the package and asked, “Don’t open till Christmas or now?”

“Something for dinner, unless you’ve something else.”

He stood with her in the foyer of the apartment. A parquet floor, white walls with smoked mirrors on them in whitish gilded frames. A small, sparkling light overhead throwing narrow prisms of light, holding them in a moment neither of them could see.

“Oh, you treasure,” said Andrea, almost breathlessly. She had opened the bag and pulled out a bottle of Perrier-Jouet, 1955. “Wherever...I mean the year and all...however did you manage this?”

“Trade secret,” said Culhane, “and a wonderful year. The year the angels waltzed on the grapes.” He was charmed by her obvious delight.

“Be perfect with the chicken. How neat!”

She hugged him, clinging, igniting. She knew her nipples had studded, revealing themselves through her filmy blouse.

“Do my tongue again, quick,” said Andrea. He bent to her but she had stepped away, leaning back, on a dreamy cloud, contagiously flustered. “God, I’m—”

“A sugary tease.” Culhane smiled.

“I’d better ice this wonder of all wonders,” she said, looking at the Champagne bottle. “If they shut the power down early, I’ll scream.” She thought of darkness and him, and that maybe she wouldn’t scream after all. “C’mon.” Andrea beckoned. “A drink. I heisted some Scotch from a friend at the Peruvian embassy...over there,” pointing

to an antique armoire, worm-holed and wax-buffed to a high sheen. “Be with you in a jiff,” and she glided away.

Culhane walked into the room, seeing the smooth lines of chintz curtains, hanging from the valances over a set of wide windows. Branches from the maple tree, he’d seen when arriving, bounced their shadows against windowpanes lighted up by a Stiffel table lamp. An Iranian area rug, more white walls, some interesting English period pieces of satinwood. The walls were hung randomly with colorful silk fabrics framed in chrome; also, on a table, a grouping of Greek icons.

A cared-for room, thought Culhane, as he went to the armoire. He spotted the bottle immediately. Talisker malt whisky, worth plenty on the black market. A careful pour into both glasses, ice in hers but not his, then a taste. Stirring the ice in Andrea’s glass, he thought of how stirred he was by her embrace. Almost woozy, his blood heating, reminding him of the flesh’s truest message.

“I like your room,” said Culhane, when Andrea returned.

“Some me, some my mother.”

“Nice.”

“Come sit.” She could feel it coming on, only a little stronger, or worse, now. “Tell me about your day,” as they walked toward the long green couch.

“Nothing big,” he said. “Just fussing with computers and game theory.”

“A who?”

“A way of trying to predict likely outcomes against known or unknown scenarios. The odds of something happening or not happening. You build a series model, then jam it with hundreds of possible cases and see what happens,” Culhane tried to explain.

“If it’s math, then to me it’s mud.”

He laughed. “As I said, it was a sort of nothing.” But it had been anything but a nothing. He had spent hours with three statistical modelers putting together a trading template that boggled him, and he was quite familiar with out-sized trading deals.

“And how is our President Halburton today? Tell him we can use some advertising revenues at the newspaper.” A hint of a bite in her words.

“Didn’t see him.”

“You see him a lot, though, don’t you?”

“More than he’d like, I’m sure. And more than I want to, I know.”

“You don’t like him either?”

“He’s fine. It’s just that he sings from a different song sheet than I do and it’s hard to make music sometimes. He’s got himself a rough job.”

“And is the wrong man for it,” replied Andrea.

“Give him a chance. You press people blame things on him that began ten or twenty years ago.”

Starch in her voice, Andrea returned with, “Did you see the article today in the paper about this Bank for International Settlements business? I mean, dammit, not even a croak out of the White House. That’s supposed to be our leader?”

He couldn’t tell her what a huge break it might possibly be. Maybe, just maybe.

“He never got his honeymoon. Only been in the chair for several months, so people need to cut him some slack.”

“He’s a disaster chasing a catastrophe.”

“We’ve survived those before.”

“This is the worst, though, isn’t it? He’s going to ruin us. Just like this BIS thing, and nobody will take our money anymore.”

“The way you press people write him up, I’m surprised he doesn’t go after you for libel.”

Andrea heaved the deep breath of the annoyed, as her spectacular breasts threatened the stitching of her blouse. The nipples, he saw, had gone to sleep.

“Be a darling and get us another drink. I’m thinking of becoming a strict alcoholic. With a sign on my back and a rosary in my teeth.”

Her voice became lighter, the mouth making a smile again. He got up and walked over to the armoire, as she lofted a thought that had badgered her all day.

“Do you know of Hans Pieggar? Excuse me, Hans-Otto Pieggar—he always insists on that Otto part—he’s at the BIS?”

“Of him,” said Culhane over his shoulder. “I don’t personally know him.”

“I lived with his family for eight months in Zurich once. He’s not worth knowing, even if he is the Second Jesus Christ these days. His wife is a saint and his son, Ambros, a lovely killer of a boy. A peach.”

Surprise, then and he reacted with a tug in his belly.

He dropped the ice into her glass. It sounded like a car wreck. Lived with the Piegars? All day he’d been working on money manipulation using the National Security Agency’s computers, trying to test the BIS’s ultimate capacity it were backed against the ropes, and take Europe’s banks down with it, at least those who were trying to shatter the dollar.

“How’d you get to know the Piegars? Newspapering?”

“Oh, way before,” said Andrea, “way before. My father was stationed for a time in Bern. I was about sixteen and had mild dyslexia and read everything backwards. The best doctor was in Zurich then, so I went there for most of a year and lived as a sort of *au pair* girl with the Pie-gars, and studied there, too. My father knew the Piegars from back in the forties, during the war, when he was in Switzerland with Allen Dulles.”

“OSS?” Culhane had somehow thought that Andrea’s father was in the State Department.

“Yes. He was...my father was a corporation lawyer, but he just kept going to war. A really wonderful man...he died in Berlin, a kind of mystery, and I was numb for a year at least.”

Culhane watched as Andrea drank nervously, wishing he hadn’t asked the question, yet glad for the answer.

“You must miss your family,” said Andrea. “I remember seeing your wife in the movies. Very beautiful.”

“Sure, I miss them. Before long I expect to be back with them.”  
Andrea’s heart thumped. “What’ll you do then?”

“Damned if I know. Close my eyes and fly kites,” replied Culhane airily.

“Mind if I ask something?”

“You will anyway, so go ahead.”

“What would be a big trading day, when you were really rolling?”

“Maybe two to as much as five billion. About as big as I ever got, anyway.”

“Is that right? Really?” Andrea asked, disbelief etched on her face.

“Sometimes.”

“Does it hurt not to be rich anymore? My family used to be, and my mother never got over it. She’s gone begging and lives now with an Italian count.”

Culhane looked off. “As long as I had my own work to do, I was rich enough. I never went in it for money alone.”

“I don’t get you.”

“In my game you can’t play it just for money. You’d go sour. The money end was just so many decimals, because it came fast and went fast. One year I had a negative net worth of seventy-million. Now I’m all the way up to zero.”

“You’re not broke, though. Look at that art you have. Don’t you worry about keeping it there at the hotel?”

“No, I don’t worry about it. Anyone trying to steal it would have a hell of a time selling it in this country.”

“I’d worry, I’d get sick. Your Cezanne is to die for.”

“I like it. One of his better ones,” agreed Culhane over his drink. So is the Dufy.”

“Yes, marvelous.” Andrea leaned back. Her eyes traversed the room, then fell on him again. “My father moved around so much. Everywhere, it seemed. We lived in McLean when we were posted to Washington. When we lived abroad, and I came to America for visits, I stayed on Long Island on my grandmother’s estate. Horses, duck

shoots, pinafores and patent leather shoes, dances, a nanny even. Pretty poshy until the money went...I suppose it was dreamy growing up in Hawaii.”

Miserable, remembered Culhane, though he replied, “Lots of pineapples, palm trees, and big blue water,” but refrained from saying how terrifying it was to be there, pushed around by older boys, and deprived of even so much as a bicycle. How he’d hated that orphanage.

“Beautiful, I suppose. I’ve never been,” Andrea was musing.

“I think I told you that I lied my way on to a tramper when I was sixteen, sailed away, and rarely saw Hawaii again,” answered Culhane tonelessly.

More to it, certainly, thought Andrea, catching the undercurrent instantly. But she was too practiced a journalist to chafe away at a raw wound, knowing it would only fester if she did.

“Must have been some lie.”

“A beaut. My best ever.”

“You’re not a liar. Are you? Say no.”

“I’m a fair bluffer. That’s almost the same. Not quite, but almost.”

“Probably learned all that in Hong Kong.”

“The Chinese are good teachers, and I got some memorable pointers from others later on.” He could remember a few of those lessons, especially the expensive ones.

“I’d like to know about those Shang-whatever sometime,” Andrea said.

Culhane gazed steadily at her. Andrea had that electrical aspect to her: she was charged, vital, a kind of sparkle in her face, and she usually brimmed with energy. Who was she really? He couldn’t quite decide. Shang-Magan! How would she even know the name. “Ever faced a really make-or-break problem in your life?” he asked.

“Well, there was school and deciding to take a crack at journalism...then, lessee, deciding *not* to get married twice...and handling my mother...things like that...what’s so funny?”

“I was talking more of a walk-or-die kind of problem.”

“Well, no, I suppose not. I don’t hang around with the French Foreign Legion anymore,” said Andrea, giving off one of her beguiling laughs.

Almost an hour had run by as they traveled along in conversation, enjoying the whisky, feeling for the deeper flow of each other.

“Jumping Phoebe!” exclaimed Andrea, leaping up, darting across the room. “The chicken! I’ll be right back.”

Am I, a what? He wondered. A case study? I’m forever on the grill with this woman. Just her way, perhaps, and she is trained to ask, ask more. Odd, and so are a few other items.

Andrea returned, a mopey, irritated look straining her face. “Rush-ton, it’s cinders. There’s just some rice.” Verging on tears.

“Not to worry. Okay?”

“It’s just so stupid of me...all those damn coupons wasted.”

Culhane got up and went to her. “Hey,” and he smiled, “let’s shake hands with Perrier-Jouet and wish on the stars for a while.”

He followed her to the kitchen. On the counter lay the earthenware casserole dish, its insides a black crust. Inedible. He opened the Champagne and returned to the other room, where he poured the wine into other glasses he took from the armoire.

“For tomorrow and the next one,” he said, touching his glass to hers. Culhane bent toward her and kissed her lightly across the eyes, then hard around the mouth.

“I want you,” said Andrea, very openly. “Brazen of me, isn’t it?” He still had one arm around her, his hand touching the warm softness just below the back of her neck. “You’ve the right to remain silent, because anything you say now can and *will* be used against you.”

“I’m not free to love you,” said Culhane.

“I don’t care. Later I will, but now I don’t.”

He felt Karin, he felt awful, and he felt thrilled, with his temples pounding furiously. Their mouths mingled again. Later, they couldn’t remember who began undressing the other first; clothing puddled about their feet, they just moved together, as insistently as early wind. Eagerly, they burrowed into their own mist of urgent murmurings.

The outside world vanished for Culhane, especially the part of it asking whether he was engaging in pardonable infidelity.

Later, he whispered, "You've really got me going."

"Ditto."

"I mean I'm all hung up."

"You mean here?" Delicate, intimate strokes.

"Yes..."

"More there?"

"Can't s-stop."

"Hurry, darling, deep, be deep."

"*Ai ching mei jan.*" The words sang out from him in the Chiu Chao dialect, as his conscience whited out.

Night brought them no betrayals. Hunger, much hunger, though none of it caused by the spoiled dinner, and Culhane knew that only time would reveal the best and many different ways to celebrate Andrea sexually

Everything about her intrigued him. Her unabashed lust, the raw strength, her sensitivity everywhere to the tiniest touch of his tongue. She was female, and very magnificent to him now.

At dawn, Culhane slid quietly from the tossed bed. Trying not to disturb her, he moved soundlessly to the window and observed the rose-gray light pushing against the tail of night. Naked, immobile, he stood there and thought for a long time. He was deep into it and didn't hear Andrea stir in the bed, reaching over for where he should be.

"Rushton," she murmured, her voice deepened by drowsiness.

"Yes, love." He turned toward her.

"S'wonderful night."

"The best. Thank you for all of it."

"Me, too."

Even in that dim light, her eyes sparkled. Christ, God! thought Culhane, mesmerized and naked and a little loony at the sight of her dairy-fresh breasts.

"I don't wan'...get up," she mumbled into the pillow."

"Don't."

“Got t’work.”

“The hell with the work. That’s all we seem to do...in daytime anyway,” he said, grinning.

“I’m behind on—”

She heard him chuckle. “You’ve a gorgeous behind. Very athletic, I’d say.”

“Stop! No, never mind. Don’t stop.”

He moved toward her, saying, “What do you say to staying home today?”

“M’velous. I need to figure out an excuse.”

“That’s where I come in. I’m your excuse. I’ll fix you up a story. How about the Shang-Magan angle, some background?”

Andrea came alive now. The *Times-Herald* could assemble its Washington news copy without her, as they had before and would afterward. She turned, feeling him, pressing.

Belly to belly, they surfed again with enough exquisite heat to make the cool of morning fly away.



Couldn’t get enough of each other on a day that seemed to soar off into space somewhere. Andrea no longer denied to herself that she was falling for him. She knew it would be fatal to finagle anything like the same admission from him. Sometime, naturally, but not now.

Still, making love that morning, and in the night before, had opened the gate for other intimacy. Now that she had him in bed, under the eternal handicap, she pressed her advantage as she pressed her body to his, nudging and asking, going straight for his bones.

And Culhane had given her enough, he thought, a glimpse that few outsiders knew or ever would know. Even Karin didn’t know much of it, though her faraway voice flayed at him now.

“I can give you some background, if that’s all you want,” Culhane had told Andrea.

“Could I dig up any of it by myself?”

“Some of it, maybe, but you’d have to know exactly where to look.”

“Where, for instance?”

“That, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“How much of this stays off the record?”

“All of it, far as I’m concerned.”

“Then don’t tell me.”

“Okay. I’d rather hear more about you anyway.”

“I’m just kidding. I’m dying to hear about it, Rushton.”

“Not an iota for print though. You promise?”

“Not ever?”

“Not ever is the way it has to be. I mean it.”

“Why would you tell me anything, if it’s all out of some hidden drawer?”

“It’s nothing that is specifically secret, Andrea. It’s just that the Shang-Magan deplores publicity, and always has.”

“So tell me, I’ll be Betty Button Mouth.”

In a spurious way, thinking about it had helped. Talking about it might even remind him of where he really belonged, which was not here in Washington astride this halo of a woman.

“Shang-Magan goes back to the sixteen hundreds,” he had begun, “when the Dutch and English wanted to control the Asiatic trade. Colonizing everything in sight, too. Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa.”

But it was the Portuguese who first put a heavy footprint on China, he had said, staring straight up at the ceiling, focusing old memory cells. Right out of Lagos, in southern Portugal, they had come to Asia, sailed up the Pearl River to Canton, anchored, and sent emissaries ashore to sue for trading privileges with the Middle Kingdom. Came at the right time, too: the beginning of the Manchu dynasty, when the emperor Ch’ung Ch’en had knocked the Ming dynasty off the throne.

Andrea snuggled closer, listening for the nuggets that might interest Flickinger, hoping it wasn’t all going to be some obscure history lesson.

## COMPRADOR

“China had been ready to deal. The time was ripe for China to lower her barricades and do a little raindance with the West—you know, see how it would all work out.”

“Just like that?” asked Andrea. “No little deals on the side with the court princes, like the Saudis do it?”

“Sure, sometimes. But to make damn certain the Portuguese or anyone else didn’t infect China, the emperor laid down an edict: the Western barbarians were to be confined to a walled patch of ground on the quayside of Canton. Go outside the walls, and the penalty was death. Any dealings inside China had to be handled by persons of Chinese blood, and no one else...the Portuguese raised hell, swore purple, but complied. So they looked around for Chinese middlemen to get the trade going, start the action. The Portuguese called them *compradors*, which means buyers or negotiators. Fixer-uppers, you could say. The name stayed because the idea of using middlemen worked so well. It was all new, a different system of dealing and trading.”

Culhane paused, lacing his hands behind his pillowed head, locking one leg with hers. Fun to remember it again, what he’d learned. Even with such a passage of time, it still seemed so real and vivid to him. As if he had actually been there, seeing it all unfold from its beginning..

Compradors were carefully screened, he went on, were men of high standing in their community—bankers, businessmen, a few professional gamblers. Men who knew where and how to bend the rules: what was possible, what wasn’t. Both buyers and sellers, it was up to them to see the teas, silks, camphorwood, porcelain, and everything else got delivered on time to the Canton wharf. There, the tall clipper ships waited for the wind-tides to sail those cargos to Gao, to Capetown, to London or Boston or wherever.

“Were they all Sunday’s children, so handy and all?” Andrea asked.

“Very sharp, and sometimes had even sharper women doing their thinking for them. There the sort of people who have fighter-pilot mentalities, attacking every opportunity in sight.”

Andrea heard excitement rising in his voice.

“Soon there were dozens of these compradors and they formed a guild, a typical Chinese tradition, and soon the whole game began to change. While the foreign owners of the trading *hongs* squabbled and fought among themselves for markets, the smart Chinese compradors were up to a different trapeze act altogether.”

“What do you mean, doing what?”

“Learning what was really going on and what the foreigners wouldn’t dream of sharing among themselves—information and information was the key to everything! The compradors knew who needed what, sent where, when...and the Shang-Magan still does. Or knows more than anyone else...on their journeys from Canton into deepest China, the compradors met secretly in Nanking or Foochow, anywhere they could. The information they exchanged gave them power. Greater power at times than their foreign employers down in Canton, and later in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Big things began to happen, and as China trade expanded, everyone wanted in, wanted their slice. The trading *hongs* wanted the goods, the Chinese provincial warlords wanted duties on every load of merchandise crossing their fiefdoms, and the Manchus up in Peking demanded other tribute.”

“I knew the old green grease was in there somewhere,” chided Andrea.

“...Impossible, though, to pay off everyone and make a profit, too... so the guild of compradors had elected a council to deal with the situation—the graft, corruption, heavy taxes, the foreign trading *hongs* who were cutting each other up to survive. The Council modeled itself after the one that ruled Venice in the 1300s, when Venice virtually controlled all the Mediterranean trade. The new Council, it was voted in in Shanghai, was made up of six men, very senior, the best of the bunch. The other compradors swore oaths of

fealty to the Council, promising to abide by the rules and promising to shut up about Council business...tough gents, too, because if you broke your word, once given, they had you garroted or worse. I've heard, but don't know if I believe it, that when the Mafia was established in Sicily in the late seventeen hundreds they modeled it after the compradors' guild. Death penalties for finking, and so on."

Is he part of a criminal syndicate, thought Andrea, the way Flickinger once suggested? God! "What does the name mean? Shang-Magan?" she asked him.

"Sort of pidgin Chinese. *Shang* is shorthand for Shanghai, which means 'above the sea,' and *Magan*, loosely, means 'merchants' association.' Anyway, very soon the Shang-Magan had a real say in the China trade. They kept all the wheels oiled, and no one can do it better, with greater finesse, than the Chinese."

"How do you fit in? You're not Chinese."

"Well, it didn't stay Chinese. They elected an amazing Shan Chu in the early nineteen hundreds—"

"A what?"

"Shan Chu," repeated Culhane, and spelled it for her. "Means Chief of Hill, and he keeps the books and is top-hand on the council. The one, the amazing one I'm talking about was called T. V. Soong."

"You're serious, are you?"

"Yes, and his father called himself Charles Jones Soong, and for a brief time he lived here. A rug peddler down in Alabama and Mississippi, where I guess he picked up the first two parts of his name. Later, he came back to China and fathered not only T. V. but three daughters too. One girl, Ching-ling, married Sun Yat-sen, who tried and damn near succeeded in making a republic out of China. Another daughter, May-ling, married Chiang Kai-shek and you know about him. What a trio! But it was T. V. Soong who owned the diamond-like brain. I think he was the best finance minister any government ever had, a boy with a real stroke. The daughters were described this way: one loved money, another loved power, and the third loved China...his brothers-in-law, whose greed was surpassed

only by his blindness, fiddled him out of the government. Not smart, but a big break for the Shang-Magan. He was the one who branched out the Magans, insisted on admitting non-Chinese to the organization. A hell of a row took place, I read, but T. V. survived it somehow. This was just before the outbreak of the First World War. T. V. warned the Chinese compradors that trouble was coming, to diversify, get rid of their European holdings. They didn't listen, and only grudgingly let a few new boys in. The Round-Eyes. Sassoon and Fessenden and Patino of Bolivia, who looked after the South American Zone, but the war hit and hit hard. Those Chinese who had invested in Europe were drained empty. Afterwards, it was the foreigners of the Shang-Magan who kept everything together. They had credit, lots of it, and they put the guild back on its pins...for a price, of course. That almost started another kind of war among the guild members...and it went on that way for another decade or so, until the late thirties, and then the Japanese invaded China. All the trade with China died overnight. A goddamn shame, that was, and the end of the real China trade. Shanghai was shut down, Nanking, Foochow, then Hong Kong. The Council of Six removed all the books—the archives—and sailed off to Lisbon. They operated out of Portugal, which was neutral, during the war...only Hong Kong was to come alive again. A friend of mine, who taught me practically all I know, he's gone now, blew air back into Hong Kong's lungs after the Japanese were whipped. He was a Council of Six member, a wonderful and great man. His name was Ming, Ken-chou Ming and I loved him hard."

"Loved him? I'd like to hear about that one," Andrea said.

"The finest, a real vicar."

"How do you get to be a member?"

"You're asked. They don't take applications."

"Ah, like Skull and Bones at Yale."

"I wouldn't know."

"And, let me guess, Mr. Ming endorsed you into the club?"

“I was the first council member ever elected from North America,” he told her. “Quite a thrill, an honor really. Ken-chou Ming pushed for me before he died. A legacy, perhaps.”

“But how does it all really work?”

“By managing the largest trades, Andrea. The ones where the zeros really count, and others can’t swing them.”

“Why? Why can’t others do it?”

“They don’t know how to assemble the immense capital needed when you’re up against the smallest window of time. Timing is everything. It’s like an assault. You’re amassing action in two or three trading zones all at once. Others can’t do that as readily. Nor are many others as skilled at creating the right mirage.”

“Mirage?”

“The illusion that once the Magan is in the market there is never any limit on money. There is, and there isn’t. It frightens most people, you see. Keeps ‘em out of the action until we’re through with a given operation.”

For a moment, it was as quiet as the Sabbath, as she absorbed his explanation; then she asked for a specific example. Culhane hesitated long enough for his memory to travel over past horizons.

“I’ll tell you about one,” he said. “In was in London some years ago, when a meeting was called to settle a threat to the world diamond market. De Beers, who monopolized the trade for decades, had called on the Shang-Magan for help. The cartel was mortally afraid the Russians were going to flood the market with high-quality yet low-priced stones. Russia wanted in. Needed the money to pay for imports before they struck oil...wanting privacy, the Shang-Magan took an entire floor at the Connaught. A tricky act in itself to manage in that place. Muldaur represented the great diamond-mining combines of Africa. Van Slyke was there to uphold Europe’s interest, De Beers being in London and so part of his trading zone. I attended for North America, because this country consumed the largest amount of diamonds annually. At that time, anyway. And from Russia came a man called Metzilov. An ornery bastard but a shrewd one...it was a

dogfight, nothing less, and went on four days running. Somehow the British government got wind of it all and asked for consultations. Van Slyke refused Her Majesty's government, telling them it was a private matter. Even the State Department here in Washington wanted to know what was going on. We had to tell them to butt out and stay out. All to be played, you see, on a very short hand, with no outsiders to muddle it...came the fourth day, very early in the morning, and we were about ready to throw in the towel when Muldaur suddenly worked out a deal: De Beers' Central Selling Organization would agree to sell Russia's diamond output; North America would buy any diamond surplus for two years so as to stabilize prices; De Beers, in return for getting its monopoly again, would persuade the British Government to allow U.S. oil companies into the North Sea oil play; the African diamond-mining combines—that's Muldaur's turf—would share in U.S. oil production from the North Sea for five years, to make up for any losses South Africa suffered by allowing Moscow into the diamond trade circle. Everybody won. We shoehorned the American oil companies, who paid us dearly, into one of the richest prizes of Europe...before the crows stirred in London that morning, Van Slyke roused the chairman of De Beers out of bed. As Joost Van Slyke later retold it—the world's king diamond merchants bought the idea. With one proviso: I had to promise to enforce it on the North American end, where the real selling action was, to stop any possibility of Russian price wars. So I agreed, of course. Had to. For a while there I owned enough diamonds to pave a small town."

"How very dreamy," said Andrea. "I could've worn them for you, if you'd only called me...then what? Were you crowned as a knight-commander or something?"

"Afterward, I told Metzilov that Russia was in. And told him that Moscow must abide by De Beers' rules, so we could keep everyone's diamond mines running. Metzilov wanted to know why the hundred-eighty degree turnabout by De Beers."

"What did you say?"

“Not very much, as I recall. I told him he was in business so long as he met with the Central Selling Organization to iron the rest of the linen. And he did, and it worked until this country fell down the stairs....Jesus, that Metzilov...coldest face I ever saw. Paralyze his mother’s heart, I’d bet...that’s how the Shang-Magan works sometimes,” he went on. “It’s the know-how. If you know how specialists work on the New York Stock Exchange, it’s somewhat similar. The whole idea is to make and ensure orderly markets.”

“Or cartels and I don’t think they’re—”

“Cartels are all right for some things,” he stopped her. “You can’t get greedy, like OPEC did. And you can’t open and shut diamond mines depending on the marriage rate, either. So you balance the flow by market control. Governments, after all, monopolize currencies. They just don’t know what they’re doing most of the time, as we’re finding out the hard way.”

“Go over that again, would you? It can’t be what you really believe.” Saying it, Andrea tilted away, a foot or more, so that she could see him fully. See whether he was joshing with her now.

Culhane repeated his point, wondering, all the while, what it was that seemed to upset her. Was she the nun of naïveté? A schoolgirl still gowned in pink innocence? Couldn’t she understand that your beliefs had to spread a dozen ways or you’d never achieve even the small miracles?

In other times, he had formed temporary cartels to support shaky grain markets. His paper losses sometimes running into heavy millions, but knowing those would eventually be recovered. You did it when you had to, or the farmers of the world would be selling their tractors at the next sheriff’s auction. You kept it going with whatever help you could provide or beg.

But then, how could she know of those struggles?

Yet he hadn’t been trying to educate her. He strived only to capture again for himself what it really meant to be of Magan weight: his communion with the real thing. Not the Knights of Malta or belonging to the Paris Jockey Club, or that sort of social fakery, but much

more—the highest curia of the daily religion that outlasted all the others. Trade, the milk breast that fed the world at every hour.

His hours, he sensed, were melting away, and his plans were still without a spine to hold them up.

He left her later and also left her in a state: a quandary—The Great Divide. She was being pulled in two directions. Culhane had asked her to remain mum as to the background he'd given her. Flickinger wanted to know everything, *everything*, and it was Flickinger's influence that had kept her on the *Herald Tribune's* payroll. She'd be up shit's creek without a paycheck. Who'd foot her bills? Culhane?

She had no intention of succumbing to that sort of arrangement, become a kept woman. She'd leave that to her mother. But how to fill in the blanks for Clay Flickinger?

Wondering again, for at least the fifth time, if she were spinning into that old whirlpool called infatuation.

## New York

**T**hin as a vanilla bean, standing very straight, yet with aging muscles sagging his face, Joe Rearden looked down the length of Park Avenue. They were at it again down there, he saw, burning trash. The days of scheduled pick-up were long gone. The sight of the curling black, rancid smoke did nothing to lighten his humor.

“Why are you forcing this thing?” he asked, still facing the window.

“It’s the best way to do it,” answered Guido Grasselli.

“I don’t like partners. You know that.”

“This thing won’t stand up by itself, Chief. It needs help. The Doney brothers can set it up. They’ve got the connections and we don’t.”

Grasselli had learned that a little buttering with the word *Chief* here and there would usually pay handsomely. So easy to say, and easier yet not to mean.

“I don’t like it. My arrangements with those *people* are for Swiss banking only. And not for joint ownership of anything.”

“To swing this thing correctly, we’ll need help. West Coast help. That’s top of the line, a given.”

“They were already paid plenty,” said Joe Rearden, irritated, though not enough to completely dismiss Guido Grasselli’s view.

“The California Coastal Commission and three city governments need looking after to buy those shipping docks out there. All the docks are union controlled. We can’t make the buy, Chief, without the Doney brothers. They can tap in where we can’t, as I said, so they think they’re entitled to a larger share...and, besides, they managed all the spadework on Culhane.”

“How’s that again?”

Just manipulate the sequence a little, thought Guido Grasselli, he’ll never check it out.

“Sure, the Doney’s have friends up in Bel Air, where Culhane lives. Hell of a big place, they say. The wife, a couple of kids, Saxa—that’s Culhane’s man—are there. And some old Chinese guy does the garden. The Doney’s had the Chinaman followed a few times. He goes into Chinatown to the Kung Liet and—”

“What’s that?”

“Kung Liet’s a Chinese social organization. They’re in all the Chinese-American communities. One here in New York, too. They speak the old tongue, gamble, find jobs...you know, a club,” said Grasselli, opening his hands as if to say, that’s all.

“Go ahead.”

“Well, the Doney’s do a little business here and there with the Kung Liet.”

“And?” Joe Rearden leaned forward, intent.

“They found out that the Chinaman—actually, he’s Taiwanese—is one pissed-off chink. Apparently, the guy wanted to retire back to Taiwan but couldn’t when the banks closed, so he’s mad. They open him up a little and find out Culhane’s got a very pricey art collection in the house...the Taiwanese comes to be smarter after a few talks. For three kilos of gold, and one more paid to the Kung Liet, he agrees to a little job for us.”

“I’ve heard about that art collection. You can’t steal it. Everybody in the art world knows who the owner is.”

“I know, Chief,” said Grasselli, alert now, ready with the clincher, “but how about this—we get the chink to destroy a painting or two...remember, I don’t know when, years ago and there was that movie, *The Godfather*. Brando was in it and Duvall played the consigliere. Duvall goes out to Hollywood to talk some studio head into something. The guy chokes off the request from *The Godfather*. Next thing you know, the guy’s prize horse, they cut off its head and hike it into the guy’s bed when he’s asleep. He wakes up to a horse’s

head and blood all over the place. But the thing is he gets the message. After that, no problems. So, Culhane's got paintings"—smirking, Grasselli lifted a shoulder in a shrug—"we cut a few and he's ours. Like that, eh?" Tickled with himself, Grasselli broke into peals of laughter.

A moment passed. "Interesting...very interesting, Guido."

"Make Culhane sweat over what happens next. Maybe he'll learn to listen for a change."

"Are we completely out of it? No chance of tracing anything?"

"As I said, Chief, it would be the Doney's pleasure. We got to put up half the gold and pay the chink's way out of the country. They handle the rest."

"But we can't be involved, not the slightest thread of any connection," insisted Joe Rearden.

"It's a one-shot. The chink will be long gone. We're thousands of miles away. The Doney's aren't gonna talk, and sure as hell the Kung Liet won't. They get part of the gold as it is. It couldn't be cleaner."

"Except," replied Joe Rearden, "the Doney brothers want half ownership in the real estate."

"Fair is fair, Chief. They've got a lot of city officials to grease, and they're assuming all the risks if there's trouble."

"I'll noodle on it," Joe Rearden indicated, wheeling around, tired of the discouraging scene on the other side of the window. He faced Grasselli.

"Sure, think it over a few days? After all, we get the dockage and Culhane thrown into the sandwich almost for free."

Another screw in Culhane's coffin, a kick right to the balls, thought Rearden. But Grasselli's getting to know too much, thinks he's one of us. Yet his connections are unbeatable.

"We'll discuss it again tomorrow."

"Whatever you think best," replied Grasselli somberly, restraining a smile. He took one last glance at the bald monk's circle on the back of the Chief's head. Bull's-eye.

After Grasselli left, Joe Rearden pulled his spindle-thin body up from the chair. Business was terrible. The commodity trading positions alone were bad enough, but the carrying costs were pure banditry. He needed a way to sell off his holdings to the strategic stockpile, and soon. Culhane was the solution; how the hell had that bastard wiggled himself into heading up the national stockpile?

It didn't make sense, but then little did these days.

Those docks on the west coast were a *must*. Whatever moved, cargo-wise, between the U.S. and Asia, mainly shipped through San Francisco or Long Beach. If you owned the docks, you had leverage; and if the unions were with you, you had control of a situation that put you on a par with anyone.

He liked it. Still, Grasselli and his Doney friends asked for a lot of watching and he was short on watchers.

## Washington, D.C.

Under the shallow light of a floor lamp, Flickinger, with one hand wrapped around a mug of acorn tea, read Andrea's second diary entry. Earlier he'd gone by the Bulgar's, torn out the recently inked pages, and been savaged by another attack of garlic breath.

Sipping the acrid tea, he read:

*Why do you rip out the pages? Never mind, I've torn up your blue cards with the vague questions on them. As to those: First, yes, you must already know he meets with Halburton more than is necessary to give advice on rare earths, etc. He gives no hints, no details, and, I suspect, he never will.*

*Second, he despairs of state-authority and can run you through brick-tight arguments of how it has failed. He says, "When the elephant runs, always the ant gets stepped on." He points to the food riots in this country, the ones in Africa, Poland, and elsewhere. What can authority do when this earth has none billion people to feed by the end of this century?*

*Control the food and you control the game is the point he makes. And he doesn't think war is inevitable. He does admit, though, that, like England at the start of World War II, we're standing alone. Yet he somehow reasons that Russia has reached its high-water mark. The way you tackle Russia, he thinks, is the same way they whipped Napoleon and Hitler. You retreat, and keep it up, until the opposition is stretched thinner than an eggshell, and then it cracks easily enough.*

*The trouble is, he says, that American “authority” cannot square up to the idea of retreating as a tactical gain.*

*Thirdly, there seems to be no really deep secret about this Shang-Magan organization. Bottomlessly financed, apparently with massive influence, it has certain rigidly enforced rules binding its members. Publicity is avoided at all costs. Their one aim is to advance world trade by any peaceful means necessary. To hear him say it, you’d think it was a sort of a nuclear-powered chamber of commerce. Of course, there is more to it. He mentioned that he received a call recently from a Van Slyke, who is, I gather, the highest priest of Shang-Magan.*

*He was pleased at the call. Very.*

*I don’t know exactly what that means. Not yet. Could use extra food coupons, if you’re not feeling stingy.*

*More, later.*

Absently crumbling the pages, Flickinger gazed into his sparsely furnished room. He recalled Clarissa Warren, the woman from whom Andrea had drawn her looks, and quite possibly her irreverent nature, too. Blissful days, eventually heaved up into a treacherous kiss-off after Frederic Warren had been eliminated. Executed out of hand, no trace left, after Warren had gone rogue and flirted with the Russians. Flickinger had arranged the wet-work, and now that double-dealing bitch, Clarissa, was sunning herself in Italy.

What of Andrea? Plainly, she was seeing Culhane on some regular basis. An affair in the making? Already made? Quite likely, he thought; he wouldn’t mind a layer or two of that cake for himself.

His mind rolled over what he just finished reading, snubbing up at one sentence; *Yet he somehow reasons that Russia has reached its high-water mark.* What was the meaning of that statement? Did Culhane know something? Very doubtful, decided Flickinger, whose cautious nature dug a foot deeper into a scheme he’d been hatching.

What would it take to put Culhane under harness? Moscow might up the ante for that ten-strike.

Culhane was still badgering him for the file concerning the New York Corporation; every time the topic surfaced at Langley, it was treated like a vial of unstable nitroglycerine. In times past, the New York Corporation had always given quick, unquestioning assistance when asked, and Rearden had useful connections all over the world. Human assets of that quality were highly prized, zealously safeguarded. A suggestion had been made to offer Culhane redacted information, but what if Culhane, sharpshooter that he was, felt he been shortchanged and complained to Halburton, and, in turn, Halburton cut CIA out of the loop?

Halburton was no strong-minded president but he was nevertheless the sitting president who could saw the bones off Langley if he so chose.

Releasing the file's contents could only stir up trouble for Rearden, and then more trouble with the Swiss: the Piegars for certain. Quite likely other Swiss banks, too, who fattened their ledgers and their profits by money laundering for illicit drug combines, the healthiest industry in the world these days..

When and if the Piegars came into it, the sins of the past would be unearthed. Almost surely so.

Then what of himself and his career?

What was Culhane really after, and why did he refuse to be specific? Specific would be easier; specific could be dealt with; specific meant narrow, and narrow had its own rules of discovery. And if you were allowed through that door, you'd know things few were privy to, and you'd know them at your peril.

Paris, that's where the real goods were kept. Paris was so long ago and so was Berlin and Zurich; a past he thought long buried but no past is ever buried.

Asleep is about the best you could hope for.

## Moscow

**T**hat damn ankle again, annoying Nyurischev; the left one, where he'd caught shrapnel as a young Army lieutenant in feckless siege against Afghanistan back in the 1980s. Stabbing pains randomly shot up to his knee whenever he moved too quickly. Doctors at the Moskova Medical Institute had suggested a second operation but, of course, offered no assurance as to the outcome.

Nor could his top aides assure him of anything less than another raft of problems to cloud his days.

Instinct told him events were moving too fast, much too fast for the economy to contend with. The nation had fallen behind when it came to exporting goods; indeed, other than oil, natural gas, diamonds, vodka and caviar, Russian products were mostly scoffed at. Shoppers across Russia demanded Western-made goods or from China and Japan.

A national disgrace. Never, not once in memory, could he recall a situation where Russian fashions, or appliances, or cars, or suits and shirts, even so menial a thing as socks or stockings were acclaimed in consumer magazines.

Taxes were too high. Organized crime had once again seeped into Russian commerce and industry. Government, at its lower levels, fed itself on a steady diet of corruption, accepting bribes and favors that threatened to undermine the state. In Putin's era, this sepsis had been all but purged; now it ran rampant again.

Unrest among the people, too, and the poets were whispering their taunting verses in the streets again.

More of the same now as Nyurischev looked across the table at Gregor Metzilov's creepy face. You have to be more nimble than a

ballerina, he thought, with these younger men. He listened to Metzilov reeling off figures, analyses, promises. Nyurischev knew plenty about promises from Moscow bureaucrats.

The dismal reports out of the Ukraine and east of the Urals meant only one thing: Russian cupboards faced yet another bleak year. Beets, corn, livestock feeds—all were in short supply. Wheat, the prime staple, had been decimated by a three-year drought.

Over his wattled neck, Nyurischev's mouth moved, the voice strong. "This one, Metzilov, right there!" One stubby forefinger pointed at a book of charts laying open on the green baize table.

"Mr. President, you cannot shift that volume of water from the Volga. The Civil Works Department calls it a two-year project. By that time normal weather cycles could resolve our problems."

Metzilov repeated his answer by rote, sick of the question, tired of Nyurischev's constant prodding. Miracles were expected each month, and endless explanations if they weren't delivered with ribbons tied around them.

"And if not? What if we're in long-term drought? We all hear about this global warming dilemma. What then?"

Metzilov shrugged. "Then it's a wise investment. Otherwise it's a risk."

"A risk! What of this European money scheme and this"—Nyurischev threw up his hands in an impatient gesture—"this American dollar business?"

"All goes well," answered Metzilov, satin threading his every syllable. "Very nicely. In perhaps three months, four at the outside, we shall have profited hugely. We can bargain for better terms on wheat imports."

"And tell me how many of the American dollars have the Finance Ministry...what is it, the word...*shortaged*?"

"Sold short," corrected Metzilov. "Slightly over a hundred-billion. We will be ruining the Americans soon enough. Finally, the end for them."

"Selling what you don't own is a risk no one can afford to take."

“Well, you needn’t worry. All goes exactly as planned and I—”

Nyurischev reached across the table, putting a surprisingly strong grip on Metzilov’s wrist. A bottle of mineral water was upended and Metzilov felt the liquid soaking into his sleeve.

“You will suspend the dollar project immediately.”

Metzilov slowly turned the color of milk. “It cannot be stopped before the sum of one hundred billions. That was the agreement made with Bank of International Settlements. Mr. President, it forms part of the arrangements for our own currency linkage with Western Europe’s.”

“You will undo the arrangements, get rid of it all. Everything!” said Nyurischev, forcibly, as he released Metzilov’s wrist.

“I’d need three months.”

“Two, no more. Meanwhile, you will coordinate with the Ministry of Agriculture for the importing of grain...look at me, damn you, Metzilov!”

Inwardly gagging, Metzilov thought, two months! He apologized, “Sorry, I was calculating something.”

“You would do better to calculate with the ministry what it will cost to pay for the grain. And let no Russian go hungry this winter because you fail in that task.”

“Of course not,” replied Metzilov, worried and showing it. “Yet the U.S. may be in worse trouble than we thought. Now is the time to send them down for good.”

“I’ve already seen those estimates.”

“And so?”

“And so, Metzilov, I’m interested in grain, bread, and not money.”

“Let me spring the last trap. I beg you to reconsi—”

“You will see to your orders. You will see to the grain problem.” Nyurischev’s face deepened, his heavy caterpillar-like eyebrows knitting together.

“Russia marches untouched. Certainly, you see how—”

“Quit your sniveling, Metzilov.”

Metzilov’s face sagged. “Will that be all?” he asked.

Nyurischev waved a dismissive hand, turning away. He was tired. His ankle seared. A fool thing to allow the dollar speculations in the first place.

Metzilov moved for the door as quickly as good taste would allow, and hurried to his office two floors down. How to reshape his plans? Several crucial calls to Europe, for one thing; Piegear could wait for a while, but not the others.

Metzilov knew he'd have to pay closer attention now to his personal ventures, his carefully hoarded cache of bribes from Russian businessmen, and Europeans who needed expedited permits and other favors from the byzantine Kremlin buros. The rake-offs, and "consulting fees" from Shang-Magan had, over time, amounted to a tidy bundle. Always paid to his accounts at Piegear's Braunschweig und Sohn, and safely parlayed into a small fortune he intended to multiply sharply when harvesting his winnings by dealing a death blow to the U.S. dollar.

Five years of hidden earnings, and all begun only two years after first meeting those strange Magan men who had whittled out the diamond negotiations with De Beers, and he had dealt the Russian hand. Even that other time, when approached by Culhane, who had attended the same United Nations Trade Conference in Rome. On the side, at Culhane's bidding, they had talked grain.

Ukrainian grain. Shiploads of it.

"Attractive money for easy work" was how the American trader Culhane had put it. "All it takes is an updated view of the finer points of Russian trade policy on agricultural products. And we'll help you get what you want and sell whatever exports you can muster at the same time...no, we are not talking about commercial espionage. We are talking about good, straight advice, and keeping the markets fluid and functioning."

Metzilov had checked to find out all he could about the Shang-Magan, even requesting a report from the Federal Security Service. Because of his position at the State Planning Committee, no questions

were asked. Nothing much to be had, though: only three or four flimsy pages, and nothing of particular interest to state security.

So Metzilov had plunged; each month he handed over a brief commentary to the British Airways manager in Moscow. Unsigned, simple, quick, and efficient, since there was so little to report. Russia, after all, had no lasting trade policy.

So why not throw the Shang-Magan a harmless bone or a clipped feather or two occasionally? Good money there for the asking. The only loose end in the arrangement—the one causing Metzilov's stomach to cinch up sometimes—were the refined platinum bars he accepted for his advisory services. Naturally, he hadn't told anyone in Moscow about that; or about how he used the platinum as collateral at Braunsweig for a margin account to short the U.S. dollar.

So close now; the kill in sight. He could taste it. Metzilov was certain he could literally reach out and squeeze the last burp out of the dollar. Somehow, he'd have to sidetrack Nyurischev's absurd orders. Sheer madness to stop now. Another thought struck home: technically speaking, he should tell the Shang-Magan that Russia might soon become a big buyer in the world grain market.

For now, the most pressing problem was to tool up the tactics for stalling Nyurischev; tie a few knots in the Kremlin's murky bureaucratic nets, a place for burying anything except sunshine. Metzilov was well aware he could be crushed by possible market reversals. Still, in some ways the horizons were still bright. Russia had control of warm water port facilities in the Caspian and Black Seas. Better yet, it had paid for pipelines that allowed it to move its oil through the Straits of Hormuz, and from there to wherever markets paid the most per barrel. A bonanza, doubling Russia's export income, and paving the way for greater political leverage.

It was that outlook that had encouraged Metzilov to dangle a big carrot, and an even bigger stick before the Finance Ministry.

This was Russia's moment to extend its bear-claw across the Mid-East and into Europe. With China on its Pacific side, and a Russo-

European alliance dictating the Atlantic flank, America would find itself in a pincers that would be unshakeable.

Whenever Metzilov thought about his strategy, that it was so iron-tight others in the Kremlin feared taking him on, he smiled.

As now.

At the very top of Metzilov's wish-list was his most fervent desire to be elected a Shang Magan and make of it a Council of Seven, he being its newest member. Things were going well for him, on balance. Some snags and sparring with Nyurischev but Nyurischev was Nyurischev. So, not to worry overly much in that quarter.

His own hopes for the future strengthened by the week. He had earned a name for himself in international commercial circles. He was well on his way to formulating the world's strongest currency when wedding the Ruble to the Euro, and, in the process, making a final wreck of the dollar. Also, to his credit with the Shang-Magans, he had served as their confidential ex-officio consultant on Russian foreign trade policy; he had the ear of everyone important in the Kremlin...and the Magans knew it.

His star still soared. Nothing he could see, then, stood in the way.

Suspend the dollar-shorting, Nyurischev had ordered. Not a chance. Metzilov needed some time, that's all—just time and Russia would be the undeniable victor.

And so would he; he'd be the tail on the motherland's kite, soaring to heights undreamed of five years earlier.

## Zurich

In Zurich, as usual, precious few civil words ever passed between Hans-Otto Piegear and his son, Ambros. In the Piegars' fortress-like house they had tossed a fresh round of barbs at each other during a late luncheon of oxtail soup, roast leg of veal, rostii potatoes, and salad. A half-full bottle of Mouton-Rothschild rested in a silver coaster near at hand.

Skipping the main course, Ambros fussed about with the salad. He sipped the wine, its dark ruby color reminding him of one of Panzi's ski jackets. He couldn't wait to *see* her that night in Davos. Wonderment struck him again that he was to be a father. Would she be the only gold medalist in history to ski though a mountainside of slalom gates while pregnant? He hoped so. One day it would be a sort of headliner to discuss within *his own* family.

"And so you defy better judgment and keep going so stupidly your own way?" Hans-Otto Piegear was asking, looking into his son's alert brown eyes. "You were instructed to make dollar short-sales on all the family accounts. I'm told you haven't."

"I did what you asked, for your account."

"But not for your mother's account or yours."

"You're not with Braunsweig any longer. Giving you that information would be against the law."

"Dammit, Ambros! I'm your father."

"But not my banker. Nor Mother's. She gave me her power of attorney two years ago, when you went to the BIS."

Hans-Otto Piegear reddened before he came down even harder on Ambros with, "You're heading for trouble. I'll have you thrown out of Braunsweig."

Ambros smiled warmly, the ready smile women liked so much. “I think you’re trying to plot the downfall of an already slaughtered U.S. currency, and you’re supposed to be the protector of them all ...I’m so very proud to be your son, really brimming with pride.”

Ambros readied himself for another blast. His father’s penchant for tyranny had likely contributed to Ambros’s stomach ulcer. For almost a year he’d been passing blood. The doctor advised him: “If you have to take it, you have to, but learn how to throw it off. Relax. Your father shits the same way we all do.”

Ambros looked across at the portrait of his mother, that superbly fresh and composed face, and then at the three small Rodin bronzes set into white alcoves against the pale lemon walls.

“Your insolence will cost you, Ambros.”

“Truth is usually pretty insolent, I find.”

“Here’s some truth for you, Ambros. Supposing I were to cut you out of my will?”

“I never expected to be in it.”

Another sharp glare from the elder Piegar as he asked, “What is your net worth currently?”

“An insolent question. And here’s the same kind of answer—I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours.”

“You ungrateful bastard.”

“Better that you not say anything like that in front of Mother. You’ve already won the trophy for insulting her enough as it is.”

“You listen to me, Ambros. You’re to take a short position in dollars for your mother’s account by tomorrow at the latest. Is that clear?”

“I will if she says yes. It’s entirely up to her. Between Mutti and myself, we’ve got a long position in dollars of about forty-million. And as much in South African rands. We’re in great shape.”

“I’m trying to keep you from making a damn fool of yourself and ruining your mother at the same time.”

“Well, I’m a hunch player.”

“You’re vacant in the head is what you are,” said Hans-Otto Pieggar, exasperated, his eyes bulging like a frog’s. A tip-off as to what was happening with his internal heat.

“Maybe. Did I mention that I received a letter recently from Andrea Warren? She’s in Washington now. Things are terrible, she said, but she sounds all right.”

A faint but delicious memory of those wonderful, fumbling nights so long ago. His first time. So much like Panzi, thought Ambros, wondering why he’d never thought of that similarity before, but then deciding it was best to keep them in separate compartments.

“What in hell’s name would she know?”

“Andrea’s a pretty smart lady. Anyway, I hope it gets better for her.”

“It won’t. Not there.” Hans-Otto Pieggar took a last swallow of wine. “Are you planning to stay in Zurich this weekend?”

“Tonight I’m off for Davos. I’ll be staying with Panzi and her family.”

Pieggar winced. “She’s got you by the pants, has she?”

“And everything else.”

Hans-Otto arose. Ambros kept his seat. He should get up, he knew, when his father did. That was custom. Courtesy. But he couldn’t bring himself to perform the simple act. Not anymore.

“And I suppose you’ll be marrying her one day.”

“Right after the Winter Olympics. My regiment has drawn winter training this year. The maneuvers are near Chur, so at least some of my battalion can come to the wedding.”

“Your battalion?”

“I’m a major now. The battalion exec-officer. I thought it was a gross error on the last promotion list. Apparently not, the damn idiots. Actually, I’ve been assigned to the Twenty-first Mountain Grenadiers. Mostly Appenzellers, and a very tough lot of boys they are, too.”

Not a little astonished, Hans-Otto Pieggar said, “That’s interesting.” No more would he say or give to his only son, however, who was now the second youngest major in the Swiss army.

## COMPRADOR

About to say something else, Hans-Otto Piegar refrained; wheeling abruptly, he left the room. Ambros still sat. Taking another swallow of wine, he watched the red tears trickle slowly down the inside of the glass. Tears are exactly what he felt like, thinking of his father, but thinking more deeply of his mother. He wished like anything she'd get rid of the loutish ghoul, thanking his stars they had married, for his own sake, but it was such a gross mismatch he never fathomed how his mother could bear up under all these years with his father.

She had the durability of the Matterhorn. He loved her, but not for her undeniable strength of character. More probably, it was because she was a Shultheiss; Shultheiss's do not countenance defeat,

## Washington, D.C.

Culhane pored over the drafts of a proposed four-way trade swap with China and Mexico and Canada. He'd need a couple more visits to Fort Meade for number-crunching on those fancy computers, then find a word-processing operator who knew how to keep his or her mouth buttoned up. Two or three operators would be better. Much safer, all around, if he could break up the document's contents.

Soon it would be up to Halburton and then to the vagaries of fate. He looked at a table of numbers, then over at some pages of a World Bank report on China. Excitement scratched at his imagination.

Russia, he knew, must be shocked into a dead standstill, forced to face up to her own choke-price. Europe must be cut loose somehow from dependence on Moscow's oil-stranglehold. Sealing up the Hormuz Straits could solve that problem. Yet Europe must pay its own levy, and how much was yet another question. What would Joost Van Slyke say about it all? Europe was his trading zone.

Culhane yawned, loosened his tie, and let these issues simmer as he studied his plans. The light was better in his new quarters in the old Executive Office Building. Closer now to his small staff, the room more spacious, easier to work in, the larger office breathed new life somehow into his work. No more than a three-minute walk when Halburton summoned him for talk.

A rap on the door. Culhane looked up.

Flickinger entered, a frugal smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. "Have you got a minute?" Though not asked, he sat down and continued, "I've been detailed to Florida for a few days to fix up some

loose nuts and bolts. If you need me for anything, the duty officer can always reach me.”

“Florida, eh? If you find any stray cigars, pick some up.” Culhane shuffled some papers to cover a map of China.

“Have you, by chance, thought of any way to come up with that Cuban paper we discussed?”

“Have you a spare copy of the New York Corporation’s file? The one that always seems misplaced?”

“No, I don’t.” The lie again. Flickinger got up and started for the door.

“Just a minute.” Flickinger turned around. “Try Leopoldo Maxaculi in Caracas. His number is 44-81-16. Use my name. He might be of help to you.”

Instantly, Flickinger whisked out a pocket notebook and pencil, asking for a repeat of the number. Scribbling it down, he looked up and asked, “Can he be trusted?”

Wagging his head, dumbfounded, Culhane said, “Do it or don’t do it. It’s up to you.”

“But if it doesn’t work, would you try it on with Van Slyke when you talk again? It’s very—” Deep from within Flickinger’s subconscious the words had simply slipped out.

Culhane went dead still, before asking, “You people, are you fooling around with my telephone? If you are, by Christ—”

“Not at all, I swear to you.” Flustered, Flickinger knew he’d be hard pressed to explain.

“Scram.”

“Look, I just assumed you’d be in touch—”

“Get the hell out of here, while you’ve still got two feet.”

Hapless, feeling idiotic, Flickinger made a hasty exit.

Culhane regained his seat. His mind pumped at flash rate now as coils of suspicion formed. A dozen questions arose, all of them angling against the recent call from Joost Van Slyke. How would Flickinger have guessed at it?

*Would you try it on with Van Slyke when you talk again?"* Flickinger's exact words.

He had told Andrea of Joost's call. No one else, not even Sant Saxa. So how did Flickinger get wind of it, if I'm not wiretapped, as he says I'm not. Someone at the hotel? Who? His mind spun backward. Wait! He recalled the night at the British Embassy on the Queen's birthday, and the meeting with Cowperthwaite. Afterward, he'd met up with Andrea downstairs at the reception, later introducing her to Flickinger. The manner of their greeting had been so casual, so off-hand, as if they'd been related, known each other from other days and other aces. Clumsily trying to hide it, or not hide it, like two old friends aggravated over some distasteful incident.

Her father, she had mentioned, had been an early-on operative with the OSS during War II. Later, a CIA station chief in Europe, and slain there quite mysteriously. A member of that dark brotherhood—Culhane now thinking at speed—and did that mean a previous connection of some kind with Flickinger? A better bet, wasn't it, than any hotel telephone operator listening in? Even if it were someone at the Hay-Adams, why ever would they tell it to Flickinger unless Flickinger had arranged it?

Flickinger had been assigned to him as a door-opener, when first he'd come to the White House, to ease the way into the intelligence community, when he needed to find out assessments available nowhere else. A convenience, that was pretty much all of it. But it seemed to be more; often it was Flickinger asking the questions, instead of himself.

Or was it Andrea?

Has she infiltrated my life, on the sly?

Sleeping with her for weeks, telling her of my private business. Lonely and getting fat-mouthed. Cooking my own goose, am I? Stupid sonofabitch.

## Bel Air

The old Taiwanese sat on the edge of a bed, sucking courage out of a third opium pellet.

The room where he slept was down a hall that ran straight off the kitchen. A very still night with a moon throwing its half-blush across the Culhane residence. Some of the light leaked through the window, painting a silvery blotch on the black cotton pants the old man wore. Barefoot, later he would dress more suitably.

His few possessions were already packed in a blue laundry bag. His shoes laid out, his windbreaker strung over the back of a chair, he could leave quickly. Three bars of gold, ticket from Vancouver to Tokyo to Hong Kong to Taipei. *I die like man instead of dog.*

Slipping one hand into his pocket, he pulled out a small penlight. A flick of its switch and the pale, beam settled on his cheap wrist-watch: 1:34.

Soon time to cut master's color picture. He away now. Picture no good anyway. Otherwise, sell to eat. Not good picture like in Taiwan. Pay so much, these stupid ones, for me to cut away worthless picture.

He stood up and reached across the blanket until his gnarled fingers gripped the familiar handle of the Wyoming hunting knife, made for gutting hunted game. He had found its hooked blade perfect for garden work. That afternoon he'd sharpened the surgical steel so that its edge could almost cut air in half. The old man padded on his bare feet out the bedroom door, then as silently through the kitchen.

Up in the master bedroom, Karin Culhane tossed fitfully on her canopied bed. Thirst in her throat, deep and dry. Then a burn elsewhere and the ache came back, a deep throbbing inside her delicate

walls. Lazily, almost unconsciously, she rolled onto her back, and with two fingers plucked lightly at an excited nipple. A soft moan, while her other hand sought the tiny organ hidden under the puff of reddish hair. Expertly, she loved herself.

There was nothing silly about it anymore. Just urges, pounding away, that needed quieting. She brought up an image of her husband doing these beautiful, playful things to her. But he was a million miles away. She did not touch him anymore, was not good for him, not since the baby died.

*I killed her. It was me.*

Both hands were there now, fingers and knuckles doing a frenzied samba, and soon the muscles along the whole length of her body squeezed, focused, arched before the gorgeous detonation slapped her flat against the sheet again.

Yet the other thirst, the one in her throat, kept biting away. Karin rolled off the bed, standing nude and lovely in a shaft of moonlight. A breathy sigh as she thought of going downstairs to the kitchen. She wanted milk, if there was any, or at least a squeeze of lemon in water. She could do it easily in the dark, as she had many times before. There would be no light at this hour.

The old man wouldn't have known one painting from another even with the aid of an art book. Already narrow strips of canvas drooled down like tangled confetti from the frames that held Pissarro, Monet, Seurat, Corot, and Cezanne. Just the Renoir to go and he'd be done. The knife sliced efficiently, just as it did in the garden, hardly making a sound.

A night noise then. He stopped his surgery, though the small penlight still played its beam against one wall. Feet! He heard quiet and rhythmic footfalls on the carpeted circular staircase.

A little one? The Missy?

"Who's there? Is that you, Rushie?" asked Karin into the black, thinking it might be her son.

Fear narrowing his already frail chest, the old man squirmed against the wall. He wanted to be the wall, disappear into it.

Many God's Thunder come now, he thought, as he pressed himself tight against the plaster.

Naked, unafraid, her mind vividly clear at the moment, Karin walked into the darkness toward the origin of the light. "What's the matter? Why're you here?"

The opium pellet was sucked away down the old man's throat; fright made his scrotum shrivel; a squirt of urine trickled down one leg. The light beam shifted its angle so that Karin saw, in one fast glimpse, three of the shredded paintings.

"Oh, dear God, what's happ—" she shrieked, then moaned, "You're crazy! What've you done?"

Karin lunged forward, in a trot, believing she was in another nightmare and knowing she was not. Her heart raced, and her graceful body reached nearly to the Taiwanese as he threw the light beam on her.

All goddesses, he thought, seeing Karin's raw womanhood in the rim of light that revealed her as if she were a ghost in the pitch blackness.

She plunged up against him. "It's you! You!" screamed Karin. "You awful—"

Petrified, seeing her hands rising up in rage, the old man struck out with the Wyoming knife. A deep slash cut diagonally through one breast and the hooked blade exited her body near the hipbone on the other side. The cutting so instant, Karin didn't feel the pain. Shoving forward again, trying to dig her fingers into his eyes. Yet whatever was supposed to happen next in life, whether sleep, whether a safe breath, had no chance whatsoever of happening.

The old man suddenly dropped his frail shoulder, ramming it against her chest. Searing pain now, a terrible burning inside her, as she was driven against a curio cabinet. Glass smashed. A collection of hand-painted Chinese paper fans tumbled to the floor. Again, a high screeching yell from Karin, before he dug the blade deep into her throat and ripped upward in one curving stroke.

One last rasp of breath as she fell, blood geyersing everywhere over the tile floor. She died as nakedly as she was born.

He gashed her twice more, taking off most of a breast. His mind fogged by the opium, his hands shaking now, the old man saw his dream fading. He thought wildly and tremulously as another burp of urine spurted down his leg.

Picking up the penlight dropped during the struggle, aiming it on the Missy, the old man saw he had rid her of all her devils. Coppery hair had fanned into a pool of scarlet blood soaking into the edge of an area rug.

He padded away, cradling his blood-streaked arm, cautiously crawled up each stair-riser; up, listening, then up again. At the top, he pointed the light-beam down another long hallway. Somewhere in there, he told himself, was more life. His knees turned to jelly, the rest of his senses still muddled in opiated clouds.

He would do the rest of it now. Holding the Wyoming knife upright, at the slash angle, he crept down the hallway, listening for more life sounds. At the third door he found the first of them, as he touched the edge of the knife blade, checking its keenness.

Visions swam in his head; visions of the earth itself yawning, swallowing him, the heavens raining streaks of fire.

So young, so sweetly innocent, needing him to spare them from life's vicious blows. He opened the door wider, crept, heard the slighted sound of breath, and he struck once more. Struck and ripped till he felt the obstruction of a rib cage.

## Washington, D.C.

“Take it with you.”

“Why not leave it here?” asked Culhane.

“You’re the collector,” said Andrea, “so keep it with your others.”

“Where’d you say you got it?” Culhane leaned over and tied a shoelace.

“The office gofer. I gave him two meat coupons and he fainted with delirium...and don’t look at me as if I were a thief.”

“It isn’t that at all.” Finished with knotting his tie, he slipped into his blue blazer.

“It’s just an old record anyway.” Andrea, leaning on her elbows against the bed pillow, pushed herself up. Her long smooth back was uncovered, and he could see the enticing drape of one breast.

“I don’t want you giving things away for me. Certainly not food coupons.”

Culhane glanced at her, as if to reaffirm his point. He went over and sat on the bed, thinking how in the spreading light of dawn Andrea looked fresher than mountain mint.

“You don’t like people doing things for you, do you?” said Andrea in a low, thoughtful voice. “Seems to upset you somehow.”

“Kiddo, you do worlds for me as it is.”

“I didn’t mean *that*...what I mean is that you go skittish or something when somebody tries to do a little paying back.” Andrea stretched and turned over. Now the bed sheet made a slanting margin across her hips.

“I’ve got to get going,” he said.

“Halburton again?” Culhane nodded as Andrea teased, “I think you’ve *got* it for him.”

“I’ve got it for him, all right.”

“Come back to bed and we’ll make two left turns. Head if you want it.” She laughed impishly, watching for his reaction. Culhane gave out with a steady look, his eyes more like a teal blue in the dimmed light. A look that never failed to excite her, making her feel special, beautiful, important.

“Don’t try me twice,” he replied. “I feel that good old southern rise coming on.”

“That’s my healthy fella talking.”

“That’s your fella who’d better get his kickers moving too.”

“What do you do with him at this insane hour anyway?” The sheet slipped down, until her thighs and blond belly fur were exposed.

“We start out with Novocain cocktails, then roll a few verbal grenades around...working with him is like sculpting fog, and he needs a week sometimes to decide the simplest things. Fear of making a mistake, I suppose. Fear of something. Of me, perhaps, for all I know.”

“Well, I hope I’m more fun than that in the morning.”

“Someday I’ll skywrite it for you.” Culhane grinned lecherously.

“Ah, well right now I’d settle for a ceiling poem. Want some more leg? Want both legs? I’m geared up.”

“Jesus, Andrea, don’t horse with me this way. I’ve got to va-moose...and you’ve got the best-looking behind on both sides of the Equator.”

“Maybe the readiest, too.” Andrea looked at Culhane openly, quite seriously too, and added, “It’s never been like this for me before. The sex and all that goes with it. And you?” She waited expectantly.

“Never.”

Not a flat misstatement, since it was always different with everyone. Feelings, sex, the complete caboodle. But that little truth could sleep undisturbed. Yes, he though—*never* was an apt description for

their situation. He'd never before been unfaithful to Karin, but, sexually speaking, Karin was no longer available to him or anyone else. A sad tale, and with no prospect of recovery. *Never*: it pained immeasurably to think of it, even fleetingly.

Getting up, he bent over, smelled the jasmine in Andrea's hair, then nibbled her mouth. He had loved two women in his life, was this now the third? Had he any right? Could he help it, even? He kissed her again, her mouth, her breasts.

"Take the record," she reminded him as he moved away.

On the way out the door, he stopped by the coffee table and picked up a limited edition CD of a Bix Beiderbecke recording. An oldie, very good stuff, a remastering of the original cut by RCA Victor decades ago.

Outside, the crisp morning sang its own praises, putting him in mind of other October mornings in other places: Beirut, where the autumn air seemed to have passed through vintage wine before you breathed it; or in Rio, where it was springtime now, with the warm breezes blowing against the blue mouth of Copacabana beach's bay.

By the Potomac, nature would soon undress the trees as the countryside changed from red to lifeless brown and finally to the deadness of white. Very soon now the great wedges of geese and duck would move from Canada down the long flyway, hide out for a while on Chesapeake Bay, then head south for warmer waters and unplucked feeding marshes.

His thoughts wandering about as made his way for the Hay-Adams, some three miles away. He thought about Andrea, too, and how their lives bonded closer by the day. Soon he'd have to come to terms with himself. A full-fledged affair, and it was wrong, for there was still Karin; and yet perhaps it was pardonable since there was no real Karin except in body, her mind now unmoored, hopelessly so.

That Andrea might be somehow tied into the CIA didn't really bother him. Nothing actually pointed to her as the source of Flickinger's knowledge of the recent telephone call from Van Slyke.

Just a hunch.

Yet he'd once made scores of millions on gut hunches, when only the timing of things outweighed the availability of facts. Better to bide my time, Culhane told himself, and wait for another signal. Why accuse her of anything, and in any event, why would she consort with a man like Flickinger?

Culhane quickened his step, invigorated by superb air as light as thistledown. It was still quiet on the streets as he passed by the deserted Electrical Workers and Machinists' building. Boarded up, the lower windows cross-taped, the lawns and shrubbery overgrown.

In two hours, he'd meet with Halburton. They would wrangle more. A few days earlier, it had become necessary to explain again how sophisticated trading practices worked—this to a President who had served once as a deputy in the U.S. Trade Representative's office before running for Congress.

They'd discussed the usual forms of noncash countertrade: barter—straight exchange of goods for other goods; compensation deals—where one party sells equipment to make more product and then takes amounts of that product as payment; swaps—in which similar commodities, such as oil, are exchanged in various locations to save on transportation costs; switches—more complex transactions, where two countries incur an imbalance in trade with each other, and a third party steps in and resolves the difference by selling the creditor country something it needs and accepting payment from the debtor country in some product it has an abundance of. He hadn't even tried to take Halburton through the more intricate ballet of four- and five-corner trades: those where you had to link six or seven trades at once. Gonad growers!



In the hotel, Jenny Carruthers, the new hire at the reception desk, put down the phone and, hurrying toward him, her face mottled with anxiety, said, "Mr. Culhane, oh, my goodness—"

"Morning, Jenny."

“A Mr. Saxa has been trying to reach you half the night. And the White House operator, too.”

Now what? “Thanks. I’ll see to it right away.”

A reassuring smile as Jenny said, “I hope everything is all right?”

Jenny stood there for a brief moment watching his retreating figure. She wasn’t sure things were all right at all. Too many calls, and the callers’ voices so urgent. She worried her lip with her lustrous teeth. Everybody on the staff liked Mr. Culhane, knew he was somehow important, even a bit mysterious. Rumors circulated that he somehow arranged for the hotel’s food.

Entering his suite, Culhane headed directly for the red phone. Three rings later, Saxa’s voice blurted, “Rush? That be you?”

“Right here.”

A labored pause. “Better take chair.”

“C’mon, Sant, give.” Culhane laughed into the phone.

A heavy intake of breath, followed by a deep cough, as Saxa said, “I die myself telling you...but Karin and children are, are dead. I bad sorry.”

Something inside Culhane jarred loose; then a heavy thunk at the pit of his stomach. “What?” he said, quite softly. “When, where?” A voice inside him said it was true.

“Night before last one, right here in house. Crawl with cops now. Jack McTigue here with other police...your family—they be murdered, Rush.”

“Shot?” asked Culhane, feeling the blood draw down from his own head. The phone seemed to freeze in his hand

“No,” came the answer. “By knife.”

Silence as Culhane could feel some other cold blade skewering his own insides. He dropped to his knees. Karin? The children? No! Every bone in his body seemed to bend.

“You there?” asked Sant.

“No,” groaned Culhane, sickened by shock.

“Christ, I sorry...is awful, awful,” and now Saxa’s voice, almost inaudible, verged on breaking. Another hacking cough and then Saxa

went on. “Police think it happen Saturday night. I down in Gardena to see Gillis. She be sick, and I not get back until Monday afternoon. I find them dead, all dead, call police. Been-*a* trying call you.”

Culhane nodded to no one, thinking: And the reason you couldn’t get me is because I’ve been shackled up with this new friend of mine.

“Somehow I’ll get out there today. I don’t know how yet, but I will.”

He hung up the phone, and his chest heaved as he stifled a cry. His insides seemed stripped out. Murdered! Why? The anger, the frustration, put a magenta glow into his eyes. Something feeling like a snake shivered down his back.

For several minutes, he knelt there, staring at nothing, dazed. His shoulders bobbing up and down, silently sobbing. When his mind cleared, later, he could think only of that feral thing that, when overtaking his senses, drove him to the brink. *Alone!* Again in this world, no blood connectives now to tie his life together. Not a single suture.

He dialed the number Halburton had given him for emergencies. Almost instantly, a resonant Southern voice answered, “Agent Rowels.”

“Morning, Billy Joe,” said Culhane, almost gasping.

“Shit-fire, Mr. Culhane, half the world’s lookin’ for you.”

“I badly need to talk to the President. He around?”

“Just hold.” The line emptied for a minute or so.

“That you, Culhane?” asked Halburton, the voice graveled.

Culhane proceeded to quickly relate what skeletal details he knew. To two questions, he answered the President with “I don’t know” and “Apparently hacked to death.” Then he said, “I need help getting a Priority One air pass to Los Angeles. Will you?”

“You stay right there. A car’ll be there in ten minutes to pick you up... keep a hold of yourself. I’m struck dumb. That’s all I can say right now,” ended Halburton, with vigor now in his tone.

“I appreciate it. I do,” replied Culhane numbly.

## COMPRADOR

Everything in his world seemed dead then. Culhane fell onto the wing chair near the phone, still soaked with shock. Everything that had counted, gone, dust!

And later, he thought, Shall I pack? No, there's plenty of clothes out there...Christ! Change my shirt? Are you going to a dance, you dumb son of a bitch? You're going home, home to a hell as empty of life as leukemia cells.

He didn't know how long he sat there watching the wheel of his life roll away; farther, farther still, until it spun off into a chasm.

## Bel Air

**D**usting for fingerprints, taking scores of photos, a flock of homicide investigators scoured the residence for traces of other evidence, with extra attention paid to the bedrooms, where the children's bodies were found. Crude chalk lines showed where Karin Culhane's body had fallen on the tiled floor. Crusts of dried blood stained one corner of a carpet. And scattered about, still, were the priceless ancient Chinese paper fans with their ebony and mother-of-pearl handles, some of them crushed beyond repair. One photographer, who had earlier taken photos of the bodies, now aimed his camera at the torn paintings. One by one, he pointed his heartless lens against broken frames and shredded canvasses.

A policeman walked to where Jack McTigue and Herbsant Saxa stood talking, in the hall, near the door to the library.

The policeman spoke, "Cap'n, there's newshawkers down at the driveway gate. They're raisin' all hell for a statement of some kind." His eyes lifted a little, awaiting a reply.

A bulky man, with graying reddish hair, known for his temper and his compassion, McTigue said to Saxa, "What do you think, Sant?" Their friendship dated back almost as long as the friendship of the captain and Culhane.

"He not like it, Jack. You know heem."

"They aren't going to vanish, you know. If we give them something maybe they'll take off before he arrives," said McTigue. He glanced at his watch. "Three hours or so and he ought to be here." His face drooping, Sant said, "You do it, Jack. I not got the heart or balls."

## COMPRADOR

“Okay,” returned McTigue, who motioned the other policeman to follow along as he went down the hall toward the front door, then out to the long driveway.

Herbsant Saxa stepped down the hallway in the other direction. Only late morning now in California, but he didn't care, he wanted a drink. Something to hold on to, anything at all. He walked into the room that Culhane had renovated with a pub bar brought over from England years ago. A hard cough bent him as he reached for the bottle he wanted. Just a little something to grip until his best friend, his *son*, arrived from Washington. Even after all these months, it would be terrible to see him in the midst of this butchery.

## Washington, D.C.

Commotion began as a murmur, rising to loud talk and soon became a mild roar as the UPI wire-service's morning news round-up fed into a large computer screen at the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles *Times-Herald*.

The tape read:

***FAMILY OF WELL-KNOWN CALIFORNIA BUSINESSMAN  
FOUND MURDERED IN BEL-AIR MANSION***

Her curiosity caught by the chattering voices, Andrea popped out of her small office. A young lacquer-haired secretary—the subject of lurid bets around the newsroom—sashayed by.

“What’s going on?” asked Andrea her. “The Pope get raped or something?”

“Beats me. Some White House guy’s family in California just bought the farm the hard way.”

Andrea raced the few yards down the half-lit corridor into the newsroom. Deftly, she pushed her way into the huddle of people crowding around the screen.

“Tell me,” she implored, “who is it?” But she knew.

“The Culhane guy again,” somebody replied. “His wife and two kids found the wrong end of a blade. Guted, sounds like..”

Andrea’s knees jiggled. A fierce tingling of her cranial nerves. “Make way, please. I’m coming in.” she said, elbowing closer to the screen.

Each printed blurb she read sank her lower. Later, the gist of the story understood, she backed her way out. What seemed like a ten-

## COMPRADOR

mile walk to her office made her feel as if her legs were bound in irons. Closing the door, she sobbed, feverishly. That fabulous man, she thought; one smackdown after the next.

## Bel Air

Culhane counted four squad cars and an emergency medical vehicle parked in front of his house.

He had arrived an hour ago at the Van Nuys Airport, northwest of Los Angeles. A blue car driven by a young airman brought him the rest of the way. Home, he was in the worst hell he'd ever known; driving through the gates, he'd seen policemen shooing away clutches of strangers.

The airman said, "It ain't my place to say it, sir, but I know you been stoned good. I'm real sorry... "

Culhane tried a smile But it stalled somewhere as he looked over at the airman, whose youth shone in an intent face. Then a brief handshake before Culhane let himself out of the sedan and walked to where Herbsant Saxa stood.

Watching through the car window, the airman saw Culhane and the dark little man embrace. The smaller man hardly reached to Culhane's chest. But the airman saw that they stood there holding each other closely in front of the big house, bigger than the school he'd been to in western Tennessee. What was it like, he wondered, to be so rich? It couldn't be much different if you were a tall, hard-looking bastard like Culhane, who seemed okay and who ran his arms around another nigger like me. The airman threw the car in gear, heading down the driveway.

"Jack McTigue still here?"

"He here. Plenty others, too. You not going to like in there."

Culhane drew a deep breath. "Let's get it over with."

Through the door then, and Culhane jerked to a standstill as he saw the ripped canvases of those priceless joys. Fury raged inside, yet he only shook his head silently.

Walking farther, he observed the chalk outlines on the tile floor and didn't have to ask what it meant. He stepped carefully, with Sant right behind him, until reaching the library.

A guarded, appeasing look on McTigue's face as he greeted Culhane, who thought the police captain looked harassed. Tie undone, shirt collar winging out, a long ash ready to drop from the cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"Jack," said Culhane, reaching forward with his hand.

"Hello, Rush. You made a pretty fast pedal here."

"I got helped. Where do you want to begin?" Then Culhane turned and said to Sant, who was about to leave, "No, Sant, stay here."

"Let's sit down," suggested McTigue. He pulled a small notebook out of his gray suit coat.

And in about three minutes the captain recited the known and discovered facts: probable date and time of the killings, the method of killing, where the bodies were found by Saxa, and so forth. McTigue sweated each word of it, skimming over the more gruesome details.

At the end, empty-eyed and perplexed, the captain asked, "It sounds absurd but I have to ask you—you got any idea who could have done this?"

"I've been thinking about it for seven hours, and I can't even guess," replied Culhane.

"Maybe them street thugs who go past gate guards," Saxa said.

"The homicide team thinks it was one person using the same weapon," explained McTigue. "We're trying to chase down your Taiwanese handyman. No one seems to know if he stayed here that night."

"I don't either," said Culhane, shrugging.

"We found a few bracelets and rings upstairs in the master bedroom. Was there any big jewelry? Important stones or anything?"

"Karin had to sell most of it a year ago."

There were several more questions. None of them poured even the slimmest light on the killings.

“Rush,” said McTigue finally, “the remains of your family can be released anytime you’re ready to make the arrangements.”

“Don’t I have to identify them?”

“Sant and I already have.”

Culhane passed an appreciative look to Sant Saxa; no words, the look was enough.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” asked McTigue, wondering what had happened to Culhane’s face.

“Hunt the bastard down.”

“I mean anything personal.”

“Can you keep a man by the gate for a few days?”

“That’s easy enough.”

“And maybe, Jack, you could loan me a police launch for a couple of hours.”

“Bury them at sea? You want that?”

“Their ashes. I think Karin would want it that way.”

“Just tell us when,” said McTigue, who sprang from his chair, walked over, and rested one palm on Culhane’s slumped shoulder, who sat there with his head buried in both hands, his mind cluttered with confusion. McTigue turned and motioned Sant from the room so some details could be discussed out of Culhane’s hearing.

Alone now, Culhane recalled oddments of his life with Karin. The nights when they would all picnic down on the cool beach, watching the waves charging in, playing a game of guessing which wave came from Tahiti, from Hawaii, from Guam or anywhere. Sometimes they’d make up new names for the early stars. Borrowed names like Pinocchio, Minnie, or Popeye for the big one that was actually Sirius. Nutty, silly, wonderful games. Sand in the food and drinks, even on the taste-end of his cigar.

Or the time they’d sailed on his *Eastern Light* through the fjords of Norway, with Karin reciting the legends of her land. A grand

month, ending in Finland, where he had the schooner taken down and shipped back to California.

He held himself now, strongly as he could, forcing control of his nerves, and feeling very old. Not this way, he thought, not with a scarlet gash across that graceful throat. He remembered her lightly accented voice and the way she could spin words, making you think you were the only person in the world who meant anything to her. A life that had gone rough, absorbing too many shocks. But a life that had counted for much with him. Taken away, first by demons, now by murder. And those kids, they had barely left the beginnings of life. Marvelous children, happy, fun-lovers, and he had greatest hopes for them. Murdered! Coldly gutted!

Everything dropped violently inside him. He lurched up from the chair, almost stumbling toward the window. He looked down across the back lawn to a grove of pepper trees, just staring, not searching for anything at all, trying to let the better memories flush away his agony.

What is left that's worth fighting for, he asked himself?

Sant Saxa, who had come back to the room, saw that Culhane had turned a sickly white, and the eyes were of deepest violet now.

"Get me some drink, Sant, please."

For several hours, Culhane stayed in the library, melting down the bottle of Izarra. Until, finally, the sun played its last light against the kingwood paneling of the room, raising it to a high sheen. Nightfall came and he slept for an hour before waking to hear Sant stirring around.

"I make barley soup for us. And vegetable from garden."

"Later maybe, Sant. You get everything straight with Muldaur on the—"

"All fixed. Don't worry about any that stuff."

"I've got some things to tell you. Then you'll have to forget them."

Culhane told Saxa of certain plans in the development stage, and of Halburton's trait of dodging the hard choices. The military's General Staff were rumored to be on the verge of a coup. He went

over it rapidly, including his ideas of cornering the world wheat market and how the Blue Dollar fit in to a broader concept of a two-currency system. One for domestic use, the other for foreign transactions. The talk forced his mind of his shock, off death. When he couldn't think of anything else to say, he kept talking anyway to find out if he were still sane.

Trying to figure a place for himself in the scheme, Sant asked, "What is like there in Washington?"

"Like running with the whores."

"Halburton, he that way?"

"Better than most of them. But he'd be better off on his ranch. A slow-moving conservative fellow, who drew some bad cards."

"He got you to help him."

"I really don't know if anyone can."

"But you got this big plan."

"I can't break through to him half the time." And then Culhane's broad shoulders shook. His head lowered as he said: "Jesus, Sant, everyone's gone on us, aren't they?"

"I be here with you."

"But no family, Sant. Who's going to be around, carry on for us?"

"Start again. You still young."

"Yeah," said Culhane, his voice as muted as the faraway sounds of his children.

Sensing instantly the mood, the great torment gathering in Culhane, Sant switched channels deftly, asking, "Can bring this big idea off? Dangerous. Never hear of any like it."

"There's a chance."

"Shang-Magan?"

"If I can con them. But it's the timing that really matters, Sant. Just like the old big market plays."

"You be careful. You mebbe looking for the big trouble," Sant offered.

"I know," said Culhane, taking another dram of the Izarra to anesthetize himself. "But I can't see any other way of doing it."

“Go walking away.”

“There goes our gold, if I did. Or a long lawsuit, anyway, to recover it.”

“You care?”

“Yes. It’s a lot of gold. Practically, a lifetime of work. Besides,” said Culhane, turning from the view of the back lawn, “I want to see if it can be done.”

“You get kill maybe too,” Sant said, blatantly.

“I want to see if something else can be pulled off. Something permanent.”

“Is what? What you mean?”

“I’m not sure yet, Sant. It’s just an idea I’ve been discussing with Halburton.”

“Idea for death maybe.”

Twice now Sant had mentioned killing and death. This time he saw Culhane nearly go rigid. But Saxa was a comprador, and would speak the best advice he could, no matter how brutal it sounded.

“How about soup?” Sant asked.

“Later maybe. I’m going to the pool house in a while. I’ll sleep there.”

Together for so long, they could read each other like a deck of marked cards. A whirlpool of questions and ideas swirled around in Sant Saxa’s head. Somehow he had to get into this massive market play Culhane was mapping out.

## New York

**J**oe Rearden burst out, “You good-for-goddamn-nothing Guinea fool!”

Wincing, Guido Grasselli stood there in Rearden’s study taking it. He had to. The Culhane business had gone sour as turpentine, threatening now to ignite into a scandal, severe legal charges by the authorities and possibly imprisonment.

“Police. Federal investigations, you idiotic—”

“Murder is a state felony, the federals shouldn’t get into it,” interrupted Grasselli.

“They’ll get into it if they’re told to. What do you take me for, you stupid prick!”

“Mr. Rearden,” pleaded Guido, “look, we’re clear. There’s no way to link us.”

“I want to know soon, very soon, where that Chink’s gone to. You get me, do you, Guido?”

“Please. Sure I get you.” You old fart-bag, thought Guido. “He’s gone to ground somewhere. Air Canada has no record of him checking in through Vancouver. There’s no way he can get out of Los Angeles by air without a month-long wait. Mexico, either.”

“Find him.”

“We’ve been looking all over for six, seven days now.”

“And the police? Are they looking too?”

Timidly, Guido replied, “I’m told so.”

“When they find him, that’s link number one. But they’re not going to find him, are they, Guido? And do you know why?”

Grasselli just shook his head, fearing what was coming.

## COMPRADOR

Rearden centered himself under an overhead light that cast its glare against his long face. His spittle mouth opened twice before he could say, “The why of it, Guido, you worthless bastard, is because you’re going west. And you’re going to find the Chinaman, and then you’re going to shut him up!”

“You need me here.”

“You leave tonight!”

“I couldn’t get seat space that fast. They’ll run that chink down. Give them some time. That’s all we need...some time.”

Joe Rearden would hear none of it. “Don’t come back to New York until every trace is eliminated.”

“Aw, for chrissakes, chief, it’s not as bad—”

“Half your rope is gone, Guido. Now move! “

Grasselli just stared into Rearden’s implacable gaze, knowing that he had no choice. He had no idea of how to find the runty old Taiwanese. The Doney’s were taking care of it.

But what if the police got there first?.

## Washington, D.C.

**I**n Washington, awakening, Andrea felt around for him. Nothing, of course, and she footed the bedcovers away. Not a word yet from him! The *Times-Herald*, the wire services, television had carried the story for three days before running out of ammunition. Culhane wouldn't interview with so much as a mosquito, the police were releasing few details. Phones went unanswered at the residence; the gates were bolted shut—she'd heard—and the grounds watched by the police.

She got up, went to the bedroom window.

An ebony sky at that hour, swarming with swirls of stars winking away in their celestial Morse code.

A ring now! With an eager sweep of her arm, she reached for the phone on the bedside table. Him?

“A Miss Warren there?” asked an operator.

“Yes,” breathlessly.

“Hold please.” Then, “Here's your party, sir. You have three minutes.”

“Andrea.” It was Clay Flickinger. Her spirits sagged.

Dreary-voiced, she answered, “Yes.”

“I'm calling from Florida. I've got a small job for you.”

“When don't you?”

“We've less than three minutes. Now listen! The President hasn't heard from Culhane. The phones don't answer out there, and the police refuse to bother him.”

“Good.”

“Culhane can hermit out there for all I care. But Halburton is Halburton and he wants answers. I can't leave Florida now. I want

you to get to Culhane and find out what's going on, when he's coming back, then let me know."

"This is a very shitto idea. You play it yourself, Clay, and I'll just turn the pages."

"None of that, Andrea."

"Plenty of that, you mean. Look what he's going through. His family—all of them scalped. Murdered. Horrible! Why in God's name do you think he wants visitors?"

Now listen. There's a letter from Halburton, and it'll be handed to you when you're picked up. That ought to get you through the gate guards at Bel Air, and we'll alert the police about your coming. Clear? It had *better be* clear..."

"You're clear out of your mind. That's the only thing clear to me—"

"You'll be getting another call soon, so don't run off anywhere."

"Why doesn't the White House just keep trying the house number?"

"They do. Days of it. Nothing."

"Clay, I can't just leave Washington and—"

"You signed on, remember. You've got a decent paying job. Millions of people won't eat meat tonight."

"You're irritating the hell out of me."

"Be damn sure you keep me filled in."

A click sounded over the line. Rude bastard, she thought. Bel Air? What could she do there? Maybe he didn't care to have her around, and maybe a lot of other things. What if another woman was there when she arrived? If she arrived? A stinking mess and yet she knew she wanted to be near him, wanted to be of help, a fast friend.

No, at second thought and third thought and fourth thought, she wanted to smother him with affection and love and whatever he needed. Forever.

Flickinger, what a cock-up. What had her mother ever, *ever* seen in him? Even for a night?

## Bel Air

She was dressed in pale yellow linen slacks, a white blouse, and a thin white sweater. A young officer gawked at her. A helluva a frail, he thought.

Reaching into the car, across the seat, she slipped an envelope from a side pocket of her purse. Showing it to the officer, Andrea said, "I'm supposed to deliver this. As you can see, it's not stamped."

The officer noted the addressee, and the typed legend in the lower corner, which read, "By Hand." Turning the envelope over, on its flap he saw THE WHITE HOUSE in royal-blue print.

Confusion scrambled the young man's face as he asked, "Miss Warner? That your name, ma'am?"

"Andrea War-ren."

"Sorry. I'll run this up to the house and see what they say."

"Who are *they*?"

"Mr. Culhane and Mr. Saxa."

"Oh. Well, why don't I run it up instead."

"Sorry, I got my orders, like I said."

"And I've got a few of my own. Can I talk to your superior? You were supposed to be told I was arriving."

"Sit tight, ma'am, I'll be right back. Just sit tight."

"I will, but please give me that letter back first. Just explain where it's from, and my name. Let them have my name."

The officer hitched up his gun belt and strode over to unlock and then carefully relock the gate. As he retreated, she peered through the ironwork of the gate. A real rambler. Spanish, Monterey? What do they call this style? Big. I've seen bigger, but this is a lot of bricks.

Near a wall, she saw the cutting gardens. Autumn flowers drooped on their wilted stems, and there were staked plants that had the appearance of vegetables.

How is he? Mortally wounded? Toughing it out? Who is the other man? Sax—no, Saxa. Strange name. She stood there leaning against the hood of the sedan, observing that, in the distance, the police officer had reached the front door of the residence. From the way his arms were moving, he was apparently talking to someone. She strolled over to the road, surveying the hillsides. Better than nice, she thought, and seeing other large homes down below, wondered if they were owned by movie people or dope kings. Nice places, but showy. Out beyond, the turquoise of the Pacific looked back at her with its hypnotic winks of cream-topped waves. From somewhere ambrosia petted the air.

She took a brief walk, absorbing, familiarizing herself as though she were traveling abroad in some new country. Returning to where she had left her car, she saw the officer waiting. The driveway gates had been swung open.

Another hundred-pound smile from Andrea, and the officer gaped openly and said, “You’re to go in.”

The double oaken doors were wide open. Andrea pulled the sedan in close as she could, got out, and walked right into a front hall surmounted by timber-beamed ceilings.

Sant Saxa appeared, startling her, and said, “You be Miss Warren.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes...yes, and you must be Mr. Saxa, is it?”

“S’right.”

“Is Rushton anywhere near?”

“Pretty near. You have letter for him?”

“I do. I’d like to give it to him personally.”

“He in no shape for company, lady.”

“I’m sure he’ll want to see me. Have you told him I’m here? I’ve come a long way.”

She looked, decided Sant, like one of those outdoorsy New Zealand girls with the magnificent breasts and pelvises that kept any sane man from chasing over the hill too often. A Culhane type for certain, right down to the few freckles on that coral skin.

“You come, if you please.”

Sant led her through one of the rooms that opened onto the terrace, then down the flagstone steps to the pool house.

Who is this funny, frizzy-haired little man with the cedar skin and dressed up like a popinjay, she wondered. Talks funny, too, out of that crooked little mouth. And with a golden bead in his ear, no less. The butler? Rushton had never mentioned anything about him, not that he necessarily would have.

Andrea saw him lying there in a sweaty sleep, wearing a red turtleneck sweater and partly covered by a sheet. On the facing lounge, some used Porthault bed sheets were bunched in a pile. Three empty bottles poked their necks out from the tangle of cloth.

“My God!” said Andrea, “What’s happened?”

“He fight the scorpion.”

“Has a doctor seen him?”

“He never go to them pill people.”

A whip of rare anger at Andrea’s mouth locked tight. Then, in a brittle voice, “You’ve got to get one. Look at him!”

“He okay, lady. Now you go away, eh?”

“Don’t be a damn fool,” Andrea scolded. “Who’s the family doctor? I want the number...right now, I want it.”

Sant Saxa wasn’t used to being ordered around by anyone, and never by a woman. Very calmly he answered, “Who appoint you anything? We plenty trouble here, lady, and we no need your kind.”

Afraid their voices would awaken Culhane, Andrea stepped over to Sant, grabbed his hand, and marched him out to the patio. Unable to resist her superior strength, he scampered right along like an errant child.

“Has he been eating?”

“Soup and good whiskey.”

“How brilliant.”

“All he wanted,” protested Sant, almost ready to let fly at her.

“It’s not all he needed! Now, I’m going back in there and try to make him comfortable. And you, please, please, are going to call the doctor,” said Andrea, pouring on the honey, and repeating, “Please, Mr. Saxa.”



In days past, Rushton Culhane had helped raise or given out of his own pocket millions to the UCLA Medical Center. A fame-laden institution, once, it was now squeezed by the same vise that pressured most hospitals. Inadequate power was a non-stop problem; people were a problem; pandemonium was a problem; paperwork was impossible. No paperwork, then no drugs or supplies. The outpatient clinic was deluged with people wanting bones set after the daily epidemics of muggings and outright thuggery, including a spate of drive-by shootings. The maternity ward had been converted to handle serious illness. Intensive-care treatment ceased to function when backup emergency power couldn’t be had. The corridors were lined with cots to handle the overflow. Few could pay their bills.

Frank Henry was not a man to forget another’s generosity. Nor did he forget that even with the help of some of the country’s top specialists he’d been unable to find any lasting cure for Karin Culhane’s bout with mental illness.

A failure, but a diligent and hard try, nonetheless.

No hesitation at the gate to Culhane’s driveway this time. Already alerted by Saxa, a new officer waved Dr. Henry right through, after seeing the large orange decal in the car’s upper right windshield.

Carrying his medical kit, Frank Henry was met at the door by Saxa who escorted him down the outside steps to the pool house. Surprised at seeing Andrea, yet disturbed at Culhane’s condition, Frank Henry, though an amiable man, waved aside Sant’s effort to introduce her.

“Rushton,” said Frank Henry, “open your mouth.” But Culhane had sunk away and barely twitched. “One of you come here and help open his mouth for me.”

Andrea moved to Henry’s side. “Like this,” he told her, “just easily, and keep two fingers lightly clamped over his nose. That’s it, not too hard.” Henry bent down. “That’s fine, just like that...good...good...”

She had stooped over very close to Frank Henry, trying to still Culhane’s damp head. Her breast pushed against the back of the doctor’s head as he moved his head between her outstretched arms, peering, with a light and a depressor, into Culhane’s throat. Out came a stethoscope from the bag; afterward a small blood pressure unit. The examination went on for several minutes.

Standing up, Frank Henry just looked off through the glass doors and across the pool. Then he said, “He ought to be in a hospital. But there isn’t one in the city that I’d put him into.”

“How bad is he, Doctor?” asked Andrea.

“Hard to know without complete tests. But he’s in a hurt all right.”

“What does that mean?”

“How well do you know him,” Frank Henry candidly asked her.

“Well enough.”

Frank Henry looked at Sant. “His vital signs are weaker than they should be. Blood pressure is low. Pulse weak. He’s not fighting.”

“What that mean, he not fighting!” Sant said.

“I see it every day,” said Frank Henry. “Too many right hooks, and God knows he’s had plenty, and the mind shuts down. The will to struggle goes to sleep. It happens. We don’t know why.”

“What you suggest?” asked Sant, pushing himself forward, alarmed.

“Keep him dry. Walk him twice a day, or he’ll likely come down with pneumonia or pleurisy. Feed him. He must eat. Keep him in the sun, within reason. Above all, keep him clean and moving and warm.”

“Is there a name for his condition?” asked Andrea.

“Your Latin any good?”

“No.”

“Then it wouldn’t make any difference. He’s in a state of severe depression, I’d say. Heavy shock. Trauma, something like that of a shell-shocked soldier. A stress disorder.”

“Well, what if he doesn’t respond to—”

“I can tell you he needs rest. Rest and quiet. He’ll heal up or he won’t. He probably will, he’s surely tough enough.”

“You mean *that’s* it? You’re not going to give him anything? What the hell kind of a doctor are you any—”

“I’d give him my blood if I could,” said Frank Henry, gravely offended.

“The booze okay?” Sant asked.

“Some is all right—as good as anything else. If you’ve any to spare, I’d like to borrow a couple bottles.”

“For God’s sake!” huffed Andrea.

They looked at her, strangely, then not so strangely, realizing she was scared. Yet Frank Henry had seen a thousand cases like Rushton Culhane, the beaten down; you could hope all you wanted but you couldn’t perform surgery, not on a man’s spirit. She didn’t know what he went through every day, and that, after a time, one became insouciant, even outwardly hardened.

“Are you familiar with how to take a pulse rate?” Frank Henry asked Andrea.

“Yes, I can. I know how.”

“Check his with regularity. If it should drop below sixty-five, call me immediately, whatever the time.” Frank Henry closed his kit-bag, let out a slight grunt, saying, “Sant, walk me upstairs so we can talk a little.”

Andrea hurried inside the pool house. Culhane was tossing around on the lounge-sofa, one arm stretched out lifelessly. Half-naked, unshaven, the ambient air smelling sourly of sweat, augmented by the vapors one might expect of a whiskey distillery. Two empty bottles

lay on the floor. He needed a bath but she knew she wasn't strong enough, physically, to manhandle him.

She'd sit for a time, wait for a chance to straighten out the rat's nest of a bed, then find out what there was to eat in this enormous home.

At least, she thought, knowingly or unknowingly, Dr. Henry implied that I'd better hang around. Maybe Saxa will relent now, won't think I'm invading his sanctuary.

Unpack now? No, the hell with it.

She looked down at Culhane again. She was no nurse, and uncertainty abounded in her. What were those grunts he uttered at intervals. The brilliant eyes, under their fluttering lids, seemed dimmer than old nickels.

A terrible spin of life's fickle roulette wheel, coming up double zeroes. Within the space of a few months, the U.S. government had dishonored a massive trade, sequestering his trading capital; now, the same for his family by an unknown assailant or assailants. Gut-sick. A man melted to his depths, realizing his world, what was left of it, had exploded in his face; for certain, those places inside where he did his real living had been shattered and now caring little for anything or anyone.

She had nothing to do but sit, think, wait and watch. Wondering what she was doing out here; and that strange little man, who was he? Like an overage drill sergeant.

She had come to California on short notice, flying on a military aircraft with a dozen Special Forces soldiers, dressed in camouflage fatigues and those boots that could stave in the sides of a bull. Grim-looking, silent types who smiled occasionally but nothing more. They read, played cards, and sometimes attended to their equipment—fangled rifles that looked like they could shoot around corners, foot-long knives, braided climbing ropes and knapsacks that had enough rings and hooks attached to carry the contents of a hardware store, color-coded grenades hooked to webbed belts. No talk with her, however. Mutes. Not so much as a syllable. She knew enough not to

ask where they were off to, nor did they query her. For the dreary, endless six-hour flight, she had been assigned a metal, cushion-less, drop-down seat affixed to a bulkhead. One would have an easier time if strapped to a medieval rack with spikes. Her rump still felt as if it someone had thrown bricks against her. Hours of cross-country flying from Virginia to an airbase in Riverside, distant by two hours of freeway driving to Bel Air; she did not expect her backside to recover in this or any other lifetime. On top of her main ache, other aspects of her plight whittled away at her. Errorlessly, her antennae informed her she was stranded. While the residence and its grounds were gorgeous, a house a pasha might envy and a floral paradise of cascading gardens bordering the verdant lawns, it nonetheless was lifeless as a crypt. She may as well be camped on a Sahara dune awaiting the Good Samaritan.

And she hadn't the slightest, faintest, foggiest idea of how to get herself back to Washington.

Whatever could be so vital that Flickinger wanted round-the-clock reconnaissance of the man. She hated it. Every part of what Flickinger wanted of her was odious. Not only wanted, but demanded. His puppet no less, that's what she'd become, resenting it; still, she had signed on, and done so without a gun at her head.

*Chrissakes!* Look at him...lying there, speaking gibberish to his ghosts. And what if he should refuse to return? Where does that leave me? In Tinseltown for the rest of my days?

Fuckit! Double fuckit! So am I to tell Flickinger I've a basket case to look after? This was no part of any deal that I remember.

Had they an operable phone here someplace? Thinking she had better buff up that little Saxa, as he might be the only pipeline to the outside world.

Culhane stirred, one foot dropping to the floor. Blinking, he said, "H'lo there. I'll be God—how'd you get here?"

"I keep asking myself the same thing. Need anything?"

"Fetch me a jar of whiskey from that closet behind the bar, if you please. Jamieson'll do or Dawson's."

“Get it yourself.”

“Won’t you...give me a hand?”

“I already am. The hell do you think I’ve come three-thousand miles for? To make a drunk out of you?”

“Sassy-ass, aren’t we?”

“You’re about to find out...and you’d better cover your privates before you catch pneumonia.”

“All parts of me need airing.”

“No truer words.”

“All right, truce.”

“Your sidekick, Saxa, is something of a martinet.”

“He’s been putting up with a lot around here. He’s fine. He’s a legend, the top hand of all time.”

“One of the top mouths, anyway.”

After a volley of a few more sideswipes, suddenly his face fell as if he’d just been slugged by an invisible fist. He had gone back to his ghosts. She remained for a time, got up and covered him, and put a damp hand towel to his sweated brow. When he was purring softly in deep slumber, she went up to the house. The vast house, she thought, big enough for a squad of marines and then some, wondering what was to happen to it. No one, in this day and age, would buy an estate of nineteen rooms, outbuildings, acreage, and all these gardens to attend. One, she had found out, was a moon garden, that bloomed white and pink but only at night. In that garden, a single floodlight bathed a life-size statue of his deceased wife.

Quite incredible, Andrea thought—a statue that had commemorated a living person, at least until recently—and then she spied Sant Saxa across the terrace, and girded herself. Knowing, however, it was a time for making a friend, but another thought came to her. Los Angeles was the head office of the newspaper she worked for; she ought to tell them she was in town but they’d question her as to why she had left Washington. On what pretext? Not for a story that could be covered locally. Not for a vacation, either. No one took vacations, if they cared to keep their job.

## COMPRADOR

She had pleaded a family illness to her boss in Washington, a wild stretch at best. In fact, she hadn't a single reasonable excuse to stand on and Flickinger, who had insisted she come here, had not said he'd fix matters for her with the paper.

## Moscow

A late afternoon snow flurried down on Moscow, the storm slated to last for a day or more. The weather did nothing to revive Gregor Metzilov's spirits, now on his way to the Ministry of Agriculture in a chauffeur-driven Ziv, making the drive from his dacha in the elite Zhukova district, twenty-five miles west of Moscow. Traffic chugged along. Metzilov recoiled as the driver swerved sharply to avoid skidding into a truck up ahead.

Nothing ever chugged slowly inside Metzilov's busy head. He was trying to concentrate on the massive dollar-shortening operation underway in European financial markets; and how to fend off Nyurischev's demand to halt the entire business, at least Russia's part of it, which was plentiful in scope.

Knocking the Americans off for good, bleeding Europe, gradually gaining control of the western world's monetary system should be enough to punch the lights out of the elder group of men who had regained control of the Kremlin. Yet Metzilov understood how the deeply ingrained nuances of the Russian *apparatus* functioned, knowing he'd have to eventually toe the line.

He needed the right timing; time, yes, and that translated into luck, but how to find that tricky bitch when you needed her most. She had no voice, she had no address, she was there or she wasn't. If he was wrong, he'd lose his neck.

Yet this annoying grain problem over in the Ukraine could upset everything. Metzilov knew he couldn't buck Nyurischev on the basics. Daily reports compiled by the Secretariat told of more trouble in Georgia, the Urals area, Tashkent, and what was once Armenia.

## COMPRADOR

Nyurischev's repeated warning still rang in Metzilov's ears: *No Russians were to go hungry this year or in any other year.*

He was on his way to the Ministry for a briefing on the present situation and how and where Russia might find supplies enough to see her through another year.

America had frozen all sales, and so had the Canadians, and so had the Argentine—the three largest growers in the world. At last report, he had heard the American Culhane had gone to Washington in some post to advise their president. Not a good sign, he thought. Culhane was one of the most inventive trading-cowboys he'd ever run across, and he might be responsible for the hold-back of American wheat.

Metzilov, lately, had steered wide of the Shang-Magan, fearful of any blowback from Van Slyke as to Russia's recent maneuvers in Europe. He had even stopped sending his monthly reports to the Magan's Inspectorate in Monte Carlo; his excuses somewhat feeble, knowing he couldn't get away with it for long. .

Soon the Americans would crack like an egg on its way to the omelet pan, had to, then they'd come crawling, begging forgiveness for flooding the Euromarkets with their worthless dollars, and finally be forced to heel, and start taking Moscow's orders.

Time. Precious time.

Just a month or two. Four at the most, to execute the last phases of his strategy. Himself, he was in line to clear millions.

## Bel Air

Sweat drooled everywhere in the seams of Culhane's body. Gripped by a nameless feeling, so fierce, even in his torpor, he now existed in two halves. Neither one was functional, neither one cared about much of anything. Not even breathing, nor living.

Sometimes he wiped the sweat away, weirdly believing it was blood. His mouth usually felt cotton-dry, except when flooding it with whatever whiskey was at hand. The sheets he used had a way of turning hot then cold, just like his body. He went down deep, ocean-floor deep, often unsure of where he was most of the day. He found out there was no such thing as pain control when losing much treasured loves, all at once, sudden as being struck down by a bus, by anything overwhelming, and without any opportunity for defending.

When conscious, when alone, he dwelled in despair. Never did the specter of their blood-smeared, agonizing deaths leave him.

One afternoon, he threw himself naked into the pool, pretending he was back in the warm juices of his mother's womb. He ate little, nibbling at what Andrea or Sant brought him, pushing most of it away. He would lie there, interminably, hold his breath, stare emptily at anything except the wall photos of Karin. His beard grew, his lean face thinned, his hollow eyes burned red at their edges.

In the night, he screamed out for his children. One time he worked up rage and smashed a few dozen glasses against the marble soda fountain in the pool house. A chair made of eland horns lay broken in half.

A damn good thing, Sant had thought, that the grounds were so big the neighbors couldn't hear the ruckus. In his youth, Saxa had

## COMPRADOR

seen Haitians succumb to trances, slurp chicken blood, dance crazily for hours during voodoo rites until they dropped from exhaustion.

Culhane was killing something inside himself, Sant knew it, and knew he must do it alone. The scorpion was stinging his son. Andrea, standing beside Sant Saxa, wept, when looking at the gaunt face that said nothing, though it still seemed to beg for help.

Shuddered, too, when he hollered out quite madly in two, possibly three strange languages, words or phrases all garbled together, as if a lunar force were shaking him.

## Johannesburg

**B**aster Muldaur, the barrel-chested African trader and diamond mine owner, a man with pink cheeks and usually a pink humor, owned a face that only a mallet could make. Weathered skin told of the outdoor life he preferred to all others. A pure-bred Afrikaner, in youth he'd captained South Africa's championship Springbok rugby team, bearing that honor proudly. A Springboker, though an unpaid athlete, was the rough equivalent of a Heisman trophy winner in America, or might even be likened to one of Spain's more select matadors. He was the Council of Six's man for all of Africa, a responsibility the Shang-Magan had conferred upon him eighteen years earlier. Other mining barons or diamond-princes on that fabled continent actively sought his counsel and maneuvered to remain in his good graces. He was the Man, the seer, renowned for his capacity to predict what lurked over the horizon of commercial and economic vagaries that were a trader's nightmare; time had proven his instincts—that he had that indefinable Sixth Sense of when to go full bore, and when to lay back, wait for the next turning of events.

On this morning, a phone tucked into the crook of his thick neck, he listened as he also fixed his gaze through a wide glass window, out across the sloping veldt to the white-painted corral fences, where some of his bull-breeding herd grazed. Beyond, lay a small village of light blue barns with orange-tiled roofs. On these four thousand hectares of spectacular land, Muldaur spent his weekends, seeing to his new wife and newly acquired daughter, his prize-winning livestock, and his private game reserve; the prime joy in this life, other than his family.

An hour from now he'd be off for Argentina to bid on the most expensive bull ever auctioned anywhere. Not a shred of doubt as to the outcome. Whatever it took, he'd gladly pay; the Argentine bull would become a South African bovine citizen whatever the cost. Easily the richest man in Africa, Muldaur had quit counting his wealth a long time ago.

Now, listening to Van Slyke, digging the phone deeper into his shoulder, freeing both hands, Muldaur lit a fat black cigar.

"I'm trying to get more information," Van Slyke was saying, "but there seems to be a lid on it. Even Halburton doesn't know anything much."

"Shouldn't be that hard, should it?"

"You know Culhane. Silent as a clam's fart when he wants to be."

Muldaur exhaled a stream of smoke, watching it disperse against the window. "Certainly, he'll accept our help to find these...those murderers."

"I can't even get through on the phone."

"Still there in California, is he?" asked Muldaur.

"So I understand. But I don't think it would do any good to send someone."

Muldaur thought for a moment, then suggested, "Let's post a two-million Krugerrand reward for information. That ought to get a result. If not, we'll double it."

"Do it in gold. You suppose Liu Wai will go along?"

"Leave him to me," answered Muldaur. "I'll get that fat Chinaman to dance to the fiddle. He owes me..."

"Very good. Have a pleasant trip to Buenos Aires. If you see Camero, give my respects."

"I'll see him all right. He owns a Guzerat bull I want."

A thunderous laugh from Van Slyke. "You must be leery of women, the way you chase after bulls, Baster."

"I'll talk to you in a week. A terrible run of events, this is. "

"You have no idea. Good-bye now, and my thanks."

At his Amsterdam town house, Van Slyke went grave of face as he put down the phone. A bad mistake over Culhane, he thought, and irreparable, too. The Magans should have helped him when it had the chance, and possibly this dreadful tragedy would not have occurred. His own fault primarily, and he knew it, and likely Halburton knew it, too.

## Washington, D.C.

**H**ours later a cheerful sun glazed the brisk air in Washington. Its generous light poured into the Treaty Room, warming Halburton's bones. He sat at the long table studying the drafts of Culhane's proposed agreements with China and Mexico. Quiet in here, his favorite retreat where no one bothered him, and he could for a short time ignore the incessant requests and complaints that rushed like torrents into the Oval Office.

A brown-spotted hand traveled up to his snowy hair, ruffling it as he thought for a while. He'd seen many masterfully joined documents in his day, some of real poetry. But Efram Halburton admitted that he had never seen any quite like these.

Perfectly reasoned, perfectly stepped off.

In this one cohesive design, the whole thing came clear. How the huge trading scheme worked, where the credits came from, the methods of financing, how industry would be furnished with materials, and in what sequence U.S. commerce could be fired up again.

Then the smaller document—the most highly classified paper in government—that told of the implications for Europe and Japan, but mostly Russia.

But the really fascinating part was the carpet-tight reasoning as to why China and Mexico would sign up. Culhane had spelled out the chief advantages for all three countries, with America's role equal to the others..

Superb work, thought Halburton, also a mighty gamble. He was intrigued as to how a brain like Culhane's worked. What bit of physics did that for one man and not for others?

An unforgotten refrain came to him again:

*First, trust him. Tell him everything important. Drive him, push him as if you were all the elephants in Africa. You will see...*

Well, I have pushed him, sighed Halburton inwardly, and he sure as the devil has done the same to me. Now look at what's happened. The man was a true credit, had done all and more asked of him—soon I must decide, and soon, I hope, he returns.

He studied for another two hours, so intently that he barely heard agent Billy Joe Rowels knock before entering the room.

Halburton looked up to hear Billy Joe say, "Sunday noon, suh. Ah brought some-a-that molasses drink yuh favor. S'break time."

"You think so?"

"Yessuh," said the big footballer, "we goin' to salute the Lord with sum-ah his best."

Billy Joe stepped forward, placed a silver tray on the edge of the table, and handed over one *glass*. No ice, just two jiggers of aromatic Tennessee whiskey, a spoonful of molasses, with a single maraschino cherry added for more sweetening. The president imbibed a single drink in any week, always on Sunday, the Lord's Day.

"Should we do some poker tonight, say around six?" asked Halburton, after a full sip, then another.

"Ah'll round up the boys. They'd be real pleased, suh."

"Same stakes?"

"Your pleasure, suh."

"See yuh at six then."

Billy Joe stood up, took the President's glass along with his own, and replaced them on the tray. The big tank of a man disappeared through the door, carrying the tray, which looked like an oversized silver dollar in his giant hand.

Halburton sat and thought more. He thought about how good the whiskey tasted, and he thought of Culhane and of how the Californian might be bearing up under his terrific load of sorrows.

*I'm already playing highest possible stakes poker with him and he's calling all the bets. The important ones anyway.*

One day I'll have to make good and release his gold to him. But not quite yet. I need him. I don't know as I like him, but I do know he is a vital gear. Yet no amount of gold will hold a man like Culhane for long. Too damned independent to stick with anything that doesn't interest him.

A loose remembrance then of one morning when Culhane had advised, "Militarily, Russia can't be beaten now, and it's a hopeless solution even if they could. Whip her by denying her the resources necessary to sustain her war machine. Make the bastards extend themselves and then we'll geld them."

Halburton thought back to the time when he'd raised the question of involving Joshua Squires in Culhane's plan to manipulate the European money markets. The trader had gone livid. But this Blue Dollar business is no trivial matter either. As an idea, it staggered, though was possibly brilliant, too. Somehow America must restore its credit, and its credit markets, and get people back to work, and replenish the nation's faith in itself. And more, persuade the voters to pass a Constitutional amendment that forbade deficits except in time of a national emergency, declared by the president, and approved by a two-thirds vote of the Congress.

It could pass, it might with enough public support, regardless of what the politicians favored. They'd fight it, but, in the end, it was the public that held the whip-hand.

## Bel Air

Nearing a collapse herself, going all day and half the night, she fed him on vegetable purées when he'd take them, cleaned him and walked him when he'd cooperate. She had moved down to the pool house, sleeping fitfully on one of the other couches, ready at all times when he surfaced from worlds unknown.

Never had she known a week as tormented as this one. Missing her monthly period by a couple of weeks for the first time in years had overjoyed her, then frightened the very wits from her. Culhane was calming down, sleeping plentifully. Yet, at other times, he was like a loose wrecking ball. And Andrea reeled at times when glancing at the photos of Karin Culhane hanging so decorously on the wall; it gave her tremors watching the beautiful glossy faces looking at her.

Deep into the night when Andrea, awake, heard him roll followed by the whisking sound of sheets being stripped away. Feet thunked on the floor. She felt around for a flashlight, found it, pointed it downward, and pressed the switch. The light beam caught his feet.

"Rushton."

"I'm thirsty," he acknowledged hoarsely.

"Lie down, baby, and I'll do it."

"I need to do it myself."

"Better take the light."

He nodded, reached over for it. He appeared, thought Andrea, like an Arabian pirate with the dark growth of beard rimming his face. She watched as the light beam zigzagged across the floor, stopping when it reached the soda fountain. The sounds of water, then, splashing into the stainless-steel sink.

He came back, more steadily, less wobble to the light's path. Sitting down, Culhane said, "I'm a catastrophe."

Andrea sat beside him, putting a hand to his forehead. "You're not sweating."

He breathed deeply, then voraciously. "How long have I been down?"

"Almost ten days."

"Christ."

"Lie down, you're about to get an Andrea special, an alcohol rub."

"No. I've got enough of that in me already."

"You almost drowned on it a few times."

"I needed it—needed something, anyway."

"I was here," said Andrea.

"I guess I wasn't."

"Been a misery-making time for you, Rush."

She pushed him flat, without resistance, until he lay face up. Culhane still held the flashlight limply, the beam grazing the blackness, then revealing Andrea's supple, strong body. Taking the light from him, putting it on the floor, she reached across to a side table and retrieved the almost empty bottle of rubbing alcohol. Slowly she began to stroke him with the cooling fluid, working her strong fingers into packed muscles, stiff as boards. In a while, he breathed evenly, dozing but not all the way out.

He knew he was still with her, when feeling the sphere of a breast against him, her arm under his neck, her care pouring into him.

Ten days, was that what Andrea said? Couldn't be. All he could recall were formless images in endless arrays. Had he been back to the jungles of Africa, out by Jupiter for tea and cake maybe, soloing in a limitless cloud bank? He didn't know. He cared, but right then he didn't care quite enough to ask. She had kept vigil over him. Sant, too, probably.

Where was Sant-o? Here Sant-o, here, c'mere, I need to see you.

He could breathe fine, move his limbs, hear everything very acutely. He dimly remembered awakening once with a straining erection, so those parts were reporting in satisfactorily too.

No, he wasn't dead because he could feel her, angel of highest mercy, rubbing him gently as one wet drop from her face plopped on his lip.

Another two days passed. At midmorning, the sky outside was as blue as a peacock's eye and Andrea was cutting up vegetables in the kitchen. Her back faced Sant as he entered the long kitchen. He stopped, stood there soundlessly, watching as she worked. She wore rolled-up dungarees, a man's white shirt hanging outside, a striped apron around her waist.

She hadn't raised her voice once since their slight tiff on the morning of her arrival. Resilient, humorous too, and he liked that. No doubt of it, thought Sant, she's made the difference.

"Morning, Miss Andrea."

She jumped. "Ah, Sant," she said, turning around, "I looked for you earlier."

"Took a walk." Sant crossed the kitchen. Nearing her, he held out a small package.

She opened it, finding to her surprise a *Times-Herald*, a tin of throat lozenges, and something wrapped in butcher's paper. "What's in there?"

"Chicken breast and little cow veal."

"How do you guys do it? Really. Rush does it in Washington, too."

A crooked smile from Sant's little mouth. "Old trick for new time. I see you put cover over torn paintings. Good idea, Andrea."

"I couldn't stand looking at them anymore. In this house, especially."

"Big before, but too big now."

"Everything is changed now, hasn't it, Sant?"

"You see it change many time before you pull down your curtain." He flicked a little dust from his blue suit, the dust earned during the long walk up from the Bel Air gate. "Let me have throat drops

back again. I go down and talk him.” Andrea gave him the tin, as he bowed to her slightly, saying, “Sorry it not go well for us first time.”

“Well, we got by it all right, didn’t we? You might like to see this,” said Andrea, pulling an envelope from her apron pocket. “He read it this morning, and was about to crumple it up when I rescued it.”

Handing the letter over, Sant took it, opened it, and read through his gold spectacles:

*Dear Culhane,*

*Three calls and no answers. Abraham Lincoln had the same trouble reaching his generals during the Civil War.*

*You’ve come to hardest grief. When my Sue Gayle died seven years ago, I thought the earth had gone off its axis. I believed that I knew something about this world and how to live in it. Not so, I found out, and rather abruptly too.*

*Real grief is unforgiving. You learn how to duel with it moment by moment. You win on the day when you’ve seen and learned all of its nooses, and one day you awake to find out that there is a sun and that sun still shines if you but lift the curtains.*

*You will. Moreover, you’re far from through here.*

*Kind regard,*

*E. H.*

*P.S. I’ve read your “Blue Boy.” Interesting!*

Sant refolded the letter, handing it back, saying, “Nice thing I guess.”

“Where should I put it?”

“Middle drawer of desk in library.”

“There’s a large wicker basket of other mail. Hundreds of letters. He won’t read them. What should I do?”

Sant shrugged. “Nothing. He not read, then he not read them.”

“What do you suppose the President’s reference to ‘Blue Boy’ is all about?”

Sant’s eyes lifted up to hers as he replied, “Must be private joke.” But he knew what it meant: Culhane’s go-for-broke plan to dig America out from under.

Now Sant did go, his pygmy-length legs moving slowly, as Andrea watched the grizzled gray head disappear.

The truth had outed one afternoon. She couldn’t hold it in anymore. Telling him, then, she had been frantic with concern over his loss. Leaving Washington so hastily, she hadn’t sorted out the dilemma of explaining her sudden arrival in California and with no invitation. Air transportation was hard to come by. She ‘fessed up, admitting she had been instructed months ago by Flickinger to see what Culhane was up to with Halburton. There was more to it, of course, but her revelation of that fact alone sufficed. She had laid out all the key cards in one air-cleansing moment. That, at the onset, it was just a job she had taken on because she wanted to keep hers at the *Times-Herald*. Rather than risk a lay-off, she agreed to play ball. Baring the details had brought her to tears. He told her not to worry. He had done worse in his past, and, said if Halburton gave the green light, he was about to mount one of the greatest deceptions in recent world history.

“It is an era of deception,” he had observed, “and no one is immune.”

Glad she told him, though uncertain of what would happen between them, her relief was evident—no longer must she hide behind a façade of deceit.



Culhane wore sunglasses against the November sun that would, at this time of year, do its work quickly and head for the horizon. Swaddled under a light cotton blanket, his newly grown beard cat-whiskering over the top of it, he lay on a deck hammock. As Sant came down the steps, he leaned over and switched off an iPod playing some jazz he favored: Cal Tjader.

Sant handed him the lozenges and Culhane, after inspecting them, dropped two in his mouth and faced the sun's rays again. Lolling there, lost in thought. After a time, he spoke, "These glycerin drops taste good, Sant. Have one. Have five."

"I sucked out after all the asses I kiss to get them. You keep."

They laughed.

"Baster's people say be back from South America tomorrow. You want I talk to him about chromates then?"

"I don't really care, Sant. Just do whatever sounds best, then let Washington know."

"Andrea show me letter from Halburton. She want save it for you. I little hard on her when she first come here."

"She get pushy?"

"Big lady. Good for you, eh? You think she here for newspaper business, the way she say?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Here she come with soup."

Culhane turned his head, seeing Andrea balancing a tray, coming down the steps. She had lost weight, he noticed. Certain that he had, too.

Andrea placed the tray on a glass-topped table and said, "Sant got us a paper. I can read you the interesting stuff."

Giving them a little wave, Sant left for the house.

Unfolding the paper, she sat next to Culhane. Once a great metropolitan daily, seventy or more pages per edition, now it was reduced to twenty or so. No real-estate section, some sports, no financial, very little society coverage. The great paper had sized itself to a small-town weekly.

On the *Times-Herald* front page, the lead article was headed: **HALBURTON BLASTED BY CONGRESS**. She hadn't seen a paper in a week. Strangely, it hadn't fazed her at all. But very soon, Andrea knew, she'd have to get back to Washington somehow and found the prospect oddly unappealing.

Thinking it might disturb him, light up memories of Karin and his children, she refrained from reading another above-the-fold front-page article: **GANGLAND-TYPE KILLING**, telling of two bodies, one Caucasian and the other believed to be of Oriental extraction, bound together, and washed ashore on Catalina Island. Heads and the hands had been severed from both bodies, making identification almost impossible. (And it never would have occurred to either of them that the mutilated bodies were Guido Grasselli and the old Taiwanese—neither of whom were known to Andrea.)

Reading more, she selected a column, datelined London, about an upcoming meeting among the European finance ministers to discuss plans for banding with Russia for a single-unified currency.

Blue Dollar! thought Culhane instantly.

Andrea saw a vague film cross his lavender-hued eyes as he looked into the distance. It was a look she'd observed before, when his mind was hammer-locking on something. She refolded the paper and laid it on the glass-topped table.

"You're getting your color back," she told him, reaching for a dish of the soup.

"Looking in the mirror this morning, I awarded myself first prize for the best Halloween mask."

"Don't shave that beard off. I love it. You look professorial."

"You might change your mind, if I were to kiss you."

“Maybe,” returned Andrea, “but you always told me one fact is worth a hundred guesses.”

“Trouble with you is you have a woman’s perfect memory.”

“If it was like yours, I’d be onstage somewhere doing mnemonic tricks.”

He shifted in the hammock, the change of weight causing it to swing. “You’ve done a hell of a trick on this stage right here. Is that that jasmine essence you’re wearing?”

And you told me you knew another woman who wore it too, thought Andrea. “Your voice is getting stronger, Rush.” And it did sound much stronger, less like it was filtered by gravel.

“Sant brought me some throat candy. Takes the rawness away.”

“Mr. Herbsant Saga is quite an interesting flycatcher.”

“If you only knew. The original right-hand, believe me.”

“Tell me what you’ve been thinking about down here.”

Culhane’s mouth parted in the cat’s fur of beard; a narrow smile made of a pink tongue and white teeth glistened against the black hairs. “I wouldn’t abuse your time for anything,” he said with a touch of sarcasm.

“Tell your favorite newswoman.”

“Later maybe.”

“It might help to let go a little, you know.”

Silence, for a long moment, with Andrea guessing she might have grated a nerve again. Maybe it was silent-time. Yet he’d smiled moments ago, a lively shine there in his eyes again, even if fleetingly.

Culhane just drifted into it. “I’ve been wondering how in one life I can lose so much family. I hardly knew my mother and never my father...then the Mings of Hong Kong faded away...now my wife and kids gone. That’s a lot of people to lose. The other night I had a dream about my days at the orphanage in Hawaii. I was terrified of that place, truly terrified. Yet in some strange way I think it prepared me to stand up for myself. In the dream, I could even smell the latrines and the carbolic soap we used when cleaning up...I had latrine duty

every Tuesday. I've never walked by a toiled since without remembering..."

"But you got away from there."

"I ran away, you mean. I needed the sea badly then. I needed the sea or something like it."

"And look at everything else you've done in your life."

"What really? I've tried never to cheat anyone, though I've been rough with my competition. Probably too rough, and fate is paying me back. I'm not superstitious but I do think that it's fate that shakes your dice as much as anything else. Dice is the right metaphor. I'm an odds-maker and an odds-taker and that's the way it'll always be, I suppose. I should've run a casino, I also suppose."

"From what I can tell, you already do. A huge casino."

Smiling and saying to her, "Maybe that's so."

"It is so."

"Okay. I'd like to thank you, Andrea, for coming here and all you've done. It means plenty to me. Plenty," he repeated, taking her hand.

"And I'm glad I did. It's been horrible for you. Treacherous."

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me what you're up to with the president?"

Culhane looked sharply at Andrea. "No, I shan't. He can, if he will, which I doubt."

"You can't say anything at all?"

"Not a peep. No scoop, I'm afraid. Afterward maybe, if there is an afterward."

"Are we all going to be blown to smithereens? I'd like to know that much, if you please..."

"There's to be nothing like that, or not that I know of."

"Well, I can always say I knew Rushton Culhane way back when."

"I'd be grateful if you leave me out of everything and anything. If Washington does what I'm asking, then things'll get pretty hot for me. And I don't have the Secret Service to guard my backside."

“Why stick your neck out? Some patriotic gesture?”

“Gold.”

“Gold?”

“Yes, gold. Not patriotism. I don’t even know if I can claim any country as my own.”

“That’s ridiculous. How can you say a thing like that.”

“What the hell do I owe this country or it me?”

“Don’t!”

“You’d rather I fibbed?” Culhane paused, grappling with another idea, something he never intended telling her. But he did now. “The government owes me a great deal of gold. They’ve been withholding it illegally. I haven’t the wherewithal to fight them in court for years. That’s what the gold is about, and that’s also why I’m in Washington. I despise politicians and their lies and manipulations. The only good thing in Washington, since Washington himself, is you.”

“That’s nice to hear. Thanks”.

“You’re welcome, and you deserve it. But I’m not quite through. Take loyalty. That cute notion doesn’t mean a hell of a lot to most people, does it? Ethics are an invitation to disaster. You’re better off making your own rules, aren’t you? At least you know what you’ve got.”

“Crooks are known for it, aren’t they?”

“I can think of some highly placed crooks, who can probably show something useful to all of us.”

“You shouldn’t talk that way.”

“Mark it down as a probable truth. Go down some morning, early, and talk to that mob of shouters at the Bel Air gate. Ask them if they’d like to eat a bowl of ethics today.”

“Well, how about your Shang-Magan friends? You always said they’re—”

“Bingo. There’s my whole case in capital letters. Christ, when I think of what I...I.” But he left the words dangling, feeling hot pressure under his ears.

“Sorry that I brought it up.”

“Are you? You always seem so interested in the Shang-Magan.”

“You’ll admit they’re pretty fascinating.”

“Not half as fascinating as how you got out here, Andrea. Or should I rename you Jezebel.”

“Don’t say that either...don’t, please...I’ve really tried to tell you everything.”

“Tell me a little more. How’d you ever get mixed up with an operator like Flickinger to begin with? I think you knew him before I came into your life, but you both pretended otherwise. Hang that together for me.”

“Oh, you’ve known, have you?”

“Guessed. So what’s all that about?”

“A long time ago he worked for my father. I also think he had a shabby affair once with my mother, but I’m not absolutely positive so I probably shouldn’t have said that.”

She went on telling him of her father, who had read law at Yale and afterward was induced to sign up with the OSS at the onset of World War II. The promise of heady adventure had somehow seduced him, and, to her mother’s chagrin, he had stayed on when the CIA was formed in 1948. After Korea, he was posted to Berlin where he was shot dead in some undercover operation. Her family was long on Old Westbury and Palm Beach, but woefully short on the money needed to keep up with that life. Out of its vest-pocket funds, the CIA carried the cost of Andrea’s education at Vassar, doing so again when she was admitted to the Columbia School of Journalism. They found positions for her with *Women’s Wear Daily*; later on, with the Los Angeles *Times-Herald*. Both the CIA and the newspaper had paid her, and until the U.S. went into its tailspin, she could live very comfortable and she had...

“And, as I said the other day, Clay Flickinger got to me when you were destined to come to Washington? Are you paid, by the way?”

“No. I’ve the use of the Hay-Adams apartment and that’s it. Back to the other, so you were tagged to put me under the looking glass?”

“Yep, in a nutshell.”

“Strange.”

“Why strange?”

“It’s no big secret why I’m in Washington. I run the strategic stockpile.”

“Is that all?”

“Pretty much. I do up plans that so far have gone nowhere.”

“Then I suppose they just want to be sure there’s no more to it.” She shrugged. “That’s purely a guess. But those people, they like to know it all, right down to the last comma. It’s the way they are, the way they’re trained and think. And they like doing it through proxies, when they can. If there’s a blowback, it makes it easier to claim plausible deniability. They love that one, they perfected it.”

“You know a lot about CIA, it seems.”

“Not a lot, but more than most.”

“I’ll bear that in mind...”

“Please don’t.”

“Well you should know I’m fixing to kick Flickinger’s ass out of my life, and I will when the time is right.”

She brightened. “Does that mean you’re coming back to Washington, I hope?”

“Soon as I can make arrangements with Sant. I’ll be there till the gold is repaid. I’m through here, and for good. Bel Air is a gone page in a gone book for me.”

“Well, I hope you won’t be too hasty, or I may be out on the street somewhere.”

“If you get boxed, let me know. We’ll throw him a fishbone or two and he’ll never know the difference.”

“Don’t be so sure. Those people are pretty darn smart.”

“Not in my game they aren’t. I assure you I can devise a riddle or two that’ll keep them sucking their thumbs till the Kingdom does Come.”



And two days later, he did make the arrangements.

On the second floor of the house, he stood with Sant Saxa in the room Saxa had been using for the past months. Comfortable, almost elegant, filled with genuine Provençal furniture, with timbered ceilings, a large needlepoint rug on the floor, and flowery Scalaman-dre drapes in convoy against four opened windows.

“...I have to go back, Sant. You know why.”

“I know.”

“I have some money. The Shang-Magan returned my reserve account, or what was left of it. A fifth of what I deposited, and with the dollar in the toilet, it won’t be worth as much. I’m giving you half. I want this place boarded up...”

“I sell?”

“Nope. We wouldn’t get much. Just close it down. The rest of the art, here and at the office, get it all crated. I’d like it if you’d move all of it to Hong Kong or Macau. Store it somewhere safe. Leave word of where you’re living with the local U.S. Counsel, and I’ll find you.”

“When you come?”

“I can’t be sure. A couple of months, perhaps.”

“I travel by ship?”

“Find a freighter down in Long Beach. You’ll probably have to sell your hide but it’ll be best. For the paintings anyway. That’s where we’ll set up shop next time.”

“At Hong Kong or Macau.”

“You pick it. Either one is all right with me.”

“When you leave, Rush?”

“End of the week.”

“For woman, too? Or she stay?”

“No, she goes with me.”

“And them torn paintings?”

“Well, we had to drop the insurance last year. Call the Getty Museum. Talk to their restoration people. If they can fix them, then give them to the museum. Be sure to get a receipt.”

“That all?”

“It’s all I can think of.”



A day passed, then another.

Saxa had waited, puzzled by the strange behavior of Andrea and by Culhane’s aloof silence and his flatly stated his wish to be left alone. At times, he heard Culhane playing the piano down in the pool house. Andrea made the meals; Saxa carried Culhane’s down to him, wanting to ask what was amiss with this woman, but he hadn’t. It was their business, not his.

He found Andrea one night, soaking laundry in one of the kitchen sinks. She looked different—wan, and unsmiling, a frown pleating her face with worry lines.

“You talk with me, eh?”

“Sure. Someone around here needs to talk...how’s his majesty?”

“He be busy thinking.”

“Two or three days of it. The second Rodin, that old thought-buster.”

“We drink two good ones, so that keep him.”

“You know what Doctor Henry said about the booze. Not too much.”

“Fucks to Frank Henry. We need it. I see you in library, eh?”

Andrea laughed. This little man who talked like a waif: one minute so courtly, funny, and the next like a street pistolero. Tidying up, she closed the kitchen doors and went down the long hall. In the library, she found Sant, dwarfed as he sat at the oversized partner’s desk.

Andrea sat in a deep chair of cherry-red damask, curling her feet under her legs.

“I go soon, Miss Andrea.”

“Leaving! Why?”

“He send me China. Maybe Hong Kong. Maybe Macau.”

“But how can you just run out, Sant?” *And why not me too*, she thought.

“Just go away, toward China. We start in China. Now go back there.”

Sant left his chair. Roaming around the room, his patent leather jodhpur boots gleaming like black Vaseline, he did his eye trick with only the whites showing, like dabs of vanilla ice cream. Andrea couldn't believe it. That's impossible, she thought—he's fainted and he's still on his feet.

“What're you doing?”

“A way be alone when you with someone else.”

“Everyone wants to be alone around here. I'll leave, if you prefer.”

“No, no,” protested Sant. “I be thinking about him.”

“Well, think away. He's down there by the water lilies in a catatonic stupor.”

“He make to heal for himself. Hees head. He take heavy beating and need times for fix heemself.”

“You really adore him, don't you?”

“He best kind,” explained Sant. “He blessed like Haitian. Haitian sometime see around corner. He like that too.”

“You really think that?” asked Andrea.

“I be with him many years. So, no mistake by me.”

Then the womanly question she'd been saving. “What was Karin like, Sant?” Andrea nibbled on a knuckle, disturbed at what might happen if Sant left now, wanting time to think about herself and some time *not* to think about Culhane.

A moment slow as a week in jail, before Sant answered: “She one of few movie women I ever like. Not stuck over herself, like some. But fast all go to hell for her. They have baby child who die from bad theeng in Karin's milk. She blame on herself. She beg for movie part,

maybe to forget. But Rush, he against it. Some studio keep asking for her and he let her go finally. She go on drug, lemme see.” Sant snapped his fingers, trying to pronounce it correctly. “Elly-es-dee. She go crazy up in Canada. Somewhere there. Rush, he all over the world when Panic come by. He move like crazy too. He try to hold big grain market in Chicago when other people shut down. Too hard, too big, you know. He spend all his money. Sell boat, horses, the plane, her jewels they go...Karin, she break down. Many doctor. Clinic, everything. Nothing work for long. Very good lady, though. Very fine. Then he do thing for Washington, and they steal all hees gold. Nine ton.”

“Nine tons! Of gold?”

Sant nodded.

“Nine, God! He never told me any of that.”

“That his world, not you, and for nobody else.”

“And if you go, Sant, what of him?”

“You look after. Why you theenk I tell you these theengs. “

Confusion riddled her. Whatever, thought Andrea, is really going on? “I’ve got to go back myself, Sant.”

“You stay till he be ready. Not long.”

Sant had left the big desk and been pacing the library. Now he stopped directly in front of where Andrea sat with her legs tucked under herself. Standing there, he being so short, they were face to face.

“Don’t run on heem.” Sant looked at her in the careful way a marksman sights a gun barrel. “Plenty important, what he try! You be good to him. You never regret it. I not mean the man-woman thing. That always a battle. But not let him down, ever...I beg you once, Miss Andrea.”

A nerve twitched in Andrea’s knee. She straightened her leg. “But you shouldn’t go like this. I can’t do everything, you know.”

“You try. No leave heem alone. He get sick when he alone too much.” Pointing at his head with one diminutive finger, before suddenly stopped talking and vanished like a wind-blown dust devil.

Unsure of how long she sat there, her thoughts roller-coastering. Suddenly, the lights were gone. A tomb-like stillness there in the dark. She pulled herself into a fetal ball on the chair until slowly her eyes came true and she could see vague shapes of furniture.

Hugging herself, she thought of Culhane. Where was he going? Up to what, exactly, and probably getting his directions from some wild calligraphy written in the stars. Should I go to him?

On my knees? The bloody hell with him, the lunk. Never! Love, ha! Cheap enough at the beginning, but the upkeep is the heaviest mortgage ever floated.

Andrea felt her way out of the room, down the hall, making a turn too soon and bumping blindly into a wall. She inched along, her hands guiding her, searching diligently, until minutes later one hand found a brass knob. She became petrified and wasn't sure why. The walls were so containing, walls that spelled death and danger and everything evil she could imagine. Here, close to here, was where Karin was killed, wasn't it?

Then another door. The one leading to the terrace, she hoped, turning the handle tentatively. A feather of night-breeze skipped across her face. Edging her way to the steps, hesitant as a toddler, she descended one at a time, her knees bent in case of a fall. Sideways, she slid through the pool-house doors.

"That you? I can smell you."

"Sorry," said Andrea, "but I had to find someplace. The lights went out, along with God knows what else."

She heard a rustle, close by, but couldn't tell exactly where he was. His hand suddenly came from nowhere, brushing her thigh, making her start, and she squealed.

"Sorry."

"S'alright. You gave me a fright. Aren't you getting tired of being here by yourself?"

"I've been holed up, thinking. Plotting might be more apt."

"S'what Sant said."

"I'm through, or mostly through with it."

“Sant said he’s leaving. Leaving America.”

“I know.”

“What about us? What about Washington?”

“I’m about to get the return flight laid on.”

“For me, too?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t leave you here. Are you balmy?”

“Probably.”

“Will you tell me what you gave out to Flickinger about me? I might have to know.”

“And supposing he finds out I did? That’d be really peachy for me.”

Culhane thought of Metzilov and many others he knew who traded on information for a living, or a piece of their living anyway. Not quite the same thing, perhaps, but he’d not put too fine a point on it right now. She’d turned on him, probably with good reason, but turning was still turning. More, it was he who had allowed her into his days...or, his nights anyway. Loneliness had made him lower his guard.

“The only thing that matters now,” he offered, “is whose side you’re on. I don’t have to tell Flickinger what day it is, or anything else. But then, I don’t want you spinning more tales on me, either.”

“That’s a problem right there. If I clam up, he’ll expect something. That’s the way he is, a very suspicious type.”

“Leave him to me.”

“I can’t. He’s got me on his puppet string. I’m terribly sorry for what I’ve done.”

“At least you told me. But now you’ll have to tell him you’re through with the Mata Hara gig.”

“I’ll be cut off, Rush. I have no other sustenance, other than my job. I’d be...be destitute.”

“You’ve got me.”

“I’m not one of those. I’m not gonna be kept by you or by anyone.”

“I’m not keeping you, I’m helping you. Helping us both. If you want it as a loan, then take it as a loan. I’m what you’ve got and you’re what I’ve got. Is there something wrong with helping each other?”

“No.”

“Well...”

“It doesn’t sound right, that’s all.”

“Why not let’s do some of our horizontal yoga. It’s been too long. Then, we can figure out what’s right.”

Over a shallow sigh, she said, “I could use some of you.”

“Ditto, double ditto.”

A swishing noise of clothing sliding off in the dark, a sound heard a billion times each night somewhere in the world: in bordellos and bedrooms, on beaches and in palaces.

He wants me, thought Andrea, and this is one god-awful time for glandular fever—too much to resolve, nothing settled. All the complexities of male-female. At the moment, she could care less.

But he was hard against her. His mouth and beard going everywhere, sucking at her flesh and the bristles brushing against her. She felt cold, none of the rubbery hotness of the other times in Washington, a distant century ago. No starbursts either, faking it now, possessing while rejecting, with her body feeling wooden like some windup-and-do-it toy.

Hardly their best night, and Andrea tried unsuccessfully to ignore the photos of Karin’s hauntingly beautiful face only a few feet away. By now she knew this room with abundant accuracy. Yet she imagined she lay on the rocky soil of some forbidden grotto, committing an act of great desecration—an act, even, of adultery.

Without novelty or even tender play, none of those ecstasy-making Tantric caresses, instead he was taking her like a Cossack. He was hurting her. Andrea bit her curled lip to smother a whimper.



Next morning, silent as a mummy, Andrea had lain back in a deck chair, keeping her own counsel. She was sniffing at the ripe spoor of a page-one story; several stories probably, all linked, but she couldn't get them into a cohesive whole. Not without betraying him. Incredible. Hot on the trail and she must keep the lid on. But on what!

"Andrea," said Culhane, his tone grave. "What time is it in Washington?"

She looked at her watch. "About six."

"In a minute I'll give you two numbers. One reaches the President's military aide, and the other will get us a local Air Force driver from Riverside, the air base. Call them, will you please? We're going back and they'll need to get the wheels ready. Tell 'em you're calling for me..."

"Okay."

"In the top right-hand drawer of the desk in the library, you'll find a book of other numbers. Call Sarah Henry, that's Frank's wife. Tell her to come by tomorrow or whenever and select any one thing she'd like before the packers come to cart everything off. Do the same for Ellen McTigue. Take anything you want, if you care to. No paintings, but anything else."

"What about the house?"

"Over and done with."

"You can't just leave it."

"I can't think of anyone who'd buy it, either. That's for Sant to take care of."

"When do we go back, do you think?"

"Soon as the doorbell rings, and there's a set of wheels outside."

"Are we moving up to the house?"

"It's all over up there, at least for me. I'd never want to go in there again, certainly not to stay."

“Am I invited to stay down here with you?”

Moving his hand to hers, pressing, he said. “I’d never want any daylight between us.”

Taken aback, knowing he grieved, she was unsure how to parse what she had heard. Words from out of a beard, words from a beaten soul, words that might be bereft of any emotional collateral, words from a man who had come into her life. But how deep into her life, and for how long?

Right then, she didn’t stop herself, because she couldn’t stop herself. She kissed him fiercely, mouth on mouth, teeth against teeth. She felt ethereal, she felt moist, she felt she was on a cloud-ride. They’d be together, she thought, *together*, for this, the oddest time of her entire life. No, not so, it couldn’t be right. He was hanging on, that’s all, he’d lost so much and she was here and she could be clutched; that’s what he was doing, hanging on to her and she was letting him. Her feelings hurtled ahead of her steadier senses—a man, this man, had folded himself into her life. *No daylight between them*, that’s what he had just said. No mistake there—he had said it plain and clear. She knew he’d had an empty marriage for the past three years, that, sexually, he was bull-strong, that he was human, not a monk, that he liked women and they liked him very much...that, what had happened between them in Washington was, if not inevitable, the next thing to it. And here she was, ready, available; so was he and no wife lurking about to interfere. Who was the wife? A name? A film personality Andrea had seen possibly four or five times on the screen at unrecalled theaters in unrecalled places. Not a friend, not a confidant, only a name—like a never visited town on some unopened map.

Begging for trouble if she scissor Flickinger off her list of reliables, and that could mean her job was about to be deep-sixed. Living, then, on what?

An unnerving revelation and she became acutely aware she wasn’t thinking with her head; her head would tell her in no uncertain terms to smarten up and watch herself. It was her lamed heart speaking to

## COMPRADOR

her, and so far it had won every argument going on inside her scrambled self.

About all she had left these days—a heart—out of control now and lurching toward this enigma of a man.

She looked intently at him, watching as he scratched his dark stubbly beard, and she was half-slaughtered by the thought: *is he worth it?* Leaning toward him, she kissed him again. Somehow, it seemed the safest thing she could think of.

She had defied her common sense, a sure sign she'd gone loopy. The loopest part was, right then, she was sure she was doing the absolutely right thing, though wondering if this is what insanity feels like.

## Washington, D.C.

**A**re you with me?" asked Efram Halburton stiffly. "I keep thinking I'm talking to a wall... I said that I've had your proposals forwarded to China and Mexico under my signature. Canada, as well."

"Oh, fine," said Culhane halfheartedly. "We need to copy Richard Ming in Shanghai and Fausto Longoria in Mexico City."

"Who're they?"

"Friends of mine. Key players. Smart enough to figure out things that are usually beyond government people." Culhane didn't have to wait long to find out whether he'd rattled his host.

"Including me, I suppose."

"And everyone else in this town I've met. What amazes me is that you people show no shame for what you did to the nation. It's like a sewer, Washington."

"Tell it to the voters."

"You tell them. I'd like to know something. Is it possible all the gold we claim to have in Fort Knox and elsewhere isn't there?"

Hesitantly, Halburton replied, "It isn't all there. It's a scandal that can't be explained, let alone defended."

"What happened to it?"

"I don't know, and if the Treasury does then it isn't saying."

"Why not demand an accounting?"

"The accounting part is up to Congress, and they haven't authorized a gold audit in years. Records are missing, apparently. A few years ago, I'm told, some Congressmen asked for an on-site inspection tour of Fort Knox and were refused outright. Maybe nothing is there, maybe it's another phantom, and no one is willing to admit it to the American people. Or say where it all went, even if they knew."

Searching each other with incredulous looks, Culhane buried his face in the palms of both hands, rubbed his forehead, and thought hard. Nothing came, except the notion that Halburton was presiding over a nation that had turned itself into a banana republic.

“We might have to reshuffle some of the cards,” Culhane finally said, dropping his hands, looking out the snow-pelted window behind Halburton’s desk. It had snowed for the past three hours.

“How?” Halburton wanted to know.

“I don’t know, not exactly.”

“That’s helpful...”

“Believe me, this is high calculus. Much can go right, much can go wrong. Which reminds me...this sleuth you assigned me, Flickinger? I’ve been asking for the CIA file on Rearden’s New York Corporation. They’d have to have one somewhere. I know they have one on me. I may need that Rearden file to check on a few things. When we move into the market, and then bottle up Hormuz, he’ll hear of it, of course. I don’t want him meddling around, and I haven’t the time to decoy him. There’ve been rumors that Rearden is Mafia-connected, one way or another. I don’t care, personally. But if it is so, he’ll want that kept secret, because it can cost his kid too many votes and possibly cost himself some time in the slammer. However, the information, if true, could be useful leverage...so I hope you’ll get that file for me. I’ll read it within a day and return it.”

“You’re going after the Reardens?”

“If I need to, sure.”

“That’s idiotic.”

“Why. The old man’s a con artist, that senator son of his is a loony, like the rest of his crowd. They’re as bad, or worse, than the mob that came here from Chicago. Those Dumbskulls.”

The conversation wasn’t going the way Halburton expected, and so he adjusted the topic. “We’re ready with the tankers and the grain freighters. The Navy says their special crews are trained up like circus monkeys.”

“They’ll need to be. They’ll also have to slow down some until I can visit Amsterdam on my way back here from Mexico and China.”

“I don’t understand the why and wherefore of Amsterdam. Why there?”

“A little matter of getting some help. Intramural assistance, you might call it.”

Halburton didn’t press it. “Your funny money will be ready in a week or so. Soon enough?”

“Plenty. Somehow, you’d better get a decent, workable currency organized. Otherwise my exercise is pointless.”

“You don’t need to remind me every ten minutes,” Halburton replied churlishly.

“Someone has to. You move like a snail sometimes.”

“Pays to be cautious. We don’t know how the Russians will react. You’re asking me to risk plenty on you.”

“Don’t get locker-room nerves now. A whole nation is putting its bets on you. And as of now I’m your only real horse. Or you can release my gold, if it exists, and I’ll say goodbye.”

“One day, perhaps.”

“Spare me a politician’s promises.” An odd, vacant look came over Culhane’s face. “Stay afraid, stay safe, and lose everything.”

“I don’t appreciate that kind of talk. I’m sorry about your tragedy, but that gives you no right to—”

“You got voted in to office to act! So, goddammit, act!”

Both men were stunned: Halburton at the outburst and Culhane at himself. Culhane shook his head, but it failed to clear. Like a Salvador Dali painting up there, everything a weird, distorted landscape.

“Sorry, that was uncalled for,” said Culhane, standing. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“By all means.”

Though when Culhane had departed the Oval Office, the President’s worries gushed. He mulled this new problem, wondering whether the man was fit to carry out this make-or-break assignment. Wearing a monk-like beard, too.

Hours later snow still fluttered in the dimly lit night, the air sharp, as Culhane left the White House. Though not wearing an overcoat, he could feel none of it, neither the snow nor the bite of the air. Heading for the Hay-Adams, wondering if Andrea would be awaiting him. Soon, Christmastime, and he'd have to find a gift for her. She'd been his Nightingale for weeks, deserved the best he could come up with. He owned a small Raoul Dufy, hanging near the dining alcove in the apartment; often she commented on it, sometimes gazing so steadily at it, it was though she were hypnotized. A still-life, the painting had been made by Dufy in Antibes, and, when seeing it in a Paris gallery, he bought it for Karin.

He wouldn't like parting with it, but then what was a gift, a real gift, unless giving it produced the pain of loss? He felt that way about gifts and felt that way about agreements. One good test of a solid agreement is whenever neither party liked it, in full.

As he walked by the Jackson statue, he speculated about how Joost Van Slyke would react when digesting the news of what awaited the world: compliments of the USA. Probably let fly with a bellow that could be heard in Baghdad and beyond.



For Halburton, the days had become nightmarish as he envisioned Culhane's foray into territory that was of the unknown and the unseeable; to him, it was as if he were following a map depicted in Braille. What if it all failed? What if the world unanimously turned against America, as was almost sure to happen when confronted by the Blue Dollar.

Many a time, and this was one of them, he thought any man wanting to sit in the Oval Office must be a lunatic. No let-ups, ever. It must've been the same for Roosevelt in War II, wondering what was to become of an America when both the Atlantic and the Pacific were in flames. No flames now but there could be...there always could be, and the U.S. was in no position to wage an all-out struggle with

anyone...the struggle now was internal, was perilous. Could America, with its love of excess, go on? Be what it once was, the great beacon.

Culhane was off for Amsterdam and that spelled Van Slyke. The giant Dutchman had been the schemer, who, months ago, persuaded Halburton to hold back on Culhane's gold, forcing the trader to come to Washington, and get to work if he wanted to claim payment.

No one else in America knew how to execute what had to be done; Van Slyke had insisted it was so, and probably it was so—but this! This, plain and simple, was asking for a one-way ticket to trouble, and perhaps to eternity.

Bowing to Van Slyke's advice, having no options at that time, or, worse, had none even now, sometimes asking himself if he'd made a gross mistake; that the nation, already reeling and bled to the bone, could suffer more wounds.



Clay Flickinger's burred head faced the window in Andrea's apartment. Looking down upon the street below, through a filigree of iced tree branches, he saw a guard dog urinating in the snow. It reminded him of the untidy contest he was having with her. He hadn't like coming here, especially in daylight, and the sooner he could depart, the better.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he was telling her. Caution advised him not to look at her then. She might detect the guile in his face.

"Whatever you say, Clay. I do know Ambros Piegar was approached and probably recruited by my father. At my suggestion, too," said Andrea, with a sudden urge to declare herself completely.

Flickinger's neck shortened imperceptibly, though not to him. A fraudulent laugh before he replied, "I couldn't imagine why your father would do that."

“Yes, you can. My father was trying to penetrate the Russian paymaster system that operated through the Swiss banks. Ambros was perfect. He distrusts the Russians as much as he detests his father.”

Your father was one of *theirs*, Flickinger wanted to say, but in restraint, he replied, “That proves nothing.”

“Let me say something else. My mother once told me that my father had been digging into the movement of drug money that passed through the United States and into foreign hands.”

“She said that?”

“She most certainly did.”

“She exceeded herself.”

“She always has. Nothing new there, is there?”

Flickinger turned toward her. Everything in his face was hard, the mouth grim, the planes of his jaw hardened and the jaw thrusting outward, the eyes unblinking. “Leave it alone, Andrea. You’re fooling with matters that don’t concern you.”

“Unless I want them to.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That I know you and my mother had a crummy little affair back in Berlin. That the manner of my father’s death was shushed up like it was dirty gossip...I think I can get that investigation re-opened.”

“Oh, interesting, how would you do that?” Flickinger bridled, completely ignoring Andrea’s allegation about his affair with her mother.

“Have Rushton Culhane put a flea in Halburton’s ear.”

“Your father knew the risks. So don’t think—”

“One call does it all, as they say.”

“Just who is it you’re working for these days?”

“Not the Junior League, Clay. I can’t continue my life on five-levels, bouncing my way through a maze all the time. I can’t take it.” Andrea leaned back in the davenport, outwardly calm, melting inside, but glad she had finally laid it out for him, what had festered inside her for weeks.

“I’d do some thinking on it, Andrea, if I were you.”

“But I have. That’s why we’re having this set-to.”

“You should know this may end our business together.”

“My position at the newspaper, I suppose. Is that what you’re saying without saying it? ”

“You’re on your own there.”

“S’long, Clay. You know the way to the door. Oh, one more thing. Rush Culhane told me he’s been looking for a file on the New York Corporation. Give it to him.”

“That’s none of your affair, either.”

“Wanna bet?”

“I remind you, you’re making trouble for yourself.”

“And I can return the favor, and make plenty of it for you.”

Looking at her very unevenly, as if she were a receding image about to disappear forever. Too much like her father, he thought, and walked deliberately to the front door of the apartment. Flickinger didn’t say good-bye, only grabbed his coat and stalked off into the downy white day.

Sitting there, her face blank, Andrea asked herself what she had done. Loving a man she had once informed on was one thing; turning against her benefactors was outright madness in these times. Mad enough, anyway, and was amazed she’d thrown down the gauntlet, making a decision that could raise painful repercussions.

For love, doing this?

Putting on the hair shirt, a way of squaring things with Rushton Culhane, who hides his own intentions in the back of blind alleys.

What about me?

As butterfly wings of steel flapped wildly in her stomach.



Two days later.

Flickinger, who used a temporary office in the Old Executive Office Building, a floor above Culhane’s, tapped his fingers on the

glossy, hard-backed folder. Not at all pleased with the idea of surrendering the file to Culhane.

*Where would it lead?*

And where would it lead, if he defied the request for all this destructive gen?

Ah, you Rearden—Flickinger pondered: it comes to an end for us all. It is a given, on the day we are born it's a given. He felt an unruly nerve pawing about under his scalp. That sonofabitch Culhane, what was he up to? And why all this fuss about the Reardens?



Culhane scratched rough notes on a legal-sized yellow pad. An old habit, it helped him jell his choices in the way others might attack a crossword puzzle. He drew a line under Hormuz, encircled China, transposing them both into a different order. He check-marked Russia then did the same to Switzerland.

Variables everywhere; every situation, every interest—just that much different, one nation to the next. And he'd soon be adding Canada and the Argentine. He'd have to yank Joost Van Slyke into the fray at some point, too. The Shang Magan would have plenty at stake, plenty riding on the outcome. Even if he'd been given the boot, he could never pull off this mind-defying set of trades without their cooperation.

If the stars smiled, he could do for America what it seemed unable to do for itself.

Out of the ashes—a Phoenix-like ascent might still be salvaged. How had America, once the world's largest single creditor, become a debt-ridden disaster?

The seduction to try what he intended trying was irresistible. Fate, failure, success, luck, all rolled into one loaf—and trades and cross-trades on a scale of the quadrillion.

Pre-dawn, for him, was the best time to work undisturbed. A good time to think, as was the middle of the night, when the competition

was usually asleep. Though it had taken some arguing with himself to slip away from beside the lush sweet warmth of Andrea an hour ago.

Swinging his chair around, he looked out the window into the wintry gray drabness. Too early to tell which way the weather would bend. Too early to tell a lot of things: how Mexico or China would decide, or why had Flickinger urgently called for a meeting at this hour.

The voice had sounded so urgent last night on the telephone. So did the footsteps Culhane heard, echoing now in the solitude of the outside hall; a clack-clacking of heel plates against the crushed-marble floor.

The door was ajar. Flickinger came through it at full stride, heaving his coat across the back of a stuffed Eames chair.

“Tea, if you want any, out in the other room,” said Culhane. “And good morning.” You fucking prick, he almost added.

“Not now, thanks.” No “good morning” in reply. Flickinger extended his lower lip, as if blowing steam out to kill the freeze in his weather-reddened face.

“You have any luck with Maxaculi in Caracas? That special paper you wanted?”

“Very helpful. Haven’t had a chance to tell you.”

Reluctantly, as if handing over his birthright, the intelligence officer passed the file to Culhane. “I’ve never seen this,” said Flickinger. “It doesn’t exist as far as we’re concerned. References to certain operational matters have been redacted. Otherwise it’s intact.”

“I understand,” said Culhane, reaching out, wondering what it was.

“I’ll leave you to your reading. My instructions are to pick it up later today, say six o’clock.

Looking at the file, gauging the number of pages, Culhane said, “Make it noon, I’ll be through by then.”

“No copying, please. I must insist.”

“Do you now? Insist? On your way, Flickinger.”

Thumbing the pages, Culhane noted how passages had been blotted out with black ink at scattered intervals. He skim-read the pages, pausing here and there to absorb certain sections. One described Braunsweig und Sohn as one of twelve Swiss banks infiltrated by CIA to learn more about the Russian paymaster system in Western Europe. Another page stated that a part of Braunsweig und Sohn was owned by the St. Gallen Trust, formed in 1948, with the “Trust” financed by monies believed to be cleverly diverted from the Marshall Plan—the aid program for Europe’s recovery after the war. St. Gallen Trust assets, moreover, were administered by Braunsweig und Sohn, which was protected from normal scrutiny under strict Swiss laws of bank secrecy.

Culhane read and reread the part that fascinated him most. Here, at last, was the explanation of how Rearden’s New York Corporation had managed to survive the recent Panic:

*Joseph Aloysius Rearden, U.S. citizen, a resident of the State of New York, also Chairman of the Board of the New York Corporation, and members of his family appear as the sole beneficiaries of the St. Gallen Trust.*

*Failing abjectly to comply with provisions of the United States Tax Code, the above beneficiaries have never reported the “Trust’s” assets and income with the appropriate U.S. authorities: see INT/AGY MEMO B376893.*

*The “Trust’s” assets currently consist of three-billion of Swiss francs, depository receipts for four tons of gold bullion, deeds of numerous real-estate parcels within Western Europe, and various holdings of shares and bonds of multi-national corporations. The specific accounts used by the “Trust” at Braunsweig und Sohn are ten in number, (Jupiter 416-10 through Jupiter 416-19). Persons authorized as signatories for these accounts are Joseph A. Rearden; his son, Timothy P. Rearden; and Hans-Otto Piegar, who was formerly the bank’s*

*managing partner as well as the lawyer engaged in 1948 to draw up the terms of the St. Gallen Trust.*

*Boggled, Culhane was riveted by another key passage:*

*The St. Gallen Trust is, in part, a device for massive money-laundering activities. Over the years, vast transfers of U.S. dollars and other hard currencies were funneled into the "Trust" from organized-crime sources, with the resultant monies temporarily invested and those investments later transferred at an agreed-upon discount to various offshore corporations known to be controlled by Mafia elements. For further details see INT/AGY MEMO Q886593.*

*The "Trust," having earned substantial commissions for its "fronting" services is thereby complicit in these illegal dealings.*

*Another audit trail points toward the St. Gallen Trust's financing of high-level distribution of narcotics, specifically the "White Dragon Pearl" heroin and No. 4 brown sugar heroin processed within the Golden Triangle area. The transactions are handled through Singapore, under the supervision of one Liu Wai, a well-known commodities kingpin believed to be a member of Shang-Magan. The "Trust" also receives kick-backs from various countries previously granted foreign aid from the U.S. Government, and which grants-in-aid are either approved or not, under various funding authorizations by the Senate Appropriations Committee, now chaired by Senator Timothy P. Rearden, the son of Joseph Rearden...*

*Rearden, I own you. And you, too, Piegarr.*

Culhane verged on delirium. Unbelievable. An Eureka moment! As if charged electrically, Culhane's thoughts danced madly. Too good to be true, or was it?

In a small cardboard envelope attached to the rear flap of the file, he found a key and a written reference to a safe-deposit box at the

Credit Lyonnais, Vendome branch, in Paris. A bearer key: whoever possessed it could access the box, whose contents, according to the reference, contained notarized copies of certain St. Gallen Trust ledgers, affidavits, and the like.”

In an addendum, he read an entry that cross-referenced to yet another file. One he doubted he'd never be allowed to see, but the referencing text said enough.

His senses still spinning, he read how Halburton, years before, had served as a congressional representative in the U.S. Delegation to the conference held in Geneva on the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade. The text stated that Halburton had acted as a consultant to the Shang Magan organization, and since that consultancy covered the American Zone, Culhane, before now, would be prohibited by Shang-Magan rules from knowing of it..

Halburton was another Metzilov, thought Culhane. Did Halburton know he'd been tagged in this file? Was that why the reluctance to let it be seen by an outsider. There was a lot more here than just the nether-world activities of the New York Corporation.

*Van Slyke, you slick bastard, I want my gold. Or, by God, I'll take yours.*

Leaning back, Culhane seethed. He thought about Karin, and about all this Rearden and Mafia trafficking in heroin and even how his wife had been hooked on the stuff. Quickly, he realized why the Justice Department, even if they knew of all this, had failed to act. Too much political influence in play; quite possibly too much Mafia in the mix. The risks sky-high if an investigation opened too many of Pandora's Boxes, as it almost certainly would.

Culhane pocketed the key. Paris: he'd not been there in several years. After Amsterdam, he'd find out what was locked up there, at Credit Lyonnais, a top French bank. Another launderer, he wondered? Well, the French; it wouldn't astonish him.



By mid-afternoon Culhane finished up a lengthy meeting with the President. A sudden change. Instead of flying to Europe, he'd go first to China. Both Mexico and Canada had signaled their willingness to sell all their excess oil and gas, for three years, to the U.S. in return for boundary changes along the mutual borders, north and south. America would concede 1,324,000 acres.

China a different story; all must be negotiated from scratch.

Discussion with Halburton turned to the world's grain reserves, especially those of the United States. Halburton, as usual, had been wary, timid, had even disputed several matters. Though exasperated, Culhane skirted any temptation to force Halburton's hand by mentioning his former link with the Shang-Magan. That could wait, just as the Reardens' peccadilloes could wait.

Going by the White House administrative office, picking up his air-priority document, tickets, and a packet of foreign currencies, he then met with his two-man staff for an hour. He autographed forty different requisitions for various items from the nation's strategic stockpiles, while rejecting double that number. He'd be out of the country before the crowing and backbiting began.

No longer caring about the restrictions on the use of the red phone, he called Jack McTigue in Los Angeles, only to be told that there were no fresh leads in the homicide investigation, with Culhane advising he'd be checking in from afar over the next weeks.

3:48.

The wind tossing more wisps of snow, as he left for the Hay-Adams.



Spread across the bed, two suitcases lay open; one for warm-weather clothing, the other for the colder climes of China and north Europe, if

he got that far. He blocked the clothing in one suitcase into a sort of square, opening up a place for the Dufy.

He heard the door open, and then Andrea's footfall outside in the sitting room. He hoped it would go well with her, but it gnawed at him just the same. Abrupt moves with no solid explanations never sat well with her.

"Hi," said Andrea, seeing him come through the door.

"Let me help you." Kissing Andrea, he took her coat, then told her, "There's warm water. If you want a bath, I'll bring you a drink while you mellow out."

A bottle of Canadian whiskey stood on a makeshift bar, part of a supply Fredy had secured from one his newly gained black-market sources Culhane had arranged. He heard the tub running and Andrea humming a tune. Pouring the whiskey neat into two Old Fashion glasses, he carried them to the next room; he still heard her humming and, thinking of music, he put the drinks down, sorted out some disks, selecting one of Hoagy Carmichael's medleys.

White mounds of bubble gel billowed surrounded Andrea, her hair wrapped in a hand towel, turban style. The air cloyed; steam clouded the mirror over the wash basin.

"Want a taste?"

"Love it. Hold the glass for me, would you?"

He bent over, putting the glass to her lips, watching her mouth take the whiskey. She looked extraordinary, fluffed in the blanket of gel bubbles.

"Want the news of the day?"

"Sure, news is my racket."

"Flickinger finally gave forth with that file I've been asking for."

"Reardens?"

"Yep."

"I'll bet it was a pretty hot read."

"You'd win, too."

"Ummm. Another sip, please?" Something she wanted to mention then, had been holding in, wanting to spare him. She spoke slowly.

“You know, Rushton, that you’re...you’ve been into those nightmares again?”

“When it bothers you too much, use the other bedroom or poke me in the ribs.”

“Baby, it’s not me that’s bothered, except about you.”

“Did I give up any state secrets, not that I have any?”

“You were shouting for your children again.”

His children. God, how he missed seeing them, the noises they made, their exuberance, those wonderful faces, and the fun, the sheer fun of hugging them. He missed swimming with them, the readings, the trips for ice cream. Everything. There was nothing he didn’t miss; a hole, that’s what it was, a great hole with no bottom. Nightmares? He didn’t care so much; at least it was something to hold on to, rather vapory, but something nonetheless.

Letting him alone for moments, but then seeing the lavender eyes hardening, Andrea said, “I might be able to find someone who could help.”

“With me, help starts at home.”

“You know what I mean, don’t be opaque with me.”

“You’re my help. All the help I need and want.”

“God, you’re so stubborn at times.”

“It’s my Hawaiian side, we’re a hard-assed bunch. I’ll leave your drink here on the sink. Can I get you anything else? By the way, Fredy is going to fix us dinner tonight. Prawns, I think.”

“Gorgeous. What’s the occasion?”

“Us. Us and hunger and a decent meal. Know something? I have dining privileges at the White House Staff Mess. The Navy runs it. Why them, I don’t know and don’t think I’ll ask. I stopped in the other day for a fast lunch. It was bologna and vegetable soup, both terrible. That ends it for me...Mess is the right word...”

“Can you take guests?”

“Only if they’re there on business. I’ve got to make a call on that red phone to Mexico City...don’t listen, okay.”

“What if I do listen in?”

“You’ll hear one side of a bid for fifty -million barrels of oil. Sweet, light-grade. We owe it to Sweden for a year’s supply of titanium bearings. Keeps the Air Force flying. And if I don’t get the right price, I may lose my job across the street. That, come to think of it, is a pretty fat incentive to screw up the deal. I just might...but that’d take me away from you, so, instead, I’ll get my chisels out instead.”

“You’re like an Iranian rug merchant.”

“If only you knew.”

“I think I do. Partly, anyway. Do you like what you do, all this finagling etcetera?”

“It’s my calling, my game, my life. Well, life’s work I suppose you could say. Sure, I like it. I just wish it were under different circumstances.”

“Including me?”

“You’re the one thing that makes Washington worthwhile. Excuse me, I’ve got to make that call.”

The red phone was twenty feet away, attached to the side of a desk by a special hanger device. She heard him haggling, murmurs, sometimes a slight raising of the voice, sometimes the tone getting stiffer, sometimes what sounded like a curse. He is a machine now, Andrea was thinking. Even in bed, violent at times, like an inmate too long in detention.

She hummed: *Light up my life with another sand castle*. Better yet, a bubble house, thought Andrea, and she blew a small tunnel through the foamy gel floating atop the bath water. Anything, anything at all that doesn’t exclude me from your world...then, it occurred to her something interesting must be in that CIA file on the Reardens.

She’d like a gander at it herself.

She’d once had a quick dalliance with Tim Rearden, the senator, but he hadn’t been a senator in those days. Just a likeable Irish-type, handsome, cowed by his father, and looking around for a girl to keep company with. Nothing serious, it was more a flirtation than anything

else. They hadn't so much as kissed. One night at a Waldorf dance, out on the floor fox-trotting, she waited till the music slowed. Summoning courage, she shoved her pelvis hard against him, startled when he had recoiled and the look of revulsion on his face. And she knew instinctively, then, he was gay and trying to keep it mum. Doing his charade, and charade it was, for anyone who knew her would know she was fully wired for the male of the species.

In years to come, she learned of three art gallery owners, a Broadway choreographer, and the deputy-mayor of New York City to be among Tim Rearden's coterie of companions. It mattered not, and, if truth be told, she was happy for them all; all of them and all of the others whose existence she had no idea of; she was equally happy about them, too.



Fredy had outdone himself. Le Danielle was closed that night, but he'd opened it for them, and they dined at a small table with two candles teasing the darkness. It wasn't prawns, after all; the shellfish had spoiled on the way from Maryland. Instead, they dined on illegally shot venison, puréed chestnuts, and roasted apple slices with raisin sauce.

"I don't know exactly, Andrea," he was explaining, "it might take as much as a month."

"A month! Are you up to it? A month!"

"You can stay here. I've arranged credit and Fredy will look after you, and the suite is free, you know. Not free, of course, but I don't have to pay so much as a shekel for it."

Andrea shook her head, the candlelight making her hair shimmer with crystalline glints.

"I'll call you when I can," said Culhane." Well, if I can, I'll call."

"Then I'll stay here," said Andrea eagerly, reversing herself. "Just come back soon. You'd better come back," insisted Andrea, thinking of China again, and if he would connect with Herbsant Saxa over

there and they'd cook up something that would detain him. She gripped his hand, strongly, and then he felt pressure on his wrist, always a little surprised at her strength.

"When I get to Europe," said Culhane, "I'd like to meet your friend Ambros Piegar."

"You'll like him. I'm very sure of that."

"In a few days go ahead and use the red phone and tell him I'll call him when I near Europe. We can set a time to meet. Only if he wants to, though. But encourage him, if you can."

"Wish I were going with you," said Andrea wistfully.

"Next time. I've one more thing to ask."

"Fire away."

"At the National Security Agency," explained Culhane, "there's a Coast Guard commander by the name of Doug Brooksterall. He's a code specialist. Tomorrow evening, he'll be by here to pick up an envelope that I'll give you later. Can you take care of that for me?"

"Certainly."

"I owe you for a lot," said Culhane.

"You could try doing something for me."

"Name it."

"Well, you see, I levered Clay Flickinger by using your name in vain. I told him if he didn't come across then you'd ask the President to re-open the investigation about my father's death."

"You'd better draw me a picture. What investigation?"

"When my father was killed in East Berlin, Clay Flickinger was his regional control officer," said Andrea. "On the side, he and my dear wonderful mother were having a shabby little thing together. I think I mentioned that once. And I'd like to know what really happened. No one ever said much about how it was my father got killed."

"You told me about this, you say? Huh. I don't recall it. Well...well...your father and Flickinger..."

“If you knew my mother, she’s quite a piece of scenery even at fifty-seven. How she’d take up with a man like Flickinger is perfectly astonishing to me.”

“You’re leaving something out, aren’t you? I can tell by your tone.”

“Some thought Flickinger was the one who had my father killed and that my own mother had something to do with it. That’s no simple thing to live with.”

“No, it wouldn’t be. My God! You want me to put a bee in Halburton’s bonnet?”

“If you ever get a chance.”

“I can make the chance. It may take me some time, however. Until I get back, I mean. It might have to wait until then.”

“I’ve got oodles of time.”

“Stay clear of him till I get back.”

“Him, yes, you, no. Take me to bed...let’s...I need sex with you.”

Amused at her glib candor, a creature of the immediate, he thought.



Sleepy-eyed and loved out, on her way to the kitchenette the next morning, she saw him sitting on the davenport. A screwdriver busy in one hand, he held the small Dufy in the other, prying the canvas loose from its frame. It had been his Christmas gift to her.

“What are you doing to my painting?” Eyes ablaze, she shrieked, “Stop!”

“The other art is too big to pack, and I need something to barter with. Don’t get so sore and don’t look like that.”

But you can’t, you just can’t do that! You said you’d never sell those paintings.”

Removing the last screw, he sprang the canvas free of its frame. He looked up, feeling as if he’d just been accused of grand larceny.

And the look he got in return was purely glacial. “But if I do have to sell it, I can’t send for it, can I?”

“It’s Indian-giving. You said it was mine, you gave it to me.”

“Right, I did.”

“Well?”

“It needs another home.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“Ah, but I do, darling woman. I live in the world of trade, and I hope some practicality.”

“Don’t you *darling* me. Bastard...oh, the hell with you...”

Smoothly as a ballerina, Andrea pivoted on one foot, angrily marching for the kitchenette. Banging a kettle against the stove burner, she turned up the flame; as it rose to a high flicker, so did her temper. Rarely given to outbursts, she was fustigated now, not caring who knew it. The loss of the painting was bad enough. But not nearly so bad as his failure to warn her, ask her. It was hers, wasn’t it? She’d put faith in his word, his promises.

Later, leaving for work, Andrea pressed a brief cool kiss to his cheek, stood back, regarded him as if he had contracted leprosy, then scurried out the door. She looked like a refugee from Hollywood, wearing a Gucci silk scarf and sunglasses, a rarity for her; the slanting morning light made the dark lenses shine like miniature headlights.

There she was, then there she wasn’t.

Having wrapped the Dufy in several layers of butcher’s paper, one more of oilcloth, then an outside covering of cardboard and cord, Culhane shut the suitcases. He lugged them over to the door, thinking of Andrea’s huffy exit.

She’d been a stalwart, loyal despite her initial Mata Hari games, very lovable, lots of fun. A reverent and inventive lover. Fine and capable, yet somehow still in search of her life’s pathway. For whatever reasons, she had sidestepped her opportunities for marriage and family. She was an adventure-seeker, an Amelia Earhart type, and a success as a journalist. In good part, she was quick to admit, that success was due to her family’s diplomatic and social register

connections, making it much easier for her to land interviews with the high and the mighty. It wasn't too late. Yet he knew, and she knew, her independence was vital to her sense of herself; that she would resist surrendering it and that resistance would lead to resentment that could be a high barrier to lasting love.

Eventually, for better or worse, Washington would end.

Then what?

With the loss of Karin and his children, America had less meaning for him now. The time had come to admit it, move on, break off with her, re-start himself. But selfishly he couldn't bring himself to do it, for Andrea was the sum of all he had left, humanly.

He was a White House man. The local media knew, and sometimes even reported, of his proximity to the president. He had, of course, gathered quick attention when the killings of Karin and the children were put over the wire to all the media in North America. Of the many invitations he received from the doyennes of a comparatively pallid Washington social scene, he had accepted none. And then, there was Andrea who seemed to know half the town, a hefty fraction of the members at Burning Tree, Chevy Chase Country Club, the F Street Club, the Metropolitan and the Cosmos. Were this not enough, she had a widowed aunt who lived across the Potomac, in McLean, on a fifty-three acre estate, who, in her day, had been the acclaimed hostess on her side of the river. No more, however. The aunt faced difficulty in meeting her property taxes, and zero buyers were looking for big acreage and a twenty-three room mansion to go with it.

He had made it a practice never to restrain Andrea from making any social rounds she chose to make. She never did, though, unless her metro-editor gave her a specific assignment or some event was being hosted by a long-standing family friend.

Like everywhere else across the land, these were dim days in the nation's capital, and, as Culhane had succinctly put it: "What in hell is there to party about?"

She occasionally chided him for keeping a distance from local society and the receptions on the embassy-circuit. He couldn't be

bothered, especially after twelve and fourteen hour days, seven days of the week, acting as *de facto* czar of the nation's strategic stockpile.

He ranged the world looking for what America vitally needed, then how to pay for it, or what could be traded in exchange, how to get it shipped and to what port or ports. Walking the tightrope when trading materials America didn't have in its stockpile, gambling he could find them later on at an acceptable cost. Halburton would faint dead away, if he knew; what Halburton didn't grasp was the necessity of trading away what you didn't already own.

The worst part of his day was still spent resolving disputes. The backbiting and squabbling among the military services for accessing precious materials seemed to mount by the week. Worries ran deep, tempers were short.

Fear did it. Fear of the unknown, and the greater fear that whatever was being imagined is what actually would happen.

A buzzing sound—it was the doorbell. A sound that augured the kick-off of a globe-girdling junket, filigreed with no small amount of ruses, conflicts that required conciliation, bargaining positions to shape and hone—doing all he'd ever trained for, doing it the best he knew how.

His nerves jumping: a creamy prospect, seeing Jia and Richard Ming again. A week earlier, on one night he had tossed and turned as his waking dreams kept chasing after one another.

*Jia, Jia, Jia...*

A lapse of twenty years. More. Seeing her again, what would it be like? Awkward? Married? Bound to be married, a woman like her. Her father, Ken-chou Ming, had all but legally adopted him and, living with the family, he and Jia soon were into a brother-sister relationship. She taught him Chinese, schooled him in the culture and family custom. Within three months, the arrangement had shattered itself; they became lovers, each for the first time. A thing never forgotten by him: in the business of love, first was always first...

The doorbell became insistent. Here it is, he thought. Canada, Mexico, then China and Jia and Richard. Opening the door, he

expected the bellman but instead it was Andrea, shorn of the sunglasses.

“I forgot my key,” she murmured, “probably on purpose...oh, Rush...”

She fell into him so strongly he almost lost his footing, and there they rocked back and forth, clinging like vines of the jungle until the bellman arrived, knocking loudly on the opened door, voicing a loud “ahem”.

An embrace that must last for a long month, and, for him, a harrowing one.

## Shanghai

**W**aking to a flight attendant's announcement, he looked out the window into a buttery sky. Clouds piled up like layered goose down, and greenish-orange shafts of light streaked down toward the somber earth below. China! Knowing without being told and his arteries seemed to fill with prickly heat.

Mexico had gone well, Canada even better. He had cut fair deals with both countries, a necessity before meeting with the Chinese. Then, unexpectedly, he had been sidetracked to Sydney Australia, a bone-cruncher of a flight from Toronto; sleep, a pass by the barber-shop, then a long and pleasant dinner with the courtly Muir Tomlinson, the Shang-Magan's council member in Australia. Aging now, though the brain still sharp as a surgeon's blade, Tomlinson had been of great help in recent months.

One more thing: Could Tomlinson set up a barter trade of grain against Iranian sweet crude to be shipped to Imperial Oil in Canada? The U.S. could release 400,000 metric tons of wheat at very favorable rates, if Tomlinson would three-side the deal with the Russians, seducing them into thinking more grain might be secured and on a thief's terms?

"What does the U.S. get out of it?" Tomlinson wanted to know.

"Canadian nickel. We've set the price but not the tonnage until we get the back end of the deal wired up. That's your end."

"Can you use Australian iron ores?"

"We can't but I know who can?"

"Who's that?"

Culhane gave him a look, and Tomlinson, half-apologetically, said: “Sorry, it’s my innate curiosity.”

Minutes later, everything was agreed. And also agreed that Culhane would call him in four days for the answer to the three-sided trade that, if it went through, would inveigle the Russians into believing there was more to be had on the same terms. Culhane was certain Tomlinson, the shrewd old trader that he was, would sense a ploy, yet was too much the gentleman to inquire further. Tomlinson was a trader, not a father-confessor.

Culhane was very fond of the elder man, was only sorry he couldn’t reveal details of a gigantic grain trade yet to come.

Maybe, that is—a maybe that was a hundred miles long. But that would have to await another day; a meeting with Joost Van Slyke in Amsterdam, with Van Slyke looping Tomlinson into the act when he was ready to do so.

He thought of the big Dutchman now, and what it might take to arrange a blocking action in the world’s wheat markets. In their private lingo, top-caliber world speculators used the term *blocking* to mean seizing control of a market for any major commodity.

It all depended upon first-rate information, surprise, and the use of prime force at the exact right moment. When the real pros were at work, they always came hard and straight and didn’t much care who was in the way. Culhane intended a full blocking action in wheat. He couldn’t do it alone. No one could. For that play, so massive, you needed a melding of interests—a syndicated cabal: quick, sharp, heavy, and that called for the Magans.

He thought of the two attempts while in Sydney to call Andrea, and the hell of a time patching them through the U.S. Naval Signal Detachment at Christchurch in New Zealand. No answer. He missed her, and knew he must soon do something about their future together.

As the aircraft descended into Shanghai, he could see a pewter-hued river meandering below a ravine cut out of the surrounding high country. A carpeting of snow, too. The Fuchun River, he guessed, tumbling toward the Bay of Hangshou. China moved much of her

country via rivers, not on wheels. These waterways stretched thousands of miles westward beyond the Gobi Desert into Tibet, even farther.

Water-beast trails and rice paddies next to more paddies as far as Culhane could see now. Green and yellow and then the sponge color of yellow umber. More than a billion people to feed down there. It was all so old, very much older than any known civilization. They knew it, too, priding themselves about their ancient cultures and deep-seated traditions. Never, to his knowledge, had western scholars and historians give the Chinese their fair due. It was China and her vast navy that had mapped the seas and continents of the world long before Columbus, Magellan and others had set sail for the New World. More, Chinese inventions had largely accounted for the Industrial Revolution that had spurred so much of the west's wealth and prominence in the 1700s and beyond.

No acclaim given to that fact, either.

Ken-Chou Ming. This was his land, the land of the Ming Dynasty. He summoned the memory of Ken-chou again. The vibrant alive face, almost unlined, usually in peaceful repose when everyone else was agitated. A magnificent mind that ranged across engineering, philosophy, medicine, business, human nature. A man with no discernible character defects, and the greatest trader Culhane had ever known. The writer of that Book, the man who taught Hong Kong how to become the greatest free-trading city of the world. Better than the vaunted city-state of Venice under the Doges. All during the Second World War, when the Japanese had sent the British packing from their treaty colony, it was Ken-chou Ming who nursed the island-people's spirits. Had re-gathered their pride for them, lifted their hearts, and showed them what brute courage could deliver in foulest days.

And what he'd done after the war to revitalize Hong Kong's economy, give it fable, make it the trading haven it was, a feat so extraordinary that the British admitted it, with the King according him highest honors—the Royal Victorian Chain and an appointment as Knight Commander of the British Empire.

A whirring of hydraulics as the wing flaps slowly extended, the engines singing lower now. A smocked stewardess walked the aisle to check seat belts. Shanghai, once the Paris of the East, a few miles ahead now as the aircraft swung on to its final approach to Pudong Airport.

More than twenty years, counted Culhane, and once again he would see Jia and Richard Ming, Ken-Chou's son. Do you start all over, everything new, do you kiss, shake hands, or what, after these many years?

Almost half my life gone since living and working with them in Hong Kong. God almighty! His throat went dry.

A rangy young man, broad-shouldered, tall for a Chinese, stepped forward just as Culhane entered the passenger terminal, carrying the smaller suitcase in his left hand; the Dufy still packed tight among his clothing.

"Mis-ter Cul-hane?" asked the young man, spacing the words cautiously.

"Yes." Culhane looked at the stranger carefully. High cheekbones, flowing black hair, brown eyes, and a complexion tinted white. An Eurasian.

A shy smile "I Michael Ming—Ken-chou Ming, the less one—but some call me Michael." He shot a muscular arm forward to shake hands, Western style.

"Very glad to know you, Michael," said Culhane, amazed, returning the callused grip. "Are you...whose son are you?"

"My father is Richard. My auntie is Jia."

"Well, I'm damned," said Culhane, shaking his head. "I didn't know."

"Nothing to be sorry," said Michael, almost getting it right. "Please come. We get your cases and go home. My father sorry not to come. Apol-apologizsa. Much work. Auntie Jia at Fudan University. Soon come home. We go, eh?"

"Whatever you say, Michael. Lead on."

Surprisingly, they found his other suitcase as soon as they reached the claim area. Before he could put a hand on it, Michael Ming had easily hoisted it, and then neatly swept the other one out of Culhane's hand. He led the way through the milling crowd toward customs, where Culhane showed his diplomatic passport. Studying it, the official observed Culhane acutely and sputtered in rapid Shanghainese to Michael before waving them through.

"I'm not so familiar with your local dialect, Michael. What did he want?"

"He say you important to have paper you carry. No one tell him you are coming."

"Not so important after all, you see."

They walked toward the terminal doors, the younger man handling the heavy suitcases as if they were balsa-wood bookends.

"My father, he say you very important."

"You must know by now how generous your father is."

"Auntie Jia say, too. They very ex-cite see you."

"Me. too. Am I ever."

"I have no money for taxi. We take bus."

"I think we can manage a taxi," suggested Culhane, who looked at the overflowing buses and decided he'd rather walk than grapple with that persecution.

When they'd turned into Honggiao Road, leading to the city, Michael asked, "You speak Chinese?"

"Cantonese and Mandarin. Not Shanghainese."

"I teach you. But now we speak Mandarin. I tell you about me, what I do. Is easier to say than in English."

"Fine. I'd like to hear about your life."

"I've finished," began Michael in the Mandarin, "my fifth year of study at Fudan University. Soon I will receive a combined certificate in geology and engineering. Then, perhaps, I will be sent again to Western China, in the province of Xinjiang, to do more work there. I spend three or four months there each year."

"Doing what?" asked Culhane, his interest aroused.

“I have a small team and we search for certain rock formations, looking for mineral deposits. The work difficult yet is gratifying.”

“You ever find anything worthwhile?” asked Culhane, staying as close to colloquial Mandarin as he could.

“Chrome deposits, coal, manganese, tungsten, and titanium. I think there are other traces too, but our exploration budget very limited.”

“Are these deposits large enough to develop?”

A brief silence. “I think so, but must test and drill more,” answered Michael Ming, who leaned over and gave some rapid-fire instructions to the taxi driver.

“How do you go about exploring that vast space with such a small team?”

A canny look brimmed over Michael’s face, while the corners of his mouth curved into a sly smile. “I sometimes secure permission to visit the region in winter. Very cold then and snowy. I live with the Kazakhis. Mongol nomads. They raise sheep. I hunt the wolves that kill their sheep. A wolf will kill ten, twenty sheep and sometime kill a man even in broad daylight. Sometimes I hunt on the Russian side of the mountain. There is a bounty on wolves. The government pays in sheep. The bigger the wolf, the bigger the bounty sheep. I give the sheep to the Kazakhis and then some sample rocks and I ask them to please look for similar things as they go places in Xinjiang. They very good at it.”

Culhane felt overwhelmed, proud too—an entrepreneur no less; the boy had founded his own intelligence system. “You are your grandfather.” This is not a boy, he reminded himself, but a wolf hunter.

“No, not like what I’ve heard of him. But I try. You speak excellent Mandarin, Culhane.”

“I also try,” said Culhane through a smile. “Your Auntie Jia taught me, and the Cantonese dialect too.”

The taxi approached the city’s outskirts. The sidewalks teemed with people, and soon the crowds must’ve numbered in the thousand.

Bicycles everywhere and mini-cars, trucks and scooters and streams of modern vehicles, including a surprising number of Buicks. Buildings, bright and gleaming, tall and hovering, many of them aping the west's architectural styles. Cranes. Trucks burdened with every imaginable construction material. A bustling, vibrant place. Neon signs like those of Las Vegas, but advertising name brands and many emporium-like stores. China, or this part of it, had suffered little from the American financial collapse. It thrived, it seemed.

The taxi rolled along Fuxing Road, on past the Sun Yat-sen Museum, slowing as it reached the Yu Garden. In there, he knew, was classic Chinese landscaping, famous for its Halls of Mildness, for Watching Swimming Fish, of Serenity, and the Tower of Ten Thousand Flowers, the Treasury Tower, and the Emerald Pavilion. And here the Society of Little Swords, using the Hall of Heralding Spring as its headquarters, had once risen up against a corrupt emperor.

Culhane thought, this country wrote the bible of rebellion, as the taxi now swung left into the old British built Bund built adjacent to the river.

“Michael, let's stop here for just a minute.”

Nodding, Michael said, “Yes, your wish,” and gave a clipped order to the driver, who pulled over.

Culhane got out. Now he could see what he'd been able to get before only from pictures and books. The Bund. The best-known street in the East. Culhane saw the long line of buildings against the great avenue that curved along the Huangpu River.

He knew those buildings, even though he'd never set foot in one. The old Bank of Indo-China, the Glen Line, further on Jardine Matheson (now of Hong Kong), then the Yokohama Specie Bank, the old office of Butterfield & Swire, the place where Victor Sassoon of the famed Baghdad family scored and lost his fortune. Near the end of the esplanade was the old Palace Hotel and what had once been the offices of the North-China Daily News.

“You like it. I can see it in your face.”

“I like it very much. Shall we go?”

In just minutes, the taxi cruised up to the old Broadway Mansions, once a very fashionable address for foreigners. “Auntie and Father live here. We go up.”

“I can’t wait.” Culhane paid the driver as Michael beat him to the luggage again.

Stopping at the sixth floor, they walked down a wide hallway papered with silvery wallpaper of cormorants and lilies. Taking a key from his jacket, Michael opened the door, then ushered Culhane through a foyer that opened upon a sunken living room.

Seeing her again, after all these years, Culhane’s heart soared.

Jia arose, coming to him with that face that made his belly whirl. So serene, a face touching him with its invisible soft fingers, and with eyes shaped like large marquis-cut brown gems.

Closer now, and he saw that she was still willowy, the hair black as ebony and swept back above the wide brow. Maturity had penciled a few shallow lines in her smoothed skin, the color of banana-ivory. A phantasmal moment for him.

Jia said, “Twenty-two years, ten months, and eleven days. How we missed you. I cannot believe my eyes.”

“Time has been a good friend for you. How beautiful you still are.”

“Enough, perhaps, for an embrace?”

“A thousand of them.”

He stepped the last few feet, threw his arms around her, and pressed so hard she gasped. Once again he smelled the jasmine fragrance. They held for a long time, dreaming of the old, saying nothing.

“I have the monkey tea for you after your long trip.”

“I’d rather hug.”

“You will kill me,” she whispered, feeling Culhane’s jarring strength, a strength she knew well from their Hong Kong youth. He loosened his arms.

“Is Richard here?”

“Soon,” said Jia, inspecting Culhane’s face minutely. “He is terribly busy and could not meet you.”

“I was delighted to be met by your Michael. Quite a fellow.” Culhane looked around, but the younger man had vanished.

“Our joy,” said Jia fondly. “I will get the tea and we can have a twenty-year visit.”

When she left, Culhane went to the window, passing by a few silk-screens secured to the wall and some intricately carved mahogany furniture. Two brass shelves held enameled cloisonné pieces and some red lacquered boxes. Tucked away in one corner was a tired-looking television. A comfortable room, though with nothing of the grandeur of Ken-chou’s villa high on the Peak in Hong Kong. He looked down on the brownish river, then off to the harbor in the north. A dozen or more ships swung at anchor, and he was reminded of his early days at sea.

“Let’s sit here,” said Jia. He turned, seeing her pour the tea into yellow porcelain cups. “I cannot tell you how stricken we were to hear of this terrible thing happening to your family. I was blinded with tears.”

“When I first mentioned it to Richard on the phone, he said you’d already heard about it. That surprised me.”

“China has many ears, Rushton,” said Jia, handing him a cup. “It must have devastated you.”

“Every so often I can feel them with...with my hand.” He sat next to her.

“And your heart,” Jia affirmed. “When father died, it was like that for me. Do you know, Richard told me of the park you bought on Repulse Bay and the statue dedicated to our father. Richard has seen it. What a wonderful thing for you to do. “A perfect likeness,” he says, “and twelve feet tall.”

“I would have made it a hundred if they’d let me.” Ten years ago he’d created that park, though it seemed only months.

“A grand thing to do. We are much honored.”

“Not much to do, Jia, not for him. Enough about me, tell me did you ever marry? Do I know Michael’s mother? Many times I wanted to contact you and Richard and I didn’t for fear of getting you in trouble.”

“For ten years, during the Cultural Revolution, it was a vulgar and dangerous time. You couldn’t have found us,” answered Jia, drawing a forefinger across her graceful throat. “And yes, I married soon after Father sent us here from Hong Kong. My husband was the commanding general of the Shanghai Military District. He died in the border fight with Russia. He had been posted to Manchuria when a fight broke out, a border squabble. Twelve years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” said Culhane, noting her careful omission about Michael’s mother. He didn’t ask again.

“We hardly ever saw each other.” Jia laughed sensitively.

“No children?”

“He was away a lot, as I said.”

“A general, eh?” Culhane was pensive. “Was he good for you? A good husband.”

“Sometimes.”

“It’s never meant to be all the time.” Culhane let it go at that. He didn’t care to know more. “And what do you do now?” he asked.

“I’m teaching at Fudan University, where Michael goes.”

“Teaching what things?”

“English, and translating English to Chinese for a local newspaper, the Liberation Daily.”

Another newspaper bug, thought Culhane, a bit ruefully. “So many times I’ve thought about you and Richard. And when your father sent me to Africa and I came back to find you gone and him dead. It was a rough hour.”

“It was time for us to come back here. Always that was his plan, and when the chance came he sent us.”

“Why so important to come back here?”

“At heart, you know, my father was a missionary. He abhorred the Maoists and always told us that we must come back, must be part of the force for change.”

“And it helped.”

“Things are always changing,” said Jia. “Though one week in China is a day anywhere else. Great resistance. You’d never credit it sometimes. Shanghai has greatly changed. All the trade with the west, though somewhat slower now.”

“Very modern, isn’t it? Remarkably busy, too.”

A knocking sound from the hallway, like an object hitting the wall; Jia tensed suddenly, her voice shook slightly as she murmured, “Oh.”

Culhane followed her eyes as they went past him, coming to rest on Richard Ming. A wide familiar smile creased a face that seemed gray with exhaustion, like a man from a cave. Binocular-thick lenses rested on either side of the flaring nose, and his chest was sunken under a too loose suit of gray gabardine. A thin black tie skewed across his white shirt.

Richard Ming stumped forward awkwardly, holding a cane, unable to bend his knees. One arm seemed noticeably shorter than the other.

My old friend has sent his ghost, thought Culhane. It can’t be Richard. God bedded in hell, what’s happened! He shot up from the divan and moved swiftly to his almost-brother.

“Richard!”

The cane dropped. “My day and my year are both blessed. Ah, Rushton, so long for us.” Richard Ming leaned his tormented body against Culhane.

“What’s happened?” Utterly appalled, Culhane squinted now.

“Past troubles. All of them gone now. Let us sit and have some of Jia’s tea. I have smelled it for an hour already. My nose is still perfect.” Again the quaint, slightly lopsided grin that Culhane remembered with clarity.

With laborious effort, which he insisted on making by himself, Richard sat on the floor to one side of the low tea table. His legs lay as inertly straight as two matchsticks. Culhane looked helplessly at Jia, who nodded very slightly.

“So,” said Richard, raising his cup, “welcome at last to Shanghai. *Aii-oo*, we waited twenty cat’s-years for you.” Richard drank in the Chinese custom, slurping the monkey tea through his ever-present smile.

“I’m impressed with your son, and I thank you for all the help over the past months. Made a great difference. The American president, that’s Efram Halburton, thanks you also...”

A fleeting look exchanged with Jia, and Richard said, “At good profits for our Shanghai Development Corporation, too.”

“As it should be,” said Culhane “Tell me, Richard, what happened to you? An accident, was it?”

But it was Jia who spoke up. “It was after the time of the Red Guards, that revolution that tore China apart. I was protected because of who my husband was. But Richard was imprisoned in a closet for a year, then beaten daily, and finally thrown into a bamboo cage for another year and forced to wear a...a big dunce’s hat. He refused to renounce our Ming heritage.

Culhane shook his head sadly. “Couldn’t you have gotten word to me? I would have come for you. We could’ve helped...or tried to...”

“Not a chance you’d set one foot in China. Not then,” said Jia.

“Probably not,” agreed Culhane. “But I could have sent men out of Macao. Or Shang-Magan would have ransomed you.”

“We all learned something from it,” said Richard. “It was almost worth it.”

“Learned what? What a broken head feels like?”

“What I learned is that terrorizing is the whip of the truly weak. In the end the communists will destroy each other,” replied Richard, adding, “and if one survives, as I did, you actually gain great face, and not a small amount of influence. In the next generation, statism will reduce in China, you’ll see. The Party knows it. We all know it.”

“Some helluva of a price to pay for that edification.”

“Not as heavy as you think. Suffering is a good school for learning how to use one’s remaining time on earth. And we’ve much still to do here in China.”

Compassion, like a cathartic, took hold of Culhane. Seeing this wreck of a fine man partly scrubbed him of his own sorrows.

“And where were you, Jia?”

“After my husband died, Michael and I hid on Shing-yun Dan Island. You can see it up the river, off to your left. The small one. We lived in an old vault under one of the deserted homes for most of a year. Then we were found, and sent to Nanking. We worked on a farm but they left us alone at night and I could teach things to Michael.”

“Tell me about the Shanghai Development Corporation,” Culhane asked, as Jia slipped away for more tea.

Richard Ming ran him through the ropes of what this government corporation did: how it promoted trade for the Shanghai district, financed factories, contacted foreign-based importers, and often did things in the dark—like the old-time *compradors*—to outwit the central government in Beijing.

“And you are the managing director?”

“Yes, but my influence is really as a member of the Central Economic Planning Committee in Beijing. I was there all last week discussing your stupefying plan. And I spent an hour with President Hu Jintao, who is most, ah, interested, Rushton.”

“Good.”

“Many problems remain,” cautioned Richard. “I must inform you the negotiators from Beijing will be delayed two days. They await final instructions.”

“Because of the size of the undertaking?” A two-day delay, dammit!

“Beijing is one long train of suspicious bureaucrats. Things are quite slow sometimes.” Richard Ming tapped his head. “Up here.”

Jia came back into the room. “We’ll have dim-sum soon,” she said, “and then chicken in the Shanghai- style. And no more business tonight.” She spoke regally, very certain of herself.

Struggling to get up, Richard said, “Tonight and tomorrow you stay with us. When the others arrive from Beijing, it is better that you move to the hotel.”

“Well, I don’t want to inconvenience you.”

Another toothy smile and Richard said, “I’ve talked already to the Jinjiang Hotel. They know you’re not with them tonight. And we can see more of you this way.”

“Where is Michael?” asked Culhane.

“At the student dormitory. You will use his room.”

They ate, talked, ate more, and drank rice wine until it was so late that Richard Ming was forced to excuse himself. An old circle of friendship was joined again in those hours. A Ming trait—a family bred for loyalty, courtesy, perpetuity.

Culhane awoke early the next morning, warmed by Michael Ming’s wolf pelts. His mind turned to Sant, then to Muir Tomlinson. Three more days before he could call for the result, if any, on the grain-oil deal with Russia. Would they fall for it? And Andrea, what of her on this day, though it would be night for her now. The Blue Dollar! Then Van Slyke. So much to get done, all of it in different parts of the world, and time was his surest enemy now.

He kicked back the covers, strode across the cold wooden floor, and entered the surprisingly large bathroom. He wondered what English family had lived here some seventy-five years earlier. Ten minutes later, dressed in flannel trousers, a tan cashmere turtleneck, and a pair of bench-made moccasins, he went down the hallway, heard stirrings in the kitchen. Entering, he saw Jia in a yellow woolen robe, pattering around an old wood-burning stove. Not one glossy black hair was out of place on her lowered head.

“So early,” she said, looking up from the stove.

“A habit I’ve never shaken.”

“Some tea and pineapple? Or an egg?”

“Thanks, no. I’m going to take a walk, and you look as lovely in the morning as you always did. Some things in this world never change, thank God.”

A demure look from behind Jia’s smiling eyes. She was something, he thought, caught up again in a quick recollection of those days in Hong Kong, when they loved until limp as jellyfish.

“Richard would like to meet with you later at his office.”

“Has he told you anything, Jia, of what I’m here to discuss?”

“We have no secrets from each other. A fantastic thing. Sometime I’d like to give you an idea or two. Is that presumptuous?”

“Not at all. I’ll walk around the area and afterward we can visit. How about lunch at the Old Prosperity?”

“You know of that one, do you?”

“I’ve heard about it. A date?”

“Of course.”

After he had gone, Jia sat on a stool by a small butcher’s block. Picking up the Liberation Daily, she saw headlines blurring the news of an earthquake in western China, over a thousand feared dead. China, she thought, the Heavenly Empire that was a constant maelstrom.

And now Rushton Culhane.

To see him again was a breeze of sweetness; to feel him a typhoon of temptation. Absurd, after all these years. Not the wild buccaneer he was two decades ago, but not far distant from it either. Yet misery tapped at the back of his dragon’s eyes now.

He will have to know and soon, thought Jia, and she wondered how to broach a truth that he must know. How would he react? I must talk again with Richard, she decided.



Walking around for three hours, Culhane covered two of Shanghai’s ten municipal districts, crossing Suzhou Creek several times, then retracing his steps toward the harbor. Junks, drayage sampans,

freighters flying enough colors to shame a rainbow; muddy waters, the, aroma of refuse, the smell of sea life; memories, then, of a hundred ports he'd sailed into during his youth. But never this one—the Rotterdam and Wall Street of China rolled into one.

Dragging himself away from a scene that stirred him, the living portrait of trade, he walked onward to the Bund. He knew what had gone on behind the facades of those grand buildings almost a century ago when Shanghai was a prime treaty-port mainly ruled by the British, but the city was split into ethnic quarters. French, American, German, Russian. Drafts on banks across the world were exchanged and discounted; bills of lading drawn and ships chartered; compradors wheedled and fought for their hong, alliances begun and enemies earned. Eye-catching women strolled under silk parasols on the wide walkways, while Daimlers and Rolls-Royces motored up the great esplanade and rickshaws in those days were everywhere, pulled by cone-hatted coolies. Drinks at the Shanghai Club, with the longest bar in the world, a hundred elbows leaning on it, where walrus-mustached Englishmen complained about business, reviled the upstart Americans, and subtly insulted the deplorable French, who always were linked to the most beautiful Eurasian mistresses.

To Culhane, it was a chapter he'd missed but he had read enough about the fabled city's history to live it in other dreams. My kind of city, he thought. And on he went, plugging his way along on the sidewalks clogged with people. The windows of the side streets were full of embroidered silks, watches, rock-and-roll CDs, carvings, antique opium pipes, mahjong games, playing cards, knock-offs of every known high-end manufacturer of the West. Along the back streets were dressmakers and palm readers. Street cleaners sweeping the curbsides of the smallest particles; painters up on scaffolding freshening the window trim of the brick buildings. Street-hawkers sold everything from fireworks to condoms.

But then the Pudong, a fantastic array of the most modern buildings in the world. The ambience riveting, the scene glittery and yet

muscular in its stature, an architectural marvel that might've been imagined by a Sinbad.

He retraced his path, walking three miles back to the old French Settlement that, at best, in its heyday had no more than 1,500 of the French quartered there. Still, they left a mighty cultural footprint in the Old City with its streets of stone gatehouses—*shikumen*—now converted to jazz clubs, high-end restaurants, branch-stores from every large metro area of the world. He noted five Cartier outlets alone.

It's one huge function-junction, he thought; a surprise awaiting him every other block or so.

Even more than yesterday, his senses were drowned in this alluring mosaic of a rocketing Asia economy. More fun to see, even, than his first day in Hong Kong, half a lifetime ago.

His senses were so taut, so acute, it was as if high-voltage had passed through him; he was absorbing like a dry sponge. Imagining, dreaming.

As he went along, stopping at many places, he began to plan. First, a little hazily, but an hour or so later, he was inspecting possibilities with the precision of a diamond cutter who had just happened across a fantastic stone to work with.

On that day, he saw the future.



Culhane met with the men from Beijing in a government office building three blocks behind the Bund. Slow, deliberate talk, in the Mandarin tongue, and all of it in the classic Chinese manner of bargaining: feint, outfox, drag out the time to take advantage of western impatience, seize upon the slightest slipups however insignificant—for they all added up, or could to triumph.

The first morning, a size-up session, the talk was elastic and uncentered, as they probed subtly, feeling him out. Breaking for a quick sociable lunch, they agreed to continue early the following day.

Richard expected to be on hand tomorrow, a good signal, as it meant they'd finally get down to tacks, and bypass further posturing. Tomorrow and possibly the day after could be determinative. In a month or two, a worldwide shortage of oil would likely occur, and China relied heavily upon petro imports, largely out of the Mid-East. He must convince these men that North America, to include Canada and Mexico and the U.S., plus Venezuela and Brazil, would assure China of adequate petro supplies. More, they imported corn in the millions of metric tons and America grew record crops of it almost every year, and troves of it bulged the Midwest grain elevators.

He was in a position to deal it off at knockdown prices, which meant China could fatten its hogs at lower costs, making the meat cheaper on every Chinese dinner table.

Naturally, the men from Beijing would insist on knowing the why and wherefore of any sudden oil shortages.

His problem was clear, at least to himself: he couldn't tell these men the details of what awaited the world. Yes, he could predict and he could assure—and that was the whole of it in this mission. A tricky tap dance awaited him. He was in China to ask for calm, and for China to keep out of it. The basis for a mutual understanding was favored-nation prices on American commodities, together with a not too gentle reminder that, downstream, it behooved China's slumping export economy to have flourishing U.S. consumers buying Chinese products again.

The Beijing men knew it to be so; and they knew he knew it, as well or better than they did. Still, could they join interests? Deal?

He was in a hurry; China was never in a hurry when negotiating for great gains. One solid plus for him, for America. Between Beijing and Moscow, no love was lost.



Returning to his hotel, where he had arranged to meet Michael Ming, he climbed the winding steps toward the columned entrance. Waiting

there, Michael stood at the top, his wavy black hair blowing about in the slight breeze, his face sturdy and resolute against the frosty air. He wore a dark blue anorak with a yellow scarf wrapped around his neck.

“Let’s go up to Nanjing Road,” Culhane called out.

“Very crowded now,” answered Michael.

“That’s why I’d like to go.”

Michael bobbed his head dubiously and started down the stairs. “Aren’t you cold?” he asked, seeing that Culhane wore only a blue pinstriped business suit.

“I have strange insulation. Usually I neither get cold nor too hot. My Hawaiian youth, I guess.”

“Come to western China. You will quickly change your mind perhaps.”

“One day I’ll go with you. You can bag me a wolf pelt.”

“Auntie Jia said you walked through Africa once. Must have been interesting.”

They dodged a truck loaded with live chickens and ducks in wooden cages as Culhane replied, “Quite interesting. I was doing some work for your grandfather. I doubt if I’d ever try that walk again, though, even if I could. I was about your age, then, maybe a little older.”

“What did you do last night?”

“I studied raw material reports for a while and later on I jogged through part of the city. Night is a good time to learn about a city. Long ago I learned about Beirut and Tangiers that way.”

“What do you look for at night?”

“A hundred things, things like the rhythm of the city. But mostly to learn my way around. Last night, two policemen stopped me and asked if I was sick or lost or both.”

Michael laughed discreetly. “What else?”

“I saw some of the night trade. Men were gathered around small fires on Dalian Road just above Lu Xun’s Tomb. They had their carts full of what-all, and they traded. I watched. I couldn’t understand everything they were saying, but I knew what they were up to.”

“Way up there? A long way. It’s illegal what they do.”

“They trade to survive, Michael.”

“I suppose,” replied Michael, thinking of his own dealings in western China.

“One night we should get ourselves a cart and go up there. Watch out for that one!” shouted Culhane.

Mindless of others, a bow-legged small man pushed a wooden cart pell-mell through the crowd. Stopping until it passed, they watched the pusher’s powerful legs spinning around fast as the wheels of a slot machine.

“We might not be welcomed up there. I only half Chinese, and you are none at all,” Michael was saying amid the street noise.

They turned on to Nanjing Road, once, long ago, the street of notorious nightclubs like Delmonte’s and Farren’s, opium dens, gambling casinos, and fastidious bordellos. It was still the city’s best shopping area, alive now as a burning beehive.

Michael Ming was awed. Beirut. Tangiers. Africa. California. He knew a good many things about Culhane, hearing them often enough from his father and auntie. Especially from his auntie, who told him of how his grandfather had regarded this American to be a *shu-shan*, a talent worthy of training, and had done so two decades earlier. At heart, they had remarked, he is Chinese though he looks like a westerner.

Now, here in Shanghai, they would call him *laowei* (an ignorant foreigner) but, of course, that would be idiotic.

Walking alongside him, was that man who seemed interested in so odd and petty a business as the dealings of Shanghai’s night-hawkers.

“Have you a girlfriend?” asked Culhane.

“A good friend. Teng-li-Fwen. She a student in radio astronomy at Fudan University. Highest honors,” added Michael, nobly, “and her father a foreman at Seagull Textile Factory.”

They neared a restaurant, the Yangzhou, known for its grilled wild duck, which Culhane wanted to try.

“An astronomer, eh? C’mon, let’s go in here and split a beer. I’d like to hear about your Teng-li. Bring her to dinner tonight.”

They passed through the door into a din of frenetic talk and smells that were sweet, sour, fragrant, and acrid. They sat at a long table that seated twenty or so, and the onlookers, mostly Chinese, gazed with open curiosity at Culhane. He was the only westerner there, and, strangely enough, accompanied by a younger man, appearing to be a mongrelized half-Chinese.

*Intruders!*

A queer notion overtook Michael Ming. He felt some deep force drawing him to this American; perhaps, he thought, because of the high-esteem expressed by his father and his auntie Jia.



A closing round of negotiations.

Culhane had given the Beijing officials the floor on the day before, listening for what wasn’t said, trying to find where the ballast of the deal could be shifted or couldn’t. Their disdainful words were as grating as hobnails, and he spent much of the time trying to parse their sentiments: willing to deal, to commit, or had it been a waste of everyone’s time?

Meek and studious, Richard Ming sat at the head of the table, more or less silent, no smiles this time.

“No,” Culhane was saying to one of the trade reps, “no matter what you think, no matter what you say when you’re alone and among yourselves, you will be relying on America for a long time to come. Not just our markets, which are admittedly in, disarray, but we can get you the materials you need to manufacture with. You’re great farmers, you’re great producers. But you’re vulnerable. You’re short on the strategics you need to make product. We can help each other...in days to come, I won’t say how many, you’ll see an upheaval in oil supplies. For a time, there won’t be a supply, or much

of one. We'll have an excess and we'll sell it to you for Blue Dollars, which I explained to you yesterday. Dollars that will be backed by gold, silver and other precious metals. I'm supposing that you're supposing you'd better mend fences with the Russians. You'll regret it...and finally, I have meetings to attend in other parts of the world. You will know about them, eventually, because Shang-Magan will know. I will have the Shang-Magan guarantee all I've told you, all I've promised you. Their *chop* speaks for itself, as you know as well as do I. Let's get it done..."

"And if we want other things?" said Xiang Xiao, the gaunt one, whose lopsided jaw must have been kicked too hard once.

"You can have milk cows if you want them," said Culhane. "There are sixteen hundred items we can supply you with. Take your choice up to two- hundred fifty- billion Blue Dollars' worth, annually. If we don't have it on hand, I'll find ways to get it for you."

"You are asking us to save you," argued Xiao. "You are not saving us."

Stay on track, Culhane told himself. *This bastard just wants his ass kissed.*

"You've over a billion people here. Over a billion brains with their two billion hands and legs. All of North America, Europe and Russia taken together don't have as many. You have a resource in your countrymen that is immeasurable. But they need work, they need food at times, and food'll be scarce this year. Next year, too and the one afterwards. Russia hasn't nearly enough food. Russia will be forced to sell oil for wheat. Since we control most of the wheat, we can dictate the price both ways."

Xiao remonstrated, "You haven't that much oil."

"I will by then. That's not something you want to gamble on, good friend, believe me you don't."

"And if we need food ourselves?"

"My final offer...Canada and the U.S. will guarantee you all the wheat you want for up to five years. It's go-time, it's agree-time. What've you to lose except for all the progress you made this past

thirty years...I assure you trouble is coming. Prepare...that's what this is all about. All you must do is relay your decisions to Richard Ming and I'll handle the rest."

One of Xiang Xiao's colleagues, whose name Culhane never got straight, intervened: "What you propose seems like a trick."

"It isn't."

"How can we tell, what proof?"

"There isn't any. If you delay, even a month, it'll be too late. Things move fast. Look at Shanghai. Thirty years ago this was a broken down port. A gun port. I'm not talking about thirty years, my friend. Thirty days, maybe sixty. Remember, I'm here to help. My real beginnings were in China, it's where I started and I don't forget my friends..."

"You are here for the United States."

"I am...I am here for you, just as much. I come as a trader, not a patriot, not an ambassador, not as anything but to deal fairly and mutually."

His words hung in the air, unopposed; words of a strong plea or perhaps a fragile prayer. Arising, he pulled his papers together, nodded to the Beijing team, and then to Richard Ming.

And he was gone, a flutter of nervousness in his gut by the time he reached the street. Still, he had given them more than what he thought they expected of him. The chips would fall the way they always fall, with uncertainty.

A short distance from the Jinjiang Hotel, the U.S. Consulate looked forlorn and lonely in its stone building. Nearing twilight now, and Culhane bounded up the steps, unsure of what to expect for Muir Tomlinson in Australia. He was asking plenty of the Australian, who had surreptitiously fronted the deal they had discussed, doing it in behalf of the U.S. government.

Showing his State Department passport and a letter of accommodation signed by Halburton, he was immediately led into the consul general's office: a fresh-faced man, eager for something to do,

greeting Culhane like an under-tipped doorman, who had just found his mark.

A brief shake of hands, as Culhane asked, "I need a secure line to Sydney, Australia."

"You'll have to patch through our embassy in Beijing."

"Any way you can do it is fine," said Culhane anxiously.

The consular official picked up his phone, issued orders, hung up and escorted Culhane to a soundproof room down the hall.

Eleven minutes later, he was in dialogue with the courtly Australian. "Now then, Rush, here's what's in the wind, mate...American grain'll be shipped to Murmansk; the Russian crude oil is to be loaded on U.S. tankers at Abadan, that's a port at the top of the Persian Gulf, north of the Straits of Hormuz."

"It's all set, then?"

"In tinsel and ribbons."

"You're a prince, Muir."

"Always ready to oblige, laddie. Good hunting. I'm on tenterhooks, I must say."

"Me, too. We'll be talking, Muir. Many thanks to you."

Good, he thought. Taking the bait, the Russians won the taller end of that trade, but they'd also been danced into a trap. He was going to jam it straight down their gullet.

It all bore a resemblance, he supposed, to the choreography of an intricate ballet. Every step was part and parcel of the next step. He had locked up deals with Canada and Mexico. He had locked up nothing, as yet, in China, hoping only to allay their fears when the world went into flux. Tomlinson had swung his deals, and now the dance could continue in Europe, and, then, possibly, the pull of a mighty trigger at Hormuz.

Likely, when the smash-up showed itself, he'd have to go into hiding. Why not here in Shanghai?

He spent the next call briefing a sleepy, apprehensive Halburton, then put in a third one to Andrea.

"Where are you?" she asked, her voice dusky. He'd awakened her.

“The Far East.”

“Is it nice as they say?”

“Better. It’s fascinating. You’d love it, I’m quite sure of it.”

“Send me a magic carpet. I’ve been bounced at the paper.”

A pause. *Flickinger, you son of a bitch.*

“Just hang on. I’ll be back in a week or two. Fredy will take care of you.”

“The hell with Fredy. My career just got sewer-piped.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t do much from here.”

“Hurry home, Rushton, it’s cold. Very boring, too, I might add”

“Soon as I can.

“What a bitching mess!”

“We’ll fix it somehow, don’t worry. I’ll call you soon as I can. Probably from Europe. Oh, did you ever reach the younger Piegarr?”

“Oh, sorry, thanks for reminding me. You’re to call him at his bank. It’s in Zurich...Braunswieg...”

“Many thanks. Tell Fredy I’ll square everything when I get back.”

“Where’s my Dufy?”

“In my suitcase. I’ve got to go, I’ve a dinner date. Don’t get morose about the job business. Besides, you’re not cut out to spy, kiddo.”

Before he replaced the phone, he heard her faraway protest. God, she must feel spiked all the way through. Bring her to Europe? Not enough time for it. No air priority, either, knowing the idea instantly for its stupidity. Within two hours, he’d also know it for its implausibility.



A southerly wind floated warmer air into Shanghai’s seasonally fickle climate. An old bent woman, her hands so gnarled they looked arthritic, poled a sampan through the choppy Huangpu River waters. Night had broken out with a rash of glittery stars. The city’s lights radiated even stronger beams, and as they moved about the harbor, Culhane could see the mooring lights of ships and junks, flickering

like a computerized display board. Red, green, a thousand twinkling whites, and the black waters reflected the lights as if they were shafts of burning fire.

He sat crouched in the stern of the sampan. Next to him was Jia, and a few feet away and facing them sat Richard, with his legs extended. The old skin-creased woman poling the boat stood on a stern platform, working her long oar in soft sucking sounds as water slurped against the sampan's low sides.

"Like Typhoon Shelter Bay in Hong Kong," said Culhane.

"Better food here," said Richard.

"Over there, that little islet, Rushton," said Jia, pointing off to starboard, "is Shing-yun Dan. It's where Michael and I hid out."

No lights shone. Barely could he see the island's shoreline. "I'd like to have a look at it during the day sometime. Shing-yun means lucky, doesn't it?"

"Tomorrow perhaps," answered Jia, her fingers tapping nervously on the seat. "Yes, it means lucky. Actually, it was called Shing-yun Dan—for Lucky Island—but the British shortened it to Shing-Dan, and the name stuck."

The sampan slipped quietly into a cluster of others surrounding a kitchen boat. Pods and pods of the sampans, festooned with paper lanterns, extending for a hundred yards or more. As the breeze changed direction, the smell of cooking fish and chicken-filled dumplings wafted everywhere.

"You like it?" asked Jia. "We thought it would be fun for you."

"It's enchanting." Culhane smiled back at Jia: she looked so China, a Lotus flower with skin like the blush on a yellow pear.

"I came here the first time with my father in 1948," said Richard Ming. "I can remember the year easily. Butter was seven-thousand Hong Kong dollars a pound. Apples were eight or nine-thousand for the same weight. He owned six kitchen boats, the only reason we ate regularly. "

Culhane thought briefly of America, the inflation and hunger there, and how history repeats its blows to the unwary. A lithe young

waiter hopped from the adjacent sampan to theirs. In Shanghainese, he recited a prodigious menu.

Jia ordered stuffed sesame cakes, beef dumplings, clams in fermented black bean sauce, cockles in shrimp sauce, drunken sea bream, oysters, and servings of eight-jeweled rice.

A raft bumped up against their sampan, and a bored, heavy-hipped, pan-faced woman offered drinks. A smaller boat sidled by with three musicians plinking notes on their two-string lyres. Shouts echoed from the next sampan, over the furious click of mah-jongg tiles.

It was China, alive and at play, old as Eden itself.

Richard had said nothing so far about the meetings with the men from Beijing, and Culhane knew he'd hear, if he ever heard, when and if Richard was ready to speak. Not before.

"Beer or tea?" asked Jia.

"Beer please," said Culhane. She poured for him and then tea for Richard, while the old woman left her pole at the stern, so she could place a table-board covered with oilcloth.

Slipping her hand into Culhane's, Jia stared for a long moment at Richard, who nodded almost covertly.

"There is something important you must know, Rushton...it's about Michael."

Slightly surprised, and wondering at Michael's whereabouts, he said. "Go ahead, what is it?"

"You are his natural father and I'm his mother," said Jia, directly and quickly, as if the words were too big to hold in her mouth.

Culhane's beer spilled on his trousers. Seeing the truthful look in Richard's face, he went numb. Not so! A sudden hammering in his head. An instant later—oh, yes, yes, God, I hope so! Let this be, with the shock of it frazzling him.

"I can guess at your surprise," said Jia calmly, watching him, "but there is more to it."

"I'd like to know it all." Giddy, a hundred sensations fighting for supremacy inside him—a son, mine? Utterly flummoxed now.

“When Father sent you to Africa,” she began, “I learned that a child was to come from us. Richard said I must tell Father. I did, and then he speeded the arrangements for our coming to Shanghai a month after the baby was born.”

“Why...why didn’t someone tell me, Jia?” asked Culhane, still weak.

“Father insisted on silence. But we tried anyway. No one knew exactly where you were. Even a call to Mr. Muldaur, and he said you were up in the Transvaal somewhere, headed for Rhodesia.”

“I made the call,” confirmed Richard.

“Why didn’t you wait for me to return to Hong Kong?”

“Because Father said you would fight for me there. Lay claim. And he wanted us back here to do the work he wanted done for China.”

“God, he must have hated me,” said Culhane, trying to regain himself, confused yet happy.

“No, he loved you, Rushton. You were his second son.” Jia tightened her hands around his.

“Tell me, why does Michael think you’re his aunt and that you, Richard, are his father?”

“An unmarried woman with a half-Chinese child would’ve had a hard time of it in those days. Michael might even have been taken from me. So Richard agreed to claim Michael as his son by a white woman from London who’d been living in Hong Kong. We had to lie. It was the only way. We were watched very closely after we moved from Hong Kong.”

“The only sensible course,” Richard agreed, “and better for everyone. Besides, in those days you’d not have been allowed into China, Rushton. That is why you weren’t told.”

Culhane could see the sense of it. Still, the revelation stunned—a son he hadn’t known about for over twenty years. Not the first time in history that had happened, he knew, yet it upped one’s blood pressure all the same.

“Does Michael know, even guess?”

“No, he has no reason to know,” answered Richard, “and the three of us have an excellent relationship. He is my son in the way you were my father’s son. But he does believe I am his true father.”

So Chinese, thought Culhane. Bred for loyalty, the family always coming first.

“And he should never know unless...” said Jia.

“Unless what?”

“Unless you decide to come live with us in China,” said Richard.

“Here in Shanghai?”

“Yes, here,” returned Jia innocently, her face empty of guile, and precariously angelic now.

“Well, I, uh...I don’t know...I’d have to—”

“You would need time, I know. But we can be a true family.”

“Even so, we must do nothing to upset Michael,” insisted Jia. “I refuse to disillusion him. You can surely understand why.”

“I respect that,” replied Culhane, aware of his own beginnings, the trauma of not knowing who he really was and where he belonged. “I’ll not say anything till you tell me he’s ready to know. I’m amazed and thanks for letting me know. As to living here, I’m not sure I’d be welcomed. I don’t know if I was believed by your Beijing colleagues, Richard. I’m the interloper in their eyes, I suspect, with an incomplete message.”

“You were more persuasive than you might think. A little tough, too, I might say.”

“Stubborn boys, you have.”

“Believe me, though, it’s not every day when a round-eye, friend or foe, arrives with two-hundred and fifty-billion dollars of trade to discuss.” Culhane laughed, but it was of young Michael Ming that he was thinking. “What you are offering,” Richard went on, “may turn out to be very valuable. They were not reassured, however, that the conditions will be as you say. Tumult, so much breakage in the markets.” Richard Ming hung back for a moment, lifting his teacup, sipping, then remarking, “It depends on whether they think the U.S. can finance its end. A proposition like that, well...never before in our

history. China would lose great face if we agreed and it all sank on us.”

“Yes, and so would America.”

“Can you?”

“All I can say is it’s in the works. The U. S. is walking a desperate abyss and has no choice at the moment. Whatever way it goes in Beijing, you were an immense help. Getting me this far.”

“I am slowly going blind. Maybe a year from now, say the doctors.” Culhane had guessed as much, seeing the thick pink glasses Richard wore. “And so my involvement may come to an end.”

“From your days in prison?”

Richard nodded, then corrected, “years in prison.”

“The bastards. Would your government really want me hanging around in China?”

“You are better known in China than you think. They remember the expedition you financed up on the Ancient Silk Road, and when you helped us with grain on credit...like you, they don’t forget either.”

Culhane guzzled more beer, thinking hard about Michael Ming and his pretty Teng-li, with whom he’d dined at the hotel two nights earlier. What of their future? My future? And China’s future? Isn’t that what I told the bargainers from Beijing today?

Whatever would Andrea say, if she’d been sitting at his side during the talks with the men from Beijing? If she ever sang that story in an article, she’d torpedo everything.



On the next afternoon Culhane and Jia strolled on the uninhabited islet of Shing-yun Dan, unaware that this would be his last full day in Shanghai. She’d taken him to the small island at his request, so that he could see where she and Michael had once lived, hidden, or mostly so, from those bent on stamping out the revered families of China’s

past. Families that had once ruled the Kingdom, and who had in large measure accounted for its illustrious civilization.

She was Ming, a Ming many generations removed from the Buddhist monk—Zhu Yuanzhang—who overthrew centuries of Mongolian rule, restoring China to its own heritage, when founding the Ming Dynasty.

1368-1644: an era of relative peace, a time of art, culture-enhancement, scholarship. China in full flower. She was Ming, through and through, but to the Communist-veneered government she embodied what they hated: nobility.

Jia pointed out the past as they strolled along. “Over there, see, it’s hard to walk there, but you can see some of the villas. The big one there was the residence of the Shan Chu (Chief of Hill) of the British East India Company.”

The porticos sagged, shutters had fallen to the ground, weeds grew waist high. But the masonry work appeared sound. They ambled down a cracked walkway that bordered a long winding hedgerow. Below, the water rolled up against a wall of heavy rocks and cement slabs. A fine spray swiped off the rocks, some of it catching on Jia’s coat until Culhane moved her away.

There she was, grandly, across the waters—Shanghai!

Culhane thought of Marco Polo, yet this great city had been no more than a fishing hamlet during the Italian adventurer’s sortie into China. Some little phantom, like a dream trying to break loose from a cocoon, knocked at the doors of his imagination. What it must’ve been like centuries ago, some fishermen, some bamboo and mud-brick huts, a few junks and sampans and now a towering, glitzy city humming with life.

“There’s the old French Catholic church, what’s left of it,” Jia explained. “Big arguments with the British over what kind of religion to have here.” She looped an arm under his as they turned at the top of the islet. “That’s where we hid, Michael and I.” She pointed with her free hand toward a stone cottage with a large door painted green,

scabby from neglect. The smallish building was set into a copse of tall poplars and barren cherry trees.

They found a weathered wooden bench, facing out to the much larger Chongming Island, and Culhane told Jia, "I'm honestly pleased you told me about Michael. It means everything to know I've a son left."

"Our son."

"And that you are his mother. You and Richard have done a wonderful job with him."

"He is our pleasure, always will be, and now yours."

"Culhane changed the subject, asking, "How long has Richard got, Jia?"

"It's in Heaven's hands. A few years with luck, if he doesn't kill himself with work first." Tears smeared her eyes. Culhane threw an arm across her shoulders. "It's why he needs you," snuffled Jia, "one reason, anyway."

"I need to really think about all this."

"A woman?"

"Yes and no-yes. Other matters too."

"America, you wish to stay there, of course?"

"I have nothing for or against America. It's a place. I was born in one of her states, so that makes me her citizen...not her puppet."

"Still, they must think much of you to send you on such an immense mission."

Culhane smiled. "Frankly, I was strong-armed."

Jia made no answer. Culhane sat silently, scanning the distance, looking out at the Pudong, a couple of miles away. Pudong, not so many years earlier, had been an area of peasant shacks and rice paddies. Now, reclaimed, it boasted one of the world's leading financial centers; skyscraper-rich, it could claim some of Asia's tallest, most superbly designed, shining buildings. He had walked there for a time yesterday, feeling the thrum of its action in his veins.

His attention was drawn to two gulls cavorting aimlessly over the sluggish brown waters. And he thought, *that is how I want to be: free,*

*unchained, able to do what I damn please. Yet always there seems some mystical tug of events that lassos my Christ-forsaken life.*

Jia nestled inside his arm, as she'd once nestled in his bed; that wondrous craving bed of youth.

"I'll think hard about coming here," said Culhane, breaking the quiet. "I can't make any promises yet. Much would depend upon your government. Can you do something for me?"

"Yes, if I can. Of course."

And Culhane gave her the first of his requests.

Jia gasped, disbelieving her ears. "You mean that?" she asked. "Just a preliminary inquiry. No more," cautioned Culhane. "You know how it's done, the way to go about it."

A higher blush came at the compliment. Intrigued, Jia added, "It would take some finagling...my father was right about you."

"How so?"

"You somehow see two worlds at the same time."

"He could. Not me, but I do wish it were so."

"You're more alike than you might think. Richard says the same."

"I'm a wheel-greaser."

"You are a comprador. *My* comprador."

Jia put a hand to his face as both his arms encircled her slender body. No affectionate embrace of old friends, not this time. They went well into each other's mouths, deeply enough so the flame of guilt seared at Culhane.

Later, he realized that as surely as the moon moves the tides, Shanghai, and what it promised, had impressed him and drawn him into its field of gravity.



Dusk spread its gray gauze over the Bund's skyline as the sampan dropped them at a pier near the old Broadway Mansions. For those few secluded hours, he'd evicted Jia from the traditional shell of reserve of a Chinese woman.

She had told him many things, interesting and subtle ones, and of her hopes and dreams spun in her head. Paris, Hong Kong, London, none of those illusory places held the slightest charm for her anymore. She was Shanghai. China to the last stitch of the soles on her slippered feet, and filled with a native cunning, both Chinese and feminine.

Up the stairs they went into the Mansions, her hand in Culhane's and Jia not caring who saw it. Coming through the apartment door, they heard Richard groaning. A few hurried strides later, saw him with his back against a wall, lifting weights, outfitted in a crimson cotton sweat suit.

Slowly, evenly, he lowered the dumbbells to the floor, took a lungful of breath, and said, "A call for you, Jia, from the university." A ring of perspiration gathered around his mouth as he told Culhane, "The president asks that you fly to Beijing tomorrow on the first plane. They will sign a preliminary accord for what you want from China but with one proviso."

"Which is?"

"They want assurances America can finance her side of the trade."

Culhane knuckled his lower lip, calculating rapidly. "We'll do it in ninety, maybe sixty days."

"You are sure?" warned Richard.

"I can't be positive. But it's what I'd bet on. I wish I could tell you more but I cannot. Not now. One thing I can suggest is to buy all the gold you can and all the dollars, too."

"Those Blue Dollars you referred to?"

"Nope. The regular green kind."

"I see. There is another message for you, Rushton, over there. Michael has left on a field trip to Nanchang to observe shapes of something or other...I trust they aren't women," Richard Ming finished wryly.

Going to the table, Culhane picked up Michael's message. The thought of leaving Shanghai gored at him. Not seeing Michael to say

## COMPRADOR

good-bye sank his heart too. Culhane gripped himself: no sooner had he found his other family again than he was forced to abandon it.

Alone again. As alone as he had felt when he had run away to sea—a feeling that sliced at his guts, as always.

## Amsterdam

A starless gentian sky.

Culhane turned to the window, peering into the murk. Three more blocks to go, he judged, as the green Mercedes crossed Keizersgracht, one of the three main water arteries that coursed through Amsterdam. Trying to remember now, and deciding three years or so had passed since last he'd visited the giant in his lair.

Having traversed a third of the world, within the past day, he suffered not the slightest jet lag. Probably, he supposed, his adrenaline was still irrigating his system after a minister in Beijing had conditionally inked a preliminary Memorandum of Accord. Nonetheless, the hanging question was how to stabilize the U.S. dollar. The answer was at hand, at least temporarily, if Van Slyke and the Shang-Magan would agree to a blocking action against the Russians and their mid-eastern minions.

Without the Magan in America's corner, the chances for success thinned considerably, and the pending deal with China would sink out of sight.

The U.S. could not issue the Blue Dollar to pay its foreign debts, or to import foreign products, unless and until the regular dollar, along with gold, was forced upwards in value. Money never sleeps, neither do the commodity markets. Fiat currency was a leper. It was paper money drummed up by politicians, then inflated and made valueless when the politicians ran from the mountains of debts they had

foisted upon its citizens unable to pay them. Paper money, no matter who stood behind it, was always a hazard to its holders.

Always a crap-shoot, with time itself the hangman.

Who believed in the U.S.'s promises anymore? A giant banana republic, not much more, drowning under trillions of defaulted debt.

Now, foreseeably, he was his own lodestar. No one else could he rely on, the simple reason being that no one had charted these waters before, not those he was sailing in. Persuading Van Slyke into the play, the greatest series of trades ever conjured, and denominated one way or the other in dollars, would be an uphill climb.

Van Slyke would know from Tomlinson about the meeting with the government in China, but would not be privy to the details. Even Halburton was unaware at this point. Van Slyke wouldn't ask, not at first, but he'd have to be told, or the gambit had no chance.

The Mercedes rounded Kalverstrat, a lovely and now winter-misted avenue ending at the Dam, where the royal palace kept its stately watch over the city. The limousine sported enviable luxury: buffed suede seats, a six-band shortwave radio, a television over the walnut bar, two phones. Outside, on the driver's door, was an intaglio of a solid gold cricket circled by a wreath.

The driver turned left and smoothly rode to a stop before the four-story, gabled, red-tiled town house. And there to greet them, his cave of a mouth making a smiling dark hole in the great wash of beard, was the gargantuan Joost Van Slyke. Wearing cavalier's black boots up to his knees, dove-gray pants, a brocaded green frock coat over a yellow ruffled shirt, he was operatic. A man for an earlier century, a man who defied convention.

Culhane got out, hearing the booming voice scythe through the air, "You damn stranger, come here so Van Slyke can put you in his hand." Two steps at a time, as if hopping on burning coals, the Dutchman bounded to the cobbled street. A polar bear couldn't have seemed larger.

"Hello, big boy," replied Culhane.

“Come, we go up. I’m glad you called when you did. We almost missed. I’m to meet in Zanzibar soon with the others and I was to depart today.” Van Slyke threw an arm around Culhane and literally lifted him up the next steps. Two housemen wearing black coats trimmed in orange piping made way for them.

“We could’ve met in Cairo. That’s right on the way to Tanganyika.”

“Bah! How can a man talk there in Egypt? It takes four hours to move two blocks, and twice as long to get someone on the phone.”

They entered the front hallway, which looked up to a staircase sided with gleaming brass railings. Van Slyke led him across a double-thick Tashkent rug of cerulean blue embroidered with silver and rose designs. Then into a room Culhane had always liked, where the walls were planked and grooved with forty rare woods from as many different countries. Outsized furniture of Javanese mahogany crowded the floor, and up above a skylight of stained glass depicted scenes of the seven continents.

Everything here was as elegantly and differently fashioned as its owner.

Van Slyke stood in front of a roaring fireplace, the flames casting an oranges-red light against facing onyx lions supporting the mantelpiece. “So,” he opened, “you’ve been busy, I hear.” He talked in German, knowing that Culhane’s Dutch was limited.

Culhane thought, Look at him, I’m damned if he doesn’t look a Viking against that fire. And he said, “You’re going to need an extra ear for what I have to tell you.”

“At the meal we talk business...now, will you have some good Dutch Genever or do you prefer that goat’s piss from Scotland?”

“The goat sounds fine to me, Joost.”

Stretching an arm the length of a short bullwhip, Van Slyke pulled on a wall cord. Seconds later a houseman arrived, took the drink order, bowed politely, and left.

“Before all else, I say how sad I am about your family. Tomlinson told me. It is a nasty sting, I’m sure.”

“Appreciate your sentiments, Joost.”

“China? A good trip? Tomlinson told me you were going. When Wu heard, he was furious. He assumed you would seek approval before trading in his Zone.”

“And there was a time when I’d’ve made it a first order of business. But I no longer comply with Shang Magan protocol.”

“Well, of course. Wu was duly reminded...” Van Slyke’s eyebrows arched.

“Joost, I come to ask a favor. And a great deal of cooperation.”

“This house is yours. Ask. You want to talk business now, or wait?”

“Now.”

The drinks came. Culhane’s was Glenlivet, the first he’d had since the time at Andrea’s apartment. He took a heavy pull, letting its burn run deep.

“This is going to get very political. I’m about to pound Russia. The Middle-east, too. They’ll be caught up in the dreck. Can’t be helped. I need you to stand with me, and to tell the others in the Magan to stay out of it. Stay out, yet buy all the dollars and gold you can handle. You’ll profit immensely, and that is my payment for giving me free rein in return.”

“Possibly, we shall see.”

“I’ll outline the play for you, but I’d like to know if you set me up with Halburton. I know he consulted with the Magan when he was on the U.S. trade delegation. Did he confer with you about the mess in America? Seek help?”

“You have reason to think so?”

“He let your name slip once in a conversation, and I could tell he wished he hadn’t. Another man, an American intelligence official assigned to help me, did the same. One and one added up to ten, and so I’d like to know if it was you who advised Halburton to stop payment on the gold the U.S. owes me?”

An earthquake of laughter made the walls shout back, as if they were sitting in a narrow canyon instead of here in Van Slyke’s

residence. Van Slyke's shoulders finally stilled. "Ach, I'm glad you are not my enemy. Sleep would come slowly."

"And?"

"Yes, I was the one. The others do not know, and still do not know."

"You owe me a big one, Joost."

"Why that look on your face?" asked Van Slyke.

"Great dismay, Joost. When the bust happened, I honored every uncovered Shang-Magan trade on the Board of Trade before it closed up. You all got out sweet clean while I held the wall for you. Then you rig it with Halburton so I'm forced to go to Washington to pry loose what's already owed me."

"Ours is no gentlemen's club where polite rules are observed in times of trouble."

"All the shit missed you and hit me, Joost. When I really needed help, you all vanished and then you set me up like I was your pigeon."

"Had I done nothing, you would not have gone to Washington. Who else was there?"

"You might've asked me, you know."

"Only to hear your refusal. We required you in Washington, not in California trying to hold a trading operation together in a country going to hell."

"I want my gold."

"It shall be yours. Finish your work, and you'll get what's coming to you. I put my *chop* on it."

"Good enough for me."

"I suspect you think that had you stayed in California, you might have protected your family...and that, indirectly, I'm to blame."

"I don't blame you."

"A lesser man would."

They chatted along for a time, imbibed in another drink, and for the first time in many months he felt the warmth of being with a man in whom he had fullest faith. Saxa too, but Saxa was far away. Van Slyke moved away from the fireplace. He threw a curious look at

Culhane, whom he regarded as the coolest mind in the business. Only then did he say: “My position as the elected Shan Chu, which thank God will end before death claims my bones, compels me to do all in my power, call on every resource, to protect the various trading zones. North America could be lost as a market. If matters are eventually righted, then you will be our next Shan Chu. I know Muldaur and Tomlinson will agree—”

“I’ve been kicked out—”

“In fact, you’re wrong. The vote was two for and two against. I never cast my vote, though I made it appear as if I had. I simply called you and said how the others voted and let you draw your own conclusion. You drew the wrong one, and, as I recall, you ended the call. No, now I remember, the call was broken up by weather interference. In any event, we did not finish...for me, something of blessing. I could be less devious.”

Culhane smiled. “It was like that?”

“Exactly so.”

“Do the others know?”

Van Slyke shook that enormous head, side to side, twice. “You will have to deal one day with Liu Wai. He is against you.”

A houseman appeared at the door, announcing, “Dinner is served, Myjn heer.”

Van Slyke stood. “My belly rules the moment. Let us see what dinner brings us.”

A starved family couldn’t have hoped to finish the amount of food served in Van Slyke’s home. A sideboard, running the length of the dining room, was loaded with ham, a glazed duckling, a tureen of farmer’s soup, wheels of cheese, four kinds of dark bread, three chafing dishes of vegetables, and an enormous baron of beef. All this for two people. A riot would have started in Washington just from the smell of it.

Van Slyke gnawed at a guinea fowl breast, washing it down with a tankard of Heineken’s ale, as he listened raptly to Culhane unroll his plan for forcing Russia to kneel down and to assist in restoring

America's credit in Europe. He told of the arrangements in North America with Canada and Mexico, and how China fit in and what he'd promised Beijing in the event of massive market upheaval. Upheaval that was dead sure to happen if the rest of the plan could be tacked down on all its four corners. A short, stony road, yet there was no choice now other than to make the journey.

"Otherwise," said Culhane, "You can write off North America for the next twenty years. It's one stop short of an all-out catastrophe."

The Dutchman posed an hour's worth of questions.

Talk went to the situation of Liu Wai. "Since we're trading bed-time stories, Joost, you ought to know, if you don't, that Liu is probably getting his narcotics financing through Switzerland. Everything concealed, of course."

"That makes what difference?"

"If you didn't know, then that means he's operating in your European Zone without permission."

"What else?"

"I've read a CIA dossier. It reveals that Wai is funding himself with American Mafia money harbored in Zurich. He's moving billions of product out of Asia, doing it on commission, with the bulk of the money getting cleaned and then hidden through a trust under the control of Braunsweig und Sohn. It's linked somehow to Rearden's New York Corporation, which means Wai was in my zone and operating behind my back. He never paid for those rights. That trust goes by the name of St. Gallen, and years ago it was a conduit for Russian payments to its informants. Those Swiss would dice up their mothers, if they could figure a way to sell them."

"Braunsweig, you say? That's Piegars' bank?"

"It seems so. The U.S. knows or the CIA knows and isn't saying because if they let that particular mouse roar, it'd ruin the New York Corporation. One of their fronts, or at least a company that's acted for them on occasion. Someday, more governments are going to get wind of all this, and Liu Wai, and there'll be trouble for you and all the

others. I include myself, too. And I do not intend to get dragged into it, Joost.”

“You can document it?”

“In a day or so I believe I can. I’ve got to fish it out of a safe deposit drawer in Paris.”

“I’d like a copy of your proof and then I’ll talk to him about it.”

“Isolating him is better. Throwing his ass out altogether is better yet.”

“How can you isolate a man who controls half the world’s exportable rice crop?”

“Joost, the bastard is the Snow White of all time.”

“Button up your hard-on. Lead goes into bullets, too. Are we supposed to shut down the lead mines?”

“I’m not saying that.”

Van Slyke put his elbows on the table, his arms looking like bent hitching posts. “We’re not the moralists of this world. We’re traders. If there’s a market, we supply it.”

“Not, by God, in a death-peddler’s trade.”

“I must think on it.”

“I’ll get a copy of a file for you. I hope you will think and think hard. Because if Liu Wai stays in the Magan, I’m out. All the way out.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Under the circumstances, yes?”

“A question for you?”

“Sure.”

“You are taking aim at the Russians. That means our man Metzilov. We’ve been discussing an accommodation with Moscow.”

“That’s a prelude to a requiem,” said Culhane, raising his glass halfheartedly. “Metzilov’s about to get his cojones cracked if we have our way. He might be good here and there for information, but not for anything big. Nothing that will last.” Culhane folded his napkin. Any more food and he’d have to be pumped out.

“If the United States wants to monopolize grain as a political tool, why does it need us?”

“We haven’t the necessary credit. Not for the present, we don’t. And it would be politically impossible to use gold for that purpose. We don’t even know how much we have in stock. Besides, you can execute the trades faster than I ever could and no one questions the Magan’s *chop*.”

“Who knows if it could be done at all?”

“I think I do, Joost. I’ve studied it for months now and—”

“I don’t suppose the U.S. could approach some of those countries directly anyway.”

“Not without showing its hand,” agreed Culhane.

“Exactly what is it you propose?”

“For Shang-Magan to option all the available grain, except ours, and do it for the account of the U.S. A two-year deal. Negotiate a fair premium for a ten-percent reduction on all future-options if the market falls by twenty-five points or more.”

“And how do we get repaid?”

“By buying up to fifty-billion in gold, using Eurodollars. Limit your purchase to fifty. You will clear the equivalent of six billion of profit in the new Blue Dollars within the year. Probably sooner than that...”

Another low rumbling roar spilled into the room. “You’re trifling with me,” said Van Slyke between gasps.

Culhane stared rigidly at his host, a look that soon sobered the Dutchman. “I don’t think you’ve ever known me to joke over a matter like this.” His eyes narrowed. “I’m going to spike Russia, Joost. They’ve been a fucking thorn and now it’s time to draw blood.”

“Who will believe you?”

“I don’t want anyone to believe me except you. I’ll need a lot of quiet on this.”

“Give me more to go on. Speak, and speak precisely, please.”

For several minutes he spilled details. Which commodities and the quantities, which markets, which countries—and the sequence of the

timing. He summed up by telling Van Slyke, "I'll front-load the market with a series of major false trades."

"That's patently illegal."

"Do I care? What's the meaning of laws made for different times and different conditions? I'll make it look as if the Russians are behind the trades. Let Moscow worry about it, when the yelling starts. They've done plenty to earn it."

"They'll have you killed."

"I lost my family, Joost. I'm already dead where it counts."

"You're talking pots of rubbish."

"Maybe. But I'm still sticking to my plan. About a hundred-billion of bogus trades ought to kick-start the landslide. I can hear that sonofabitch Metzilov right now."

"I'll agree with you it's quite intriguing. Only, though, if you have the precise and right timing. Yes, a stupendous concept and I congratulate you. First...first you'll need a cataclysm...perhaps even a catalyst. A war or something like it...Europe will pay a mighty price in the cost of its oil...mostly Russian oil... "

"It's worth that price and more. Europe needs waking up, too. Russia will have this continent by the short hairs before you know it. No Yankees can I bail you out this time...you want what I want. Safe, dependable, reliable markets. Everywhere...and everywhere..."

"You will have to tell me more, a great deal more."

"I cannot say much more."

"Can't say?" replied Van Slyke, color showing in his face.

"Not even to you, Joost."

"Why should I help then? You must trust me, you know you must."

"I do. That's why I'm here in Amsterdam. But trust works both ways."

"Hmmpf."

"I'd tell you but I can't without breaking my word to the U.S."

They conferred again, with the Dutchman getting up and down from his chair several times, even changing chairs, pacing, almost

fretting. At the finish, an obviously fascinated Van Slyke said, “How can America stand behind all this? Are you saying Halburton agrees?”

“He does.”

“Will he put it in writing?”

“No, he’d have to ask the Congress. That’s hopeless.”

“Then how can we depend on anything?”

“I’ll give you the best thing I’ve got—my word. I’ll put my nine tons of gold behind it and that’s all I’ve got. It’s not much, I know, but consider it as a good faith bond.”

Abruptly, Van Slyke’s eyes searched the ceiling as if he were looking for divine guidance. He stood and went to the sideboard. Using a silver dagger, with near invisible speed he cut a wedge of Gouda cheese the size of a man’s hand. Chewed, then, and chewed more while locked in thought. Tying up the world’s grain supplies had never before been attempted. Nor was he sure it could be done. And there were bound to be political storms of which the Shang-Magan wanted no part, whatsoever. His mind skipped from choice to choice, option to option, problem to problem, danger to danger. Eyes snapping, his beard moving side to side as his teeth bit and bit harder, the Gouda meeting its inevitable destiny.

Knowing one thing: if the North American markets couldn’t be righted, then everyone lost and he himself was no loser.

Culhane looked on, respecting the dead silence, mired in his own thoughts: if the Shan Chu agrees, we’ll be a long step ahead, rigging the markets until they squeal for mercy. A few weeks now and the die would be cast. He hoped irreversibly so. All it’ll take—time, luck, and execution at a scale never attempted before. Worldwide commotion would spread like a *tsunami*, with a force that would make a train wreck seem like an altar boys’ procession. Then, the tipping point and America, even though it didn’t deserve it, could begin to dig out from under.

And he waited, measuring the moment, his feelings jumbled but one of them was still diamond-clear: *remember, you were the one who*

*dealt me the dead hand. I've paid...paid big and paid hard...as I said you owe me...*

Suddenly, Van Slyke's beard seemed to jitter, as if he'd had an attack of palsy. He withdrew a bosun's pipe from the cuff of his jacket's sleeve. The tune he played had only a few notes, half an octave repeated twice.

In came Marit Toorenaar, Joost's assistant, a confidant and his ever-long mistress. Culhane had not seen her in two years or so, marveling how she never seemed to age. A dark-haired stunner wearing an ankle-length white gown suitable for the nuptial bed. Laced with silvery threads, the gown glittered faintly when she moved, even a very slight move.

Walking across the room directly to him, Marit kissed him on both cheeks, saying, "I am very happy to see you, Rushton." She leaned back, adding, "Your eyes, so extraordinary, and you look a little tired."

"And you look your usual gorgeous self."

Smiling, she turned to Van Slyke and said, "You called, Joost?"

"*Ja*, reach Augustino Camero. He'll be with the others sailing somewhere off Zanzibar. Have him meet me in Kenya on...what day is this...meet me on Friday. No, Saturday. Saturday, it shall be. The Samburu Reserve, we'll stay at the lodge. Book two suites. This is urgent, make sure he understands that and that he is to say nothing to the others."

"In the morning or call him tonight."

"Morning is soon enough."

"I shall attend to it." Then she asked Culhane, "Will you wish for a woman tonight? A Latt? Very pretty."

"Ah, no. Thanks but no. Just my pillow. Been a long day, Marit."

Nodding demurely, she left as she came, silently as a puff of air.

"Can you use my plane while you're in Europe? I'll need it back by Thursday."

"It'd be a Godsend."

“Then I bid you goodnight. S’wonderful to be with you again. Do not be too angry with me. I do what I must do, even at the risk of friendships. Sleep well. I’ll need a week or two and then we’ll see what we see.”

“Thanks for all and everything, Joost.”

“You’d better wait till you issue any thanks to me.”

“You’ll not forget the gold.”

“Where you’re concerned, I never forget anything.”

“One other favor.”

“Say it.”

“I need access to the Inspectorate. Will you fix it so Ka will provide what I need?”

“A story?”

“Yes.”

“Confined solely to what we’ve discussed?”

“Precisely that. Nothing more.”

“You’re aware the Russians and Brazil are peddling damaging information against the U.S.”

“I’m aware.”

And you wish to counter it?”

“*Au contraire*, Joost. I wish to abet it.”

Van Slyke shook as he filled the room with another roar of laughter. “I will call Ka in the morning. You will have your clearance.”

“Many thanks.”

“Big dice you’re throwing around.”

“Big stakes, too. The biggest.”

“I can see it is so, but still you got the big balls, my good friend.”

“I hope they’re big enough. This’ll be a hard mile.”

“Call when you need us.”

Van Slyke left now, not so silently, the four-hundred year old floor creaking under his long-striding bulk. Sleep begged at Culhane but he sat there for a time, taking another drink, looking at the fire’s embers ebb, thinking of Hormuz. Wishing for a ringside seat to see

what it would be like, if Halburton ever pressed the go-ahead button. Wishing also Hormuz would never be a necessary act.

All this wishing because he was alone, trying not to think of something else: that today was his birthday yet with absolutely nothing to celebrate, he tried ignoring it but couldn't. A strange life, he thought; then, deciding he knew no other, nor would he choose any other.

Six hours later, dawn sent its wake-up call. Blinking, he saw a bar of light flooding through an octagonal stained-glass window, the prism of shifting colors reminding him of a kaleidoscope. He rubbed his eyes, thought for a while, and wondered how and where to find Joost's private jet. A generous offer from a very generous man, and he planned to take him up on it. A real break, time-wise.

Van Slyke and Halburton had sandbagged him. Who to trust? Andrea, that lovely creature and part-time spy? Sant? Yes, always Sant. And Paris, what of Paris? What of anything, he thought, feeling down and disheartened.

## Paris

He rode by taxi from Le Bourget into the city, and presented the bearer key and his passport to the manager of the Credit Lyonnais's branch at Place Vendome. After signing an access-log, uncomfortable at leaving even the slightest trail, he was taken two levels below the street to a vault of safe-deposit boxes. Keying one lock, he watched as a guard did the same to a second lock, and was stunned at the quantity of files in the oversized metal drawer.

Offered a private room, he accepted, finding it complete with a computer, a phone, a copying machine.

He pocketed the bearer key he had purloined from the file-folder Flickinger had passed to him in Washington. Was someone missing the key yet? Had they wanted him to have it for reasons known only to themselves?

Two hours later, after paging through piles of incriminating matter, he had a possible answer. Affidavits, photo-copies of highly confidential documents, references to Rearden's New York Corporation and its ties to a New York crime family, twenty or so pages about Hans-Otto Pieggar, his mistress, and a separate file on Joshua Squires. It was as if they were all blood-related. Three photos, somewhat grainy, of Tim Rearden in bed with a youngish, pencil-thin black boy. The New York Corporation owned eighteen-percent of Braunsweig und Sohn. He'd be looking into that connection in a day or so. And more detail about the activities of the St. Gallen Trust; indeed, considerable detail about New York's topmost crime family—the Doneys—and their connections to Rearden's New York Corporation.

A spreadsheet indicated that Joshua Squires held a seven-percent interest in New York Corporation via a Lichtenstein dummy company. A notation verified that this information had been withheld from the United States Senate at the time of Squires's confirmation hearings—therefore perjury, therefore a felony. Also, Squires's Lichtenstein company showed a holding of four-percent in Braunsweig und Sohn.

A page later, more on Squires. He was chummy with Rearden and a powerful clique of Wall Street hustlers who had been backers of Halburton's predecessor. Heavy campaign donors, wanting a friend at court, they had eventually finagled Squires's job at Treasury.

Next page showed an inventory-like listing of video and audio tapes in the safe-deposit drawer. The tapes, apparently, replicated intercepted cell phone conversations. God knows what they'd reveal, things, perhaps, too dangerous to know or to repeat. He hadn't the time to listen to them, or a device for doing it either.

Locking the room, he returned to the lobby and stepped outside for fresh air. Looking across the Place Vendome, temptation struck as he debated to head over to the Ritz. Last time he'd been there was with Karin, staying a month or so while she had been here on location for one of her last films.

Instead, he walked and thought, treating himself to one of Van Slyke's most excellent cigars.

An hour later, back at the bank, he perused more of the files, copying and copying again and again. His respect for the Brits and CIA's capacities notched upwards: how had they ever found out so much? Likely, from insiders; the sources, if they appeared at all, were tagged with codenames. Failing to turn this information over to the authorities was tantamount to an obstruction of justice. Yet what if they had already turned it over and the Justice Department had decided it was too hot to cope with.

On the other hand, the CIA was near the pinnacle of government authority, or, at minimum, a principal adviser to the high-ups. Were they after bigger fish? Were these only the minnows?

He began thinking so when he came across a yellow flimsy tucked away behind a cardboard divider. The yellow onion-skin sheet had faded, but, when holding it up to the lamplight, he made out four signatures, presumably acting field officers who had overseen aspects of the European side of a money-laundering investigation. Not surprisingly Flickinger was listed; so also was Crispin Cowperthwaite, the second-secretary at the British embassy in Washington, whom Flickinger had introduced on a day they had visited there, the Queen's birthday celebration.

His hunch, at the time, had been right; Cowperthwaite was of that dark-knight brotherhood.

Two other signatures belonged to a Frenchman and a Swiss, neither of any significance to Culhane; still, he made a mental note of their names.

Thinking, too, that maybe they're hoping I'll destroy this mess. As he considered that possibility, a flash of optimism accosted him: *I'm almost there...it's all coming together...* realizing the weight and value of the trove he'd found, compliments of Flickinger, who had earned his pay and then some.

Was it a ploy, he asked himself again? Wanting to draw him into their nefarious game, make of him the usual scapegoat if things went off the cliff?

A setup had lured him to Washington, was this yet another ploy?

## Monte Carlo

1849.

In August of that year, the Shang Magan's Council of Six voted to establish the Inspectorate; this, to gather economic data, such as it was at the time, and if it could be found at all, from its various trading zones. For a while, the Inspectorate limped along, trying to find its legs. Useful data, difficult to come by, moved by sea mail to Monte Carlo, often so slowly as to be of little value. In that era, the Shan Chu was Callis McAlester, a Scot with heavy holdings throughout Europe and Canada. No North American trading zone existed for the Magans at the time. That would come later with the discovery of great quantities of gold, silver, copper, iron ores—in what seemed as inexhaustible veins. Added to which, the nation, pushing its Manifest Destiny to its limits, had settled the rich lands of the Great Plains with an ever-enlarging capacity to grow and harvest the world's largest grain crops.

Still, the movement of timely, worthwhile information awaited Marconi's wireless telegraphy, and, later, the system of trans-ocean cables. It was then that the Inspectorate really came to life. With excellent codes, and adept communicators, exchanges of valuable market-affecting information speeded up by leaps.

Now the trick was not speed but the integrity of the information itself—how to obtain it, accurately and sufficiently?

A retired British secret service officer was brought in to advise; to re-light the stage, he told the Council: "Do it the way we all do it. Spot the people who know what's what, and then buy them, from the socks up..."

Every Magan was thus charged with finding sources with their own Zones. Farmers and government agro-agents who would know about crops; mining superintendents with first-hand knowledge of production rates for gold, silver, copper, other ores, and other strategic metals and materials in the form of cobalt, titanium, palladium, platinum. Also, the harvest numbers for coffee, cocoa, teas. On and on—whatever humans consumed. As populations expanded, demand for more materials of every sort soon followed, and the Magans information-feed, and the ability to sift it, was without peer. In the 1950s, the payroll for their world-net of informants exceeded \$25-million annually, that, in the days of solid dollars. The amounts grew every year; the cost, however, was a pittance compared to what the data produced in the way of trading trends that could be exploited for great, and sometimes huge, gain. Why not? The Magans had devised the scheme and they stood the risks.

Then, a stage-two was added.

In the 1960s, the age of the computer had arrived *en masse*. Every brokerage house, every day trader, every bank, every black marketer, every speculator, big and not so big, had a blinking-light machine on their desks. Add in the turmoil of wars, of eco-shifts, of constant political upheaval in areas, like Africa, where so many minerals and metals were mined, brought unacceptable uncertainty in many critical markets.

The Magan's first mission to be sure—and in its own interest—was to keep order in the markets in ways no governments could or should; nor could industries and private trade groups without running afoul of the law.

Now, another game; a very serious, very precise and delicate game of annihilating speculators and kibitzers who, artificially rigging markets and driving up prices, did nothing else for anyone except themselves.

Quelling the speculative bubbles was a task calling for other talents.

Calling, perhaps, for crystal-ball skills, for someone who was morally void, with a criminal bent of the mind. The born deceiver, the con artist.

By chance alone, Baster Muldaur had happened into the find of all finds. His Parisian lady friend visited weekly with a much favored psychic, an Icelander by name of Ka Bernardsdottir; her father, oddly enough, a Keflavik farmer and a professor of higher math at Reykjavik University. He had raised a daughter who—wart-faced, stout as a barrel, mop-haired and bespectacled—drew sympathetic glances from bystanders. Looks deceive and hers belied native gifts that seemed without boundaries.

On one occasion, visiting Paris, Muldaur had been persuaded by his lady friend to undergo a session with Ka, and had come away in an amazement-induced trance. Known among many as a man who could see over the most opaque horizons, and who seemed among the first to leave his footprints in the future...but, this Ka, this very odd Ka-woman had unraveled him inside minutes. Hazzarding what he was up to, largely describing to him his own secretive plans, none of which he intended to activate for at least a year, she had taken fewer than ten queries to unmask the intentions of Africa's *numero uno* mogul.

How she knew what she knew, she never said. After all, who gives up trade secrets? She didn't know it all, of course, but she knew too much for Baster Muldaur's liking.

He had Ka to dinner, followed by lunch the next day, bombarding her with questions; then, two days later at a breakfast of croissants and filter-café, in Montmartre, where she occupied a small apartment with an artist friend, he had offered her one-million in pounds sterling annually, with bonuses linked to performance. Her job: to co-head the Inspectorate.

The human Grail had been sought and lassoed.

In the course of her fruitful years at the Inspectorate, she had won over the Council members completely; her staff, too, numbering twelve when at full strength, idolized her. As her Bibles, she chose a

stack of military treatises used by Britain's Sandhurst instructors on the many fine arts of military deception, starting with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, and yet more writings of the same arts as later perfected by the Brit's vaunted London Control Section in War II, and whose guiding maxim was always: "It is not what you want your foe to think, but, instead, how you want them to *act*."

The extraordinary dimensions of her imagination soon became apparent to all, especially in her employment of her rumor-spawning nets she had built throughout the Middle-East, where the mongering of fakery was as sacred a rite as three prayers daily while facing Jeddah.

Ka referred to her nets as "my Babel".

Confuse, mystify, mislead. Stir half-truths into the real truth, add in a measure or two of no truths.

Until no one knew what to believe. Uncertainty, the mother of fear itself, was sown by Ka and her minions with sublime abandon.

She'd go about her business by contriving a plausible *control story*, larding it with tantalizing possibilities, then calling upon her stable of tongues to begin the job of its circulation. A motley crew but wholly effective as touts: fortune-tellers, gazers, the odd holy man, fakirs, the *souk* hustlers of Beirut, the owners of gold shops of Teheran and Baghdad who could be counted upon to say anything to boost gold prices, and the bordello-keepers in Cairo, Tunis, Casablanca excelled as ideal funnels for passing odd bits and pieces. Ka had lists and yet other lists. Not a one of the "tongues" had even a remote idea of who was behind all the word-charades; nor did they know the identity of the paymaster who authored the "themes". How could anyone know much of anything? Spread what you were told to spread and it was cash on the barrel-head, always in local currencies, untraceable, and delivered in envelopes by mutes.

In the span of a few days, the rumors—both straight and twisted—were enough to have journalists sent to the streets to follow up on leads, always finding enough for at least one printable story worthy of

the wire services: Reuters and the AP being the most preferred of those carrier pigeons.

Knowing her craft cold, Ka believed that the key to foisting a masterful deception was to know the hard truth, good or bad, or as much of it as you could possibly find out.

As she had once opined to Culhane, “You’d best remember we always start with gossip, and gossip is akin to bad news. Both always travel faster and wider than good news. Do you ever remember any good news for long? When a Hollywood glamour-puss is making it with some Al-Qaida hot-shot, and *People* magazine runs it, the thing prints in your head and stays there. Try to un-forget it. Remember Princess Di and that Egyptian playboy? Dodi something or other...I forget the rest of his name. No one ever saw them shackled up in bed together, but so what? No one had to see them, right? We do the same, lay out the teasers and let everyone draw their inevitable conclusions, right or wrong.”

Her string of triumphs became the stuff of legend among the Magans. Along with her gifted staff, she had quelled numerous nefarious trading schemes, causing much teeth-gnashing among those unfortunate enough to have found themselves in the Shang-Magan’s crosshairs. While still in her twenties, all cylinders firing—this, in the late 1970s—she had tumbled the Hunts of Texas, who had attempted to corner the world’s silver markets, almost succeeding.

She had lured them into assuming one too many colossal bets, always leveraged to the hilt, a bet that had ended the folly. Camero had gotten the Peruvian silver mining companies to do a market dump, selling the following year’s production at bargain rates. The bubble was thus pierced: overnight silver plummeted, as Ka fanned the embers of her intrigues into galloping flames, sending an overblown market into a tailspin. The banks, holding great gobs of Hunt paper, called in the loans the family couldn’t repay. Next stop, the bankruptcy courts.

Having gotten the go-ahead yesterday from Joost Van Slyke, she awaited her boy now, ready to cook up another classic if that’s what

he had in mind. Van Slyke had sounded stimulated, even excited, raising her own appetite for what may come of it all.

She'd not had a mirage to sell all year.



Culhane had chosen a nondescript Renault two-seater to make his way to a subterranean garage, one-half of a block due west of the Inspectorate's quarters on Rue Bel Respiro. The quarters, as they were called, consisted of the garage, a maze of underground tunnels that led to a three-story brick affair, that, from its outside, appeared to be a little used building with a steel-gated front-door that no one, ever, seemed to enter. Over the door a faded blue sign, slightly askew, read: Import-Export. Passersby paid little or no attention to the building, exactly as intended.

Inside, a quite different situation existed. The appointments to the offices, if not lavish, were commendable. Easy chairs, mahogany desks, the latest in computers, T1 lines, and the best in communications gear. The wall art was European, up and coming artists, along with a few Oriental pieces, some quite valuable.

Otherwise, a nerve-center and workplace for dicing up and interpreting data, and for housing Ka's tricksters.

Parking the Renault, he made his way into the maze of tunnels, came to an elevator, punched a set of numbers into a keypad, stood aside, was then photographed by an overhead camera, waited for the door to release its locks, and then stepped into the elevator cabin.

Three minutes later, Ka was bear-hugging him with arms like rods of steel. "Oh, you are a sight, Rushton. Been an age, eh? Step to the light so Ka can get have the full look of you...how sorry I still am about your Karin and the childies..."

"Thank you for your note."

"Ah, you got it then?"

He nodded. "Much appreciated. Very much."

"Like a coffee, would you?"

“You go ahead, I’ve had mine.”

“Let’s go to the quiet-room and have our talk. Jesus, it’s joy itself to see you again.”

“And you too, Ka.”

“Joost says you’re making the eye of a new hurricane. I’m peeing with excitement, I truly am.”

They reached the quiet-room, where the sacrosanct “your ears-only” consultations were held. On one wall hung a platinum plaque lettered with:

**BEFORE THERE WAS ANYONE DOING  
ANYTHING, THERE WAS KA DOING EVERYTHING**

Ka’s name was studded with sapphires and rubies. Her piece of pride, and Ka had chosen its location; the plaque had been a gift from a grateful Baster Muldaur after helping him defend the DeBeers diamond cartel (in which he had interests) from a Russian-led endeavor to break up the South African market dominance. Ka’s wily, ingenious play, costing the Russians hundreds of millions in losses, had saved the jobs of a many thousands African mine workers.

After a short preamble, Culhane got to his business, feeding Ka his requirements; what he needed and by when. He wanted the attackers of the U.S. financial system taken down the path of unforgettable remorse. As slick, as punishing a con job as she and her cohorts could conjure.

As he talked, he noted mischief twinkling in Ka’s Arctic-blue eyes, as obvious glee was re-shaping that craggy face.

“So, to reiterate,” he went on, “what we’re trying to swing is a situation where the Russkies and their Arab bedfellows, and some of Europe’s unfriendlies, will come in for the supposed kill, and we’ll snap shut the trap so they can’t wiggle out. We want to end this mess...or start to end it...it’ll take years probably to get America right again but that’s what this is all about.”

“But how is this to be done, exactly? Where’s the trip-wire? “

“I’m held on this, Ka. I cannot say everything, not yet anyway.”

“Surely, Joost knows.”

“Less than you do.”

“Oh...oh, well...a question, love.”

“Sure, shoot.”

“Recall, do you, that in 2010 Europe assembled a trillion-dollar loan bailout for their errant, debt-drugged members? The roof about to fall in. Will this be about that size? The entire play?”

“Triple, at least triple.”

“You’re not pulling my tired old veiny leg, Rushton? You’d not do that to old Ka.”

“I’m serious as I know how to be.”

She could be sugar-tongued and foul-mouthed in the same breath. Exhaling volubly, she uttered, “I’ll be fucked, really jammed. I never—what a kick-ass this’ll be. I’m in a thrill. You’ve come to the right turnstile, oh yes.”

“There’s not another like you anywhere who could pull it off.”

“I’ve my helpers, you know. It’s not just Ka.”

“Then, I’ll amend. Not another like any of you.”

“A bouquet and I shall pass it on. Let’s you and I sum the action. You’re wanting a full-winged story that will encourage certain parties to think they’ve got a sure thing, when it’s their noose they’re really buying?”

“But it must be precise. We want them to act, not just think, but act. We’ve got to get them thinking the end is nearing for the States. We *must* get them to go short, in a massive way on the dollar, oil futures, wheat and think the only safeguard is to go long on gold. But I’ve got an option on a big tranche of Chinese gold. When the time’s right, I’ll take it off Beijing’s hands and dump it on the market. It’ll cost us plenty but it’s worth it. “

“A nicely packaged three-corner operation?”

“Correct. And there’s more padding to be had, Ka. You’re aware that every month the U.S. government issues economic data on payrolls, production, that kind of thing. I think I can persuade Halburton to delay the release of that data a couple of times. People

will think the worst, the way they always do. They'll think Washington is hiding something, and they'll be right since Washington is always hiding something or other. But it ought to help your story."

"How I do love you, my Rushie. Oh that's perfect. You're like a tour with Sinbad, you are." She was doing something with the ivory stickpin she wore in her hair, for no seeable reason. A small affectation, he supposed. "Like to hear Ka's tentative scenario?" she asked, quite bluntly.

"I would, indeed."

"We've a nice stunt we've not used in years. I've the Rothschilds in mind this time. The last go, we used Barclays but I like the Rothies for this. People believe the arrogant of this world, and so how do you beat the Rothschilds for arrogance? Listen now to Ka..."

Unfurling the map of her present thoughts, she enticed his fullest interest at what was brewing in that beautifully bent mind.

"I've several British itinerant actors on my rolls. Bastards've been lounging about lately, and it's time we put the stick to them, eh?"

She'd have them outfitted in customary grays and striped shirts, school them in the parlance of traveling deal-hunters, doing a survey of the Mid-East. Dubai. The Emirates. Saudi and Iraq. She'd get them invites to various press clubs, the gossip-oases, and there they could lift the bottle a bit too often and talk slyly about the latest Armageddon forming up. The smashing of America, and here is how Rothschild thinks the real money will be made out of it. That, then, the "controlling story" and after it was salted she'd pump aspects of the great fib to the second-tier players in the *souks* and money-houses with roughly the same chicken-feed, so they'd think they had originated the truth of it all. Queries would be made from legitimate sources to the editors of leading newspapers and t-v and radio outlets in the region, sufficient to get reporters out on the street and on the scent. By then, the actors, having split up, would be vanished into some faraway locales: the beaches of Thai, the Bahamas, perhaps Belize if they liked fishing. But a prime deception would've been

born, the rumors traveling hotly, the speculators checking with their backers, and poised to make their fatal strike.

“It’s only a rough-out, but have you thoughts?”

“None like yours, Ka. No one has thoughts like yours.”

Uncertain if it were a compliment, she said, “What of Moscow? If what you’re thinking of goes down, heads will be bloodied. You play too long at the edges, you can lose your footing.”

Culhane’s brow lifted. “Metzilov, you mean?”

“*Exactament*, my adored one. We need a donkey to pin the tail on. Such a pest, that lout. He’s in trouble, they say, with Nyurischev. We get that from our Kremlin pipe, and the same corroborating noise comes from Kiev. They’re short wheat there in Russia, did you know?”

“I’m counting on them getting shorter.”

“Can you?”

“Can I, what?”

“Cut them off?”

“I intend to do just that. I’ve got the wheat market under my thumb, or shortly I will. I haven’t got Argentina’s wheat but Joost will handle that with Camero.”

“The full box, then?”

Culhane nodded.

“Love, if ever you marry again, I hope it will be to Ka.”

“You wouldn’t want me to marry above my station twice in one life. Back to Metzilov, cash him in if that’s what it takes. You’d better clear it with Joost.”

“It’s Joost’s highest wish. He’s told me so.”

Culhane laughed. “One must arise early to beat your time, Ka.”

Reaching over, chucking his chin, she taunted, “Like to hear the next forecast? It’s about you, my dear son, and Ka’s giving it out free of charge.”

“More trouble ahead? I’m already quite familiar with that forecast.”

“When isn’t there trouble in this world? My forecast is this: you’re to be the next Shan Chu, you watch if I’m not right.”

No smile, no smirk when replying, “They couldn’t pay me enough.”

“Oh, you’ll do it. You’ll do it because that’s the way you’re made. A Samaritan...well, a streak of Samaritan. Old Ka knows, knows to her very brim.”

“My dear woman, you couldn’t know about that.”

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“Why the ha, ha and ha?”

“How do you think I ascended to my throne? I’ve crystals in the back of my eyes, the better to watch with. I’m like Muldaur, I know the trend before the trend itself knows it’s the trend. You know what they say: ‘the trend is your friend’ and I’ve always known my friends. You, for one.”

They took lunch at the terraced Côté Jardin at Hôtel de Paris, where he had put up the night before. Older times, they talked of those, and even of Karin, always a favorite of Ka’s, being, as they were, two sisters of Scandinavia; and then a reference or two of what was to come—high trickery, a majestic suck-in, and, if all went smoothly, relatively speaking, then a managed bloodbath.

“I want to tell you something, and then I want you to forget it. It might round out your perspective as to size of the play.”

“Tell Ka...”

“I’m proposing that for the next ten years the U.S. go to a two-currency system. The new one will be known as the Blue Dollar. If you hear about it, you’ll know the end game is nearing. And you can go full throttle with your control story.”

“I need more.”

“I can’t, not yet.”

“Is this your idea?”

“Not exclusively, portions of it were discussed some years ago in Washington. It never went anywhere, however. It will soon. I intend

to get Halburton re-elected on that concept. He can win on it. He'll get the credit."

"Why not you?"

"I don't want credit nor can I afford the publicity. When this is over, if it's ever to be over, things won't be so safe for your old friend Culhane. Some huge losses, you know."

"Ka will look after you."

"Aloysius might object..."

"That old fuck of a fraud...is he—well, a sort of dolt? Halburton, I mean, not my madman Aloysius."

"Halburton's a politician."

"One of that herd."

"One of the herd, how right you are...I've got calls to make, Ka, and—"

"Say not another syllable. I've your story to air out with my helpers. Count on this: we'll send the bastards back to the caves. Unremitting siege, that's what old Ka says. Spend the rest of their days doing pictographs on the walls, eh? Hand them a chalice of hemlock. By the way, love, you don't mind if I make a few bets of my own? On your play?"

"Go right ahead but you better await my signal. I've got a few more things to set up. You might as well get into it...the Magans will, if they agree to get behind this..."

Culhane stood, advancing to Ka's outstretched arms. After another of her spine-jarring hugs, he made his goodbyes, leaving her with the fifteen-digit number-code of his secured phone-line in Washington. With her flypaper memory, she hadn't any need for pen or pencil to mark it down.

Ka, nothing beige-on-beige about her. An original, all the way through.

He could almost feel her self-proclaimed eye-crystals moist with pity for Metzilov and sundry swindlers and operators about to get their grasping hands burned. He had nothing against Metzilov

## COMPRADOR

personally, but the moment had arrived to shut down the finaglers and interlopers. If Metzilov wanted a game of hardball, well, so be it.

Other weightier worries loomed: the Peigars, Rearden, Squires, what to do about Liu Wai.

Later, depositing the Renault at the car-hire agency, he swapped it for a gleaming red Maserati Quattroporte, a machine better matched to the high Alps. Waiting till traffic subsided, he started out at eight o'clock that evening, driving all night to eastern Switzerland. Arriving at dawn, too early to check into the Dolder, he rolled himself into a camel-haired car-throw, sleeping on the backseat till almost noon.

Even asleep he felt alive, his blood quickening, He was dealing again, in the front ranks, taking aim.

## Zurich

**P**erched high on the plateau-side of a mountain, the Dolder Grand Hotel overlooked the city, part of Lake Zürich, and a spread of eye-luring countryside ranging for miles. From his fifth-floor suite, he'd been observing the lake's whitecaps, standing at one of the windows, thinking some about Karin, his children, Jia and Michael, and, of course of Andrea, who was about to have her fortunes improved.

Wondering, then, at the going rate for a Dufy? Wondering, also, if he'd be able to peddle it here? Soon, he'd leave Europe and he had to get that transaction out of the way.

He looked over at the table. A thick-bound folder lay there, one of four he'd made up in Paris: the contents explosive. He'd never engaged in blackmail before, but found it a somewhat appealing option at a time when he searched anywhere and everywhere for options. He was in the midst of an unannounced war, and, as the saying went: *All is fair...* It was far more productive to handle things this way, than rely on the secretive Swiss or the American courts.

More, he thought his brand of Dodge City justice much more apt than what could otherwise be expected. Fines, jail-time—not enough to satisfy the scales of real justice. Not his scales, either.

He still stood by the window, gazing idly, when hearing the knock, then again, louder the second time. Taking a breath, he moved toward the door.

“Ambros Pieggar,” said the younger man, cheerfully. Dark-haired, brown-eyed, ruddy-cheeked.

They shook hands as Ambros felt himself being eased through the door.” I’m Culhane. Thank you for coming. I thought it better to meet

here, rather than at Braunsweig. You might agree with me after we talk. Can I fix you a drink of some kind? I'm having coffee."

"Mineral water, if you have it."

"Coming up." Culhane led Ambros to the small sitting room, then poured the drink at a small trolley-bar. Handing the glass to the young banker, he said, "Yesterday I talked to Andrea. She sends her love and holiday greetings and asks that you please send her a picture of your fiancée."

"Nice of her. Andrea. She was my first puppy love...a long time ago, that was." Admitting to it, Ambros blushed slightly.

"She puts you up there in the rare air, too."

"Return my compliments, please."

"Will do. I'd like to be brief. You said you were on your way to Davos and I don't want to detain you. Going skiing?"

"If there's time. Actually, I'm instructed to report there by my fiancée. Making marriage plans," said Ambros pleasantly.

Culhane raised his coffee cup. "Here's to you and to your lady. May the sun shine bright. *Centanni*...have you any idea why I'm here?"

"I'd like not to guess about it, Herr Culhane."

"Rush or Rushton. I'll call you Ambros, unless you object."

"I wouldn't object, not a bit."

"Let me lay it out in a flat line. I plan to take over Rearden's interest in Braunsweig und Sohn. Eighteen-percent ownership, if my numbers are right. He doesn't know this yet, but he will as soon as I can get myself to New York. I thought I'd talk to you about it, get to know you a little, get you to know me some. That's why I'm here. But there's more and it has to do with what's in that file over there on the table. You won't have time to read it all now, and I'll not want you to take it to Davos. It's extremely sensitive stuff...damning and, I'd say, highly incriminating, involving the Reardens, their New York Corporation, something called the St. Gallen Trust, which seems to be overseen by Braunsweig, and then a sub-file regarding your own father. Not too pretty, either, I'm sorry to say."

“You know *all that!*”

“There’s plenty more to it, as you’ll see.”

“It sounds like you could hang us all on the first available clothes-line.”

“I’ve no interest in anything like that, I assure you. That does not apply to Rearden. Rearden has a new life awaiting him.”

“I won’t ask what it is.”

“You’ll know soon enough.”

“What is it that you want from me? Or us?”

“A couple of things, but first would you like references on me?”

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt my conscience. I was beginning to wonder if you want references on me.”

Culhane smiled, liking this Piegar’s insouciance. “No, I’m pretty clear about who *you* are. Let me sum up some of what’s in the file. It’s all the St. Gallen Trust stuff. Ledgers, the trust agreement, the deeds, the interlocks, the Mafia deposit arrangements, your co-op with Russian intel, the evidence of how the Reardens conspired to beat their taxes... all of it seems to be in there.”

Ambros’s skin shrank a centimeter at a time. He tinkered with the ice cubes in his glass, and they felt warm to his touch. “You could only have gotten those from one source,” he said quietly.

“You’re right or probably you are. But the compiler had more than one source, and I think I may be looking at one of them.”

“You don’t expect me to incriminate myself, surely? I’m not loco, other than getting married.”

“You’re safe with me, don’t worry.”

“I need to be safe with myself. It’s my family, my mother anyway.”

“I realize.”

“That file,” Ambros looked over to the table, “must be a real piñata of stuff. A hangman’s guide to happiness...I’ll say this much and no more. I was forced into some blabbing. This man, it was years ago, came to me. He knew more than he should and I’d suppose he knew more than he let on. They wanted info on drug-money laundering and

said if I didn't fork over there'd be hell to pay. Braunsweig's reputation could've been sunk. My mother, of whom I'm terribly fond, would flip her wig if it all came out in the newspapers. She's a Shultheiss, if that means anything—"

"Afraid not."

"Shultheiss is the family that founded Nestle. Other Swiss companies, too."

"Big name, eh?"

"It pulls a long oar here in cuckoo-clock land. I've made a terrible blunder, I think." Ambros swore under his breath then, exhaling slowly. "Anyway, I more or less confirmed what they already knew and, after that, he left me alone. Goddammit, this is very embarrassing."

"Tell the truth and you and I will be just fine, Ambros."

"It's not something you want known about your business?"

"I'm going to your partner, remember. I don't shit on my own shoes...and here comes another question, Ambros. One of your clients is the Five-Stars Trading Company of Singapore. That's in that file, as well. Do you know much about their business?"

"Rice and textiles and metals, I believe," replied Ambros evenly.

"And narcotics. Dealings with the St. Gallen Trust. I guess you know the trouble the narcotics part can cause. Braunsweig is an accomplice."

"I really can't comment on a client's affairs. Nor do I have the authority to dismiss them as a client or any of the others, either."

"I can fix Rearden's wagon. As I say, I'm about to take over his interest at Braunsweig and I'm telling you beforehand. I've no intention of being active in your bank but I can, I think, pour a lot of business your way."

"No criminal connections?"

"I don't consort with criminals, with the possible exception of a Singaporean and we'll see about him one day. Here's a question for you: if you were to put in charge of Braunsweig, would you cooperate in getting rid of the trash?"

“My father would punch his berserk button. Really flip out.”

“Your father may prefer a flip to what else could happen.”

“Are you going after him?”

“No, I wouldn’t do that. But you can. That dossier is full of short fuses.”

“My father and I don’t get along, but I’d not want him imprisoned. Or myself, either.”

“Nor would I. But you have enough in that file to nudge him in any direction you choose.”

“Meaning blackmail my own father?”

“Viewed another way, you could say you’re protecting him from blackmail.”

“Whose?”

“Mine.”

Ambros laughed. “Answering your question, if I were running Braunsweig, I’d cashier the riff-raff. Be expensive but then Braunsweig is fairly small as a bank and our reputation is everything. If we lost that, we might as well shut the front door.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear, that you’ll clean things up. You seem perplexed.”

“I keep wondering,” Ambros said, “how they ever figured out Braunsweig was involved with the St. Gallen Trust, and that crowd from New York. I include Mr. Rearden. I mean we’re a Swiss bank and we keep a lot under lock and key, so they must’ve bored a hole into the New York Corporation before they got to me.”

“Largely, you’re right. It’s all in the file. The short of it is that the FBI’s narcotics people followed the money trail of the New York crime families. Especially, how the money was sent out of the country and washed. They somehow got wind of the New York Corporation as the conduit and they infiltrated its accounting and financial section. You can guess the rest. It wasn’t that difficult. When it got to be a foreign matter, the FBI called in the CIA and the CIA pulled the rest of the investigation together. *Voila!*”

“All the black hands, busy at work.”

“Just like money, they never sleep.”

Ambros looked at his watch. “If that’s everything, I’ll be on my way. I assume you’ll get back to me after you settle the hash with Mr. Rearden.”

“You’ll hear from me, but I’ve two other matters and then off you go to see your girl. Do you remember the name of the person who approached you, extorting the information about New York Corporation and all the drug business?”

“It was a ways back. Andrea would probably know. He was a friend of her father’s, I’m pretty sure.”

“Might it be Flickinger? Someone named Clay Flickinger?”

“That’s the name. Right you are, it’s Flickinger...”

“Thanks. I’ll fetch something and then we can wrap up.”

Leaving the room, Culhane came back carrying the Dufy. “The London gallery I bought this painting from about eight years ago tells me they’ll purchase it for two-million and eight-hundred thousand of Euros. It’s a Raoul Dufy. I’d like, instead, for Braunsweig to sell it in Switzerland. For gold, or Euros to be converted to gold. Open an account for Andrea and deposit the proceeds. Say nothing about this to her for three weeks or so. By that time, I’ll be back in Washington. Can you, and will you?”

“I’ll attend to it personally. Consider it a piece of history. Two-eight was the offer?”

“Yes.”

“A Dufy.” Ambrose whistled appreciatively. “One question from my side. Why do you want Andrea’s account in gold?”

“For safety. I want her safe. You, too. Buy all the gold you can handle. All the oil and wheat futures, too.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“What’s up?”

Culhane shook his head. “I’ve already said too much.”

“You might be a handy man to know.”

“I hope so.”

“You’re with Joost Van Slyke? The Shang-whatever.”

“Magan. The Shang-Magan. Yes, Van Slyke and I are associated.”

“And you’re at the White House? Andrea said you were.”

“Temporarily.”

“Many hats, eh?”

“One too many, anyway.”

For a time, they looked at each other. Doubts cast their shadows, though neither man said anything more, and then Ambros picked up the file folder. “I can secure this in the right place before heading to Davos. With consummate care, he placed the Dufy on top of the folder.

Ambros offered his hand, and they shook heartily. Deal done or part way done, and the beginning of an understanding reached between men who didn’t need everything in writing and notarized. Ambros Piegarr departed, not altogether comprehending what had happened to his life inside of one hour. But he knew its course was about to veer on to another heading...to God knows where...

## Zanzibar Zurich

**S**ixty miles in length, twenty wide, the island of Zanzibar could boast of a history like few others in the annals of East Africa. Lying off the coasts of Tanzania and Kenya, for many centuries it was ideally situated as the outpost for trade, foreign incursions, and, in its way, had acted as a prime importer of Islamism into sub-Saharan Africa.

A hub for adventurers and traders from everywhere, the niceties of its legal and illegal activities pivoted on who it was who ruled today and their cut of the action.

Indeed trade knew few bounds: ivory, guns, spices, precious woods, unaccounted for gold and gemstones, vast slavery auctions run by the Arabs, silks, dhows for sale, concubines for sale, mercenaries for hire who engaged in small raids, chiefly for ivory and women, in scattered villages along the coasts of Africa and India. It was also a recruiting ground for the clans of Somalia, to the north, who had founded a highly remunerative business plundering tankers and other freighters plying the upper regions of the Arabian Sea.

A veritable paradise, the island proper is fringed with small islets, coral reefs, unsurpassed white-sand beaches lapped by the turquoise-hued waters of the Indian Ocean.

It was ancient—*Zan-ze-barr*—no one knew how ancient, not exactly, and no one cared particularly. But ample records duly noted that as far back as 2200 B.C. the island had served as an offshore storage and distribution center for the caravans of goods brought west from Beijing via the Silk Road, extending from deepest eastern China

clear to Antioch in Syria...and the many, many stopping points in between.

1764. Here it was that near the settlement of Nungwi on the north-most tip of the island the Shang-Magan acquired the House of Shirazi built a century before, as a summer retreat, by the Persian merchant—Mayu Kavi—for his eighteen wives and thirty-four children. A sumptuous, walled in, villa-palace, guarded day and night by a platoon of Ghurkas, housing twenty-nine (a lucky number) bedrooms, five salons, three terraces, two kitchens (one for day, one for night), three dining areas and sundry other rooms, some of which had not been used in decades. The House was manned by eighteen servants and two chefs, all chosen because they were deaf, could neither overhear nor repeat any of the Council of Six proceedings.

One wall of the north-most salon was covered in rare blue jasper. All Shang-Magan members, since its inception in 1587, were inscribed by name in Chinese, English, Arabic. In all, over the centuries, one-hundred and sixty-two select *compradors* had variously sat on the Council of Six that met twice yearly at this villa-palazzo.

Here it was, on a sun-spilled morning that Joost Van Slyke, as Shan Chu, held forth. He had met in Kenya two days earlier with Augustino von Grolin Camero, the grain-mogul out of Argentina, who commanded Shang Magan interests on the South American continent.

They had disputed. Today, that dispute must be resolved; and, on the doing of it or not, hinged the fate of Culhane's plan.

"...I want to fairly state the case of Augustino, "Van Slyke was saying to the others, "that he does not believe Culhane can make happen what the Americans have in mind, or should I say that Culhane has in mind. Too vast, too grandiose. Indeed, it may be so...these are strange, beggarly times and who knows what will emanate one day to the next. Myself, I have great faith in Culhane—"

"Why do we talk of Culhane?" interjected Liu Wai. "We dismissed him months and months ago."

"Not so, Liu Wai. Not technically, we didn't. The vote was two against Culhane and two for having him remain. He was not given an

opportunity to vote for himself, and when I called him on the day we voted, he assumed everyone had voted him out. I did not cast my ballot. Had I done so, I'd have voted in favor of him. Therefore, he would have remained on the Council.”

“Why have you said nothing before now?”

“As Shan Chu, I kept my own counsel. I had entered into an arrangement with the American president to force Culhane to go to Washington and provide his assistance to that undeserving madhouse. It may bear fruit...which is why we meet today.”

“Be done with him,” insisted Liu Wai. “What is he anymore to us?”

“He sits very close to the American president. I know. As just said, I was the one who arranged it. The towering Dutchman broke into a smirk, hidden by his beard, as he spoke directly to the Singaporean: “Before I return to the business of why we meet, I wish to say, openly say, that the Americans possess information that is particularly damaging to you, Liu Wai, and therefore to all of us. I will say no more, except that Culhane knows about it. He is in a position to ruin you and, simultaneously, injure us. He has done neither one. So far, that is. Further, I would remind you that you’ve been conducting transactions in his North American Zone and without his permission to do so. He can, himself, offer evidence to the Council, if he so wishes. We, in our turn, would be called upon to levy the trespass penalty upon your house, Liu Wai. It might run as high as two-billion...you might care to think about that...”

Liu Wai’s eyes narrowed.

Van Slyke waited for the Singaporean to speak, but Liu Wai seemed content to remain silent.

“By Culhane’s calculations,” Van Slyke continued, “he believes we will clear a collective sum of five-to-six billion Euros, if we will do as he says. Follow his plan, that is. Divided six ways, it is an estimable sum that will be earned out over the next two years or thereabouts. Culhane will surrender half of his share of these proceeds to Agostino Camero as a standstill-fee, if Agostino will remain out of the spot-market for wheat, but will, at Culhane’s signal, buy wheat

futures for delivery of nine-hundred million bushels of wheat. With what the Americans have in hand, and Culhane's trade bargains with the Canadians, he will effectively control the major share of world-wide supplies of wheat, at least foreseeably. Fascinating, eh? I think he'll succeed if we do his bidding. Those are my words, and that is what I know, and this is why we convene. What say you, Council?"

Baster Muldaur spoke first, "If he swings it, he'll slam the Russians. What will happen to Metzilov? I understand Moscow is sweeping the markets looking for grain, both corn and wheat."

Van Slyke replied. "Gregor Metzilov has over-extended Russia. We may lose him. One thing I've failed to mention that buttresses Culhane maneuver. He knows, and you know, and I know that all the oil, gold and diamonds in the world mean nothing if people haven't their daily bread. Let us not do anything to promote riots or anarchy. Let us work this out with singular care..."

Now, Muir Tomlinson's turn. "You've not told us, Joost, how Rushton Culhane will execute this. A very heady situation, I'd say."

"He's not fully described what he intends. Knowing him, I'd readily bet that he will find ways to decouple everyday market prices from the underlying value of wheat and corn. Simultaneous phantom trades in several markets, all minutely timed to confuse everyone, and causing a heavy run of short sales. He'll jack up the price and trap the speculators, I'd imagine. When no one knows the real worth of the commodities, day to day, then he can keep inflating the market as he pleases. Then, the price-bubble, and the ensuing panic when others realize that they'll have to pay what the Americans asks or otherwise starve. As Baster says, he'll disrupt Russian attempts to wreck the U.S. dollar, and that reminds me that Moscow is in talks with the Bank for International Settlements to join its currency with Europe's...we'll have to entertain that matter tomorrow. I don't like it, not even a *beteng* do I like it."

"A monopoly," suggested Camero, "we've not looked at that aspect. It's against too many laws in too many places."

“Not quite so,” replied Muldaur. “If he’s acting for the U.S. government, they’re immune and he, as their agent, will be immune.”

“Yes, but will we?” Camero replied testily.

“Who’s to know? We’ll be in his tailwind. He’s the front-runner and all eyes, if there are any, will be on the Yanks.”

Tomlinson offered, “If Culhane can manage what he proposes, be a gigantic undertaking, eh? Certainly got the head for it, and the right size balls, I’d also hazard. Always had a pair of big brassies, that chappie. But doesn’t it seem one must create a, um, well a cataclysmic, world-level fright to trigger all this price goulash? Agree or no?”

“Yes, he admits it,” Van Slyke quickly responded. “He won’t say exactly what, though, or when. Especially when. He tells me he is held to a promise of confidentiality, and I assume that’s a pledge to Halburton. That is why he wishes for us to remain on the sidelines, till he signals us. Personally, considering all factors, I concur with his request.”

Tomlinson again, “Joost, we’ve all fared well by you. Yet this calls for major *mojo*...and, lately, R. Culhane has been lacking in that department, eh? What if it all falls apart and we don’t even know when the trigger gets pulled or who pulls it? A dicey business, I’d say.”

For another hour, talk crisscrossed, sometimes descending to hot-blooded wrangling. Muldaur, for one, perhaps the most gifted strategist within the Shang-Magan, with his uncanny ability to index the future, was becoming impatient. He’d run across a statuesque Nubian two days earlier, while moseying through the bazaar in Stone Town. A breathing black diamond! She’d turned his entire body inside out with all her sensual African wiles, and she now awaited him up on the second floor of this beach-side palazzo.

When all the cross-talk burned itself out, Van Slyke took the floor again. “Culhane asks a favor of us. He’s in a situation whereby he cannot ask his government for special help without obligating himself...he’d like to find out who killed his wife and family. Let’s

help him, post a reward...that sort of thing. Baster, could you lead this one for us?"

"Gladly," said Muldaur.

Came luncheon and it was then, when all that should be said had been said, and Van Slyke handed out the red, gold-tipped joss sticks. The vote: five-to-naught, with Liu Wai siding with the others, quite aware by then of how thickly his bread was being buttered.

Five or six billion of winnings amounted to five or six billion, with no one being asked to risk so much as a bean; indeed, barely doing more than casting a vote for the American's intrepid ploy in a time of crisis.

Not at all. It could go wrong, all of it. Liu Wai was quite aware of that possibility, as were the others. Rearden would have to be informed, stay alert, or inadvertent losses could soar so high it would take years before recovery.



Later that same afternoon, while the others were detained by their own pursuits, Liu Wai called for a launch to take him out to the Shang-Magan's sailing junk, swinging at anchor a quarter-mile offshore. Under a waning sun, the big sailing junk, flying its long burgee of six dragons woven in six different colors, looked as it always looked: impressive.

Three dhows, likely sailed by Arabs moving small cargoes, had luffed their sails, drifting off the starboard side of the junk, gawking. The sight sent a spear of pride through Liu Wai; there was nothing like the vessel on any sea anywhere.

The launch pulled alongside the boarding ladder, and two of the launch's sailor's handed the heavy Singaporean over the side, and boosted him up the ladder. A three-hundred pounder, Liu Wai made his way up to the taff rail in slow ascending steps.

Once aboard, he sat, winded; his great belly pouring to his lap.

## COMPRADOR

He called for a cipher pad, and a copy of the Vulgate Bible. Turning to a pre-arranged psalm, he bent, with a pencil and using the pad's printed format, he selected every third letter of the psalm's text and encoded:

**CEASE ALL FURTHER OPERATIONS OF ST. GALLEN  
TRUST UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.**

Four-minutes and thirty-two seconds later a signal burst went out to Liu Wai's House in the Siglap District of Singapore, where it would be relayed to the New York Corporation's headquarters: an *eyes only* message, exclusively restricted for reading by Joseph Rearden.

With the message now on its way, Liu Wai watched with care as the signaler tore the page from the encoding pad and burned it, dropping the dusty ashes into a chloride solution.

It was Liu Wai himself, who poured the solution over the junk's side, eliminating any possibility the encoded message would go astray, be read by prying eyes. The signaler knew nothing, either. He had sent bits and bytes, in a string of digits



Two hours later, instructions from New York (via Singapore) advised Braunsweig und Sohn's office in Zurich to stop all further transactions in behalf of St. Gallen Trust.

Over the previous week, Ambros Piegar had been shorting the U.S. dollar, for the trust's account, and in heavy amounts: \$4,723,000,000 worth of shorting at last tally.

Today's abrupt instructions said nothing about reversing the trades, and thus they remained open on the books, unhedged.

## Moscow

**H**ans-Otto Piegar had sensed he was about to gain the upper hand over Gregor Metzilov, but then the conversation swung against him. A preliminary meeting had taken place one day ahead of official discussions with the Ministry of Finance and The Bank of Russia, the federation's central bank. Piegar was testing the waters, trolling for clues, though growing increasingly alarmed at Metzilov's demands.

"You're not cooperating at all, Hans."

"Much better to await the day when the Americans are forced to settle. Unless ..."

"Yes?"

"Unless you agree to pledge your gold reserves. Otherwise, the EU will demand that you devalue the ruble before admitting Russia into our banking and payment's system." Piegar raised his hands, imploringly, beseeching common sense. At least, financial sense. "You're pressing the outer limits on shorting the U.S. dollar. You'll have to straighten that out—"

"Don't be so idiotic...will you have more tea...no, well I will...now, you listen. Russia has come a long way in agreeing to Europe's demands. Our patience is thinning."

"I remind, Gregor, that I am responsible...correction, Bank for International Settlements is responsible for settling all international accounts among the world's central banks. Our directors are adamant. If Bank of Russia does not unwind its negative dollar positions, we cannot partner with you to form a single Euro-Russ currency. It simply won't fly."

“We can do both. We’re supplying Europe with most of its oil and gas. That’s top-grade collateral. All we need is a hundred-billion in credits to fund our grain imports—”

“As you’ve said for the third time. You’re playing politics with money as the hostage. I remind, respectfully remind, it’s a dangerous game.”

“Our purchasing missions want clearance to commit. They want that commitment now.”

“Pledge your gold then. It’s the only acceptable choice. You’ve used all your unsecured credits with BIS. “

“You’re not hearing one damn thing I’ve said!” stormed Metzilov. “We’ve got a minor problem that couldn’t be foreseen. We expect help.”

“It’s not a minor problem. I’ve made inquiries of the other central banks, but—”

“We’re going round and round here.” Metzilov stood. “Make the inquiries again,” his voice sharpening as he tried to figure out how to fudge his answers to Nyurischev. A war dance was forming in his neural centers. “Tomorrow then,” he told Piegar, “you’ll have to do better with the finance minister.”

“I think if best we call that meeting off, Gregor, and I’ll return to Bern and see if we can sort things out. It looks grim, I’d say. Better that you be the one to say it to your colleagues.”

“You’re not going anywhere, my friend. We’re demanding a little help and we expect to get it.”

“It’s not *little*. I said I’ll leave. You can plead for me. Say I’ve come down with an illness. You’ll dream up something.”

“Your aircraft is temporarily impounded for necessary repairs,” Metzilov retorted. “Or it will be if I have to pick up the phone. Get as sick as you please, but you’ll be at the meeting tomorrow and you’d, by God, better come up with an answer for our grain import credits. That’s final. It’s irrevocable, it’s irreversible and it’s as final as I can make it. Get the wax out of your ears.”

Metzilov smiled, almost sympathetically. Knowing his message was glycerin-clear, he wheeled about and left Hans-Otto Piegar with the terrifying sensation that a stream of molten metal was pouring over his groin.

As if nailed to his chair, Piegar had doubts if he had the ability to stand up. Grossly threatened, treated like some errant schoolboy, fearing, if he arose, he'd fall to the floor.

Had he heard right, that the message out of the Kremlin was for Europe to go bail for Russia, requiring sums that could buy up most of Portugal.

Preposterous!

Would Russia go so far as they once had with the Ukraine—cut off the flows of oil and gas? No telling with the Russians, and that slippery eel Metzilov might be up to anything and everything. Was he baking up a scheme to involve Europe in persuading the U.S. to unload a sea-full of grain?

Threats, cajoling, maneuvers—they were good at the game, but they overlooked the fact that America, at present, had so little to lose.

Russia, with its penchant for muscle-politics, was gambling they could rout the dollar, crushing a much weakened United States, lowering its esteem even further, forcing it to recall the last of its overseas troops and navy, while sending up the equivalent of the white flag.

Leaving a united Russo-Euro to rule the western roost, and a Chi-na-Nippon duality to dominate its eastern counterpart, thus controlling the Northern Hemisphere.

*If...*

Yes *if*, and what had he told Ambros to do? Pronto, short the dollar just as Russia was doing. A mistake? Hans-Otto felt his gut flop. Had Ambros done as instructed? No telling, not with his son, who was more independent than a soaring eagle.

## New York

**T**oday they were to meet and for the first time; Culhane had arranged it through Ambros Piegar before departing Zurich.

Better that way, he had thought. Ambros could speak with a certain urgency that Rearden could not possibly mistake.

He had his reservations about Joe Rearden: the man was said to wiggle out of big trades that went against him by threatening bodily harm to the complainants, using the muscle of the Doney brothers to back him up. True or not, Culhane didn't know. Still, it was a terrible mark against one's reputation, especially when so much of the trading was done via the given word, and not much else.

Minutes ago, he had entered the directors' room at the New York Corporation, sat down, lit a Cohiba, and glanced at the day's edition of the *Times*. The news glum as ever. He put aside the newspaper. More minutes passed, and he was about to leave when some of the wall art caught his attention. Excellent maritime scenes, two by Winslow Homer that he'd like to own himself.

Hearing the door open, he turned and there stood Joe Rearden, grim-faced and appearing perplexed and uncomfortable. They simply stared at each other for a long moment. No greeting, nothing, as distant as two strangers standing side-by-side on a subway.

Culhane sat, tapped the ash on the Cohiba, inhaled, and said, "Let's get to it."

"Get to what? Make it snappy, I've got a full day."

"Okay, get tuned because here it comes. Snappy-style. I've had a long and exciting talk with Ambros Piegar and one day soon I expect

to have one with his father. You'll not be included, in case you're wondering."

"What is it you want of me, Culhane?"

"Your hide, for one thing. For another, I want your interest in Braunsweig, and Squires's too. We can start there."

"What makes you think I've any interest in Braunsweig?"

"Read this"—sliding a copy of the Paris file across the table to the startled Rearden—"it ought to keep you up for a good part of the night. Tomorrow, at ten a.m., I'll expect you and your lawyers at the Waldorf Towers. Suite 2727. Ten pronto. You can keep the file, and I'll have the other copies destroyed or turned over to you. I refer only to the parts that list your, uh, high crimes and misdemeanors, which are mountainous. The price of keeping it quiet, at least from me, is your shares in Braunsweig—"

"Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"I *am* blackmailing you, as you put it. If you don't show up tomorrow, ready to paper up the transfer, the contents of that file go straight to the Justice Department and *The New York Times*. There'll be some helluva dust-up if that happens and you can imagine what'll it do to your son...there'll be no payment made to either you or Squires for your Braunsweig shares. I'll deal with Squires later...it's to be a straight handover and you can consider yourself one lucky sonofabitch...I won't even tell the Doney's that their name is all over that file...the Doney's could only get in there because of you and maybe Liu Wai."

"Sounds like so much horseshit to me."

"If the Attorney General gets his mitts on it, you'll learn all there is to know about horsehit."

"You come in here, menacing me. Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I came in here to make a promise to you. That I can have you walked down the plank. And I will, too."

"Some sort of a joke..."

"I just told you how you can find out, Rearden. Maybe I'll run a copy of that file over to *The New York Times* today."

Rearden rubbed his jaw, his brow arching as he said, “Hypothetically, supposing I was willing to deal. What guarantees would you provide?”

“I’m of Shang-Magan,” replied Culhane flatly, “and that’s all the guarantee you need.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. In your case, you’ll be posting collateral.”

“Collateral? What collateral is that?”

“You’re the collateral. More specifically, your life, your future. Obviously, the Doneys will want a reckoning if all this gets out. I’ll have the FBI pass the word that you did the *outing*, which, in some measure, will be true. In the words of the Queen Mother, ‘you’re fucked, chappie.’”

Caught up in their separate silences, they eyed each other with contempt and neither man let go of the other’s scorn. It was Culhane who ended the standoff with, “Just make sure you arrive with the right papers and a loaded ink pen...”

He left, without bothering to put out the cigar in its ashtray. The smoke drifted toward the semi-shocked Rearden whose eyes began to sting from the gray tendrils drifting into his face. Cursing, he reached across the table and stubbed out the cigar.

Picking up the file, by page three he was perturbed, a page later he was pissed, and finally petrified. How was it possible for outsiders to know so much of his operations? Braunschweig couldn’t be the culprit; they had too much to lose in fees. The Swiss were no moralists in matters of money, caring nothing whatsoever as to sources, legitimate or otherwise.

Trembling, his rage increased at the turn of each page. His right hand clenched like a claw, then it shook in an uncontrollable rage.

Later, somewhat calmed, he saw several references to Liu Wai, and while those were stressful enough, the worst still hovered as he read his way into three pages devoted to his son Tim, the senator. At the bottom of the third page, a notation referred to a numbered photo in the appendix. Flipping to the back of the file, he found what he

dreaded: a copy of the picture of his son in bed with the black man, the bed sheets tossed aside, and the two of them fondling each other.

Rearden's eyes swam as an ever-darkening daze overtook him.

The things that were next supposed to happen in his life had no chance of happening. Not now. Vividly, he recollected Culhane's instruction: "*Just make sure you arrive with the right papers and a loaded ink pen...*"

Tomorrow seemed a long way off. So did all else.

## Washington, D.C.

**A** dream that wasn't really a dream, but a jolt of some memory that crossed up her nerves, awakening Andrea. No smell, sound, or feel of him for weeks and now he was back. Halfway back. He had not divulged much about the long junket to Asia, then the say-over in Europe and New York. She well knew how private a man he was and how very private his work was at the White House.

Still, she was a woman and she had her feelings and her worries and she wanted to know.

More, much more; irritated at his Sphinx act.

And then her embarrassment at how huffy she'd been, excoriating him, when he left for Europe toting along her Dufy. Four days ago, Ambros Piegar called to tell her the painting had been sold to a Saudi, that it had fetched three and a half million Euros. She was rich! What kind of man did that out of the blue, especially in times like these?

Hearing the smooth chords of a Duke Ellington tune, she knew exactly where he had gone to; contented, she breathed more easily. She wanted him here, side by side, or on top of her spread limbs again.

Odd, she thought, how soon you get to know another's habits. Not the person, not the walls of their souls, a lifetime wouldn't do that for you. But a laugh, a look, a temperament, and a mind. Especially a mind; a mind was as unique as a fingerprint. She wondered how long it would take to really get a full fix on a man like Culhane.

Rolling over, she looked at the luminous dial on a cheap clock kept on the bedside table: 4:27, it reported. He'd become a swooping owl of the night, my loner.

She sat up, threw on a robe, and was about to enter the sitting room when she heard his voice.

That eff-ing red phone! At this hour!

He's talking with someone, and who was it this time? Was it another of those calls with Shanghai Lil, or whatever her name is, meddling again, finagling again, calling from China, six-thousand miles distant? What the hell was going on? How was it that she rated the confidential number for accessing the red phone? Speaking in Chinese, which was not understandable to her, speaking of what exactly?

Andrea moved.

In the sitting room, four vigil lights flickered. One of them threw a weak daub against Culhane's face as he hunched over a table, talking, then listening, then talking again.

In English this time.

He was conferring with Baster Muldaur, in Johannesburg, telling him, "...it was Joost who appointed me to post rewards and find out what we could about what happened to your family...have you ever heard of an organization called Feng Zhao Nu. It's located in the Chinatown part of Los Angeles. I'm told it's a social club of sorts for the overseas Taiwanese, something on that order."

"Never heard of it," said Culhane.

"We connected with Interpol and they talked to the Los Angeles police. One thing led to another and it came to light that you had a Taiwanese gardener working for you."

"That's right. He's among the missing."

"We set up a reward for information, gold bullion, two pounds of it, and what we learned...correction, what Interpol learned from an informant at this Feng Zhao Nu was that your gardener was approached by a man named Grasselli, looking for information about you and your family. That's about what was said at that point. Have you heard that name?"

"Someone with that name works for Rearden at the New York Corporation."

“Worked, past tense. A man was found in the Long Beach harbor, a floater, no head and no hands remaining. The Los Angeles police were to find out who he was, and couldn’t. But then after Interpol got into it, they tried a DNA match through the police in New York and the New Yorkers ran it down and it seems that the Long Beach floater and this Grasselli of New York are one and the same.”

“Well, that’s damn interesting. I wish I’d known when I saw Rearden last week.”

“Oh, you did?”

“Yes, but that’s another story for another time. Do they have any idea about my gardener?”

“They think that it’s possibly the second body found in Long Beach. Again, no hands and no head. They could take DNA samples but there’s nowhere apparently to make a match up. However, the forensic people say the remains indicate it was a Chinese person. Possibly your gardener, but they didn’t say anything like that, of course.”

“Possibly it was my gardener. He took a licking on his life’s savings and groused like hell about it. Do the police think this was a gangland thing of some sort? Cutting off hands and heads, for Chrissakes...”

“That’s exactly what they do think. That comes from Interpol, incidentally. This Grasselli, they say, apparently had links to a crime family in New York.”

“By the name of Doney, I’d bet.”

“I’ll be a monkey, how did you know that?”

“Also another story for another time. Is there anything more, Baster?”

“No, not that I recall.”

“I owe you. Many thanks, I cannot tell you how I appreciate it.”

“Well, it’s not proof, of course.”

“No, it isn’t proof but it’s highly suspicious to me. It’s surely too much to be a casual coincidence.”

“I agree. Well, back to sleep for you and the start of the workday for me. Joost says your gold is being returned.”

“Yes, it has. Next week. I’m in the process of figuring out where to park it.”

“I’m glad for you, Rushton, very pleased it got straightened out. Hell of a thing...”

“We’ll be talking, Baster. Once again, my deep thanks.

He mulled a minute, tying together the bits and pieces of information he’d heard. Grasselli meant Rearden and they both meant the Doney brothers. Had Grasselli gotten eliminated for exceeding himself? Thinking on it, he concluded he’d never know. Just guesses but guesses were better than nothing.

He heard the rustle of fabric behind him, and he supposed she was wearing the silk dressing robe he’d bought her in China. He turned to her as she said, “Opening the office early, I see.”

He smiled. “Not really. It was personal.”

“How personal, or should I ask?”

“Baster Muldaur. He advised me on some possibilities of how my wife and children were murdered. Nothing ironclad but a pretty high probability.”

“Oh, sorry I asked. What did he say?”

He hadn’t intended to repeat the news, but did anyway and then he commented, “You’re up early yourself.”

“I awoke and you weren’t there and I heard speaking. I was wondering if someone had knocked on the door. Wrong suite or whatever. Then I realized you were glued to the red monster again. I’m thrilled to learn it wasn’t your new Muse in Shanghai.”

“Lay off her, Andrea.”

“Lay, you say. Ha! Now there, by golly, is an interesting idea.”

“Shall we?”

“Maybe. Why don’t you stop being such a clam and tell me why that woman calls here, all the way from China.”

“Jealous?”

“Not as long as she keeps to her side of the Pacific. Why should I be jealous?”

“I’ve no idea. But we all know what curiosity did to the cat.”

“Yes, we do. But I’m no cat.”

“Jia Ming is helping me find a bank to buy in Asia. She thinks she’s got a bead on one in Macao. It’s in a transactive stage, so that means lots of back and forth conferences.”

“Why is she the one doing it?”

“Two reasons. I trust her completely and she’s sharp as my straight razor.”

“Are you going back to China?”

“I’m debating it. I’ll have to go, if I buy a bank, Sign papers and whatever. Do a dance with the authorities, I’m sure, and probably, as a foreigner, post a lulu of a bond.”

“Do you like being rich again?”

“I like it a helluva lot better than the alternative.”

“Just thought I’d ask. Banks and such. I’m going to make a cup of tea. Like some?”

“Thanks, no. I’m headed back to the shut-eye department.”

“Feel like a back rub?”

“Not now.”

“Then, how about a front rub,” she teased. “Those always seem to have the most marvelous outcomes.”

“In one hour, please. My wake up call.”

“Little Kiki will be there, always ready for master-man.”

She didn’t make tea. Instead, waiting till he entered the hallway to the bedroom, she stepped to the bar and poured herself a stiff whiskey. It was barely five o’clock in the morning. She’d not had an alcoholic drink at this hour since college days, weekend parties; so long ago she couldn’t bring herself to think about it.

A nice taste to it, even at this ungodly hour, when nothing much would be happening in the eastern time zone, not for an hour or so. Yet plenty was happening in her nervous system. After this goblet, she might indulge in yet another or even two or three others.

She had much to be thankful for: she was solvent, extremely solvent—with enough financial padding to tell Flickinger or anyone else to go fly a kite, no, to go to hell, no again, to go fuck themselves; and thinking of fucking, she had never been as sexually excited, *never*, and she had known her share of partners.

She liked the man, liked him too much perhaps. Loved him, in fact, helplessly so. Full of man, that was her lover: hard, neat, masculine as anything, arrhythmia-inducing, and he came with those lavender-tinted eyes—swoon-makers. She distinctly recalled the first time he had gazed at her at that reception in the British Chancery, when Flickinger had introduced them. Eyes, he had once told her, that had earned him no end of fistfights as a youngster in the orphanage, where older bullies had teased that he was a faggot, a word he didn't really understand till he reached his twelfth birthday. By that time there was no one left who could lick him in a fight. But the eyes, of course, were as indelible as a birthmark, which indeed is what they were anyway.

Musing about his youth, or what she knew of it, she thought he was one of the few who had made that enormous leap from bare beginnings into the front-rank of his life's calling. A dealmaker. A juggler. An illusionist. Whatever it was—he was a remarkable cut of person. And he could fuck all the night when not burning the lamp across the street.

*You and me*, she had thought many times, just as if she were an adolescent in the mirage of a first love: giddy, feelings that throbbed, sexual wonderment, a million things.

Yet a nagging feeling pestered her that something wasn't quite kosher, but what was it? Even after a second trip to the makeshift bar, she had no idea of what was flitting around in her nervous mind. That she was in love? Was that it? That she suffered the historical sickness of all women who had gone to pieces over a man.

He had come back from that globe-girdling trip and had hardly said a paragraph about his stay in China. How curious. *How extremely*

*curious*. Everyone she had known, who had gone there, had come home raving about Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong.

But not the clammer, not him.

She had a bloodhound's nose for sniffing out stories. Something was up. Too much of a lull lately, much too much silence, and too many calls at strange hours. Even two calls from that darling Ambros Piegar. A call from a man named Joost; just who the hell was Joost? It sounded like a sports drink. Calls from the White House. Since moving in with him, she had, for the first time, seen lights burning late over there. Some nights he didn't return to the apartment until near midnight. So tired, so beat, he couldn't climb between the crook of her waiting legs.

What if we married? Not too late for children.

His family, wiped out. Marriage wouldn't be in his Tarot cards for quite a time to come. So, nix to that idea.

She ought to retrieve her mother, pry her away from that Italian Count. She was kept merchandise. *Her mother!* Slugging down a full gulp of the whiskey, as she said to herself half-aloud *and so am I*.

And one day he's not going to be around, so up what creek does that leave *moi*?



The **BLUE DOLLAR MEMO**, authored by Culhane for Halburton before the trip to Asia and Europe, was up for discussion this afternoon. It was a last ditch, sink or swim proposal meant to find a way for the nation to begin repaying its gigantic \$22 trillion in debts, owed largely to foreigners; and, at the same time, a way of putting Americans back to work. Unemployment stood at twenty-six percent of the workforce; stores opened for three days of the week, and sometimes only for two; factories at forty-percent of capacity, if running at all. A profligate America had spent its way into a grave, thanks to its politicians, and a national attitude that had asked for more and yet more, always to be paid by the mythical *other guy*. The quarter-century orgy had ended with a whimper, when the U.S.

government could no longer issue debt; its credit—meaning the public's credit—had tanked.

Europe had traveled the same path but had been smart enough to tighten its belts, long before, and, having paid its bills, was still relatively prosperous, learning a lesson that needed no re-learning.

The essence of the Blue Dollar concept was this: \$22 trillion would be repaid as the debt matured, in serial tranches, over the next twenty years or so. Payment to be made in Blue Dollars (having a value of three times the greenback, but with the Blue Dollars only usable by foreigners to buy U.S. made goods or services).

What this would do is even out the traditional U.S. foreign trade imbalances with its creditors, and, since the Blue Dollars could be used for no other purpose than to Buy America, the effect would be to power up the nation's factories and get workers working again.

If, as a creditor you wanted to cash in your Treasuries, you could either lump it and accept near worthless greenback dollars, or realize a greater value with the Blue Dollar by buying American-made aircraft, autos, farm equipment, computers, hundreds of other products, or any number of services such as legal, accounting, marketing, on and on.

Was there precedent for new currency? Many, in fact as the memo itemized.

At its beginnings, America's colonies had issued its own metal and paper money; later, the various states did the same through their independently chartered banks; later yet, Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, issued the first of the U.S.'s national currencies that underwent changes, and when the South attempted succession it added the Confederacy's version. Europe had done more or less the same when taking a dozen separate currencies and consolidating them into the Euro. In 2010, Taiwan created NT\$, a separate currency to strictly transact with mainland China.

It was all fiat, meaning none of the currencies were backed with anything hard, like gold; instead, they represented a perceived value relative to the currencies of other blocs or nations.

What, for example, as Culhane had posed in his memo, was a Russian ruble really worth? Not much unless you wanted vodka, caviar, oil or gas. Except when Moscow or Gasprom sold fuels, they insisted on payment in foreign currencies. Indeed, the ruble was worth nothing more than what Moscow's opinion said it was worth, and comparatively few in this world rated that opinion any too highly.

Creditors, when learning they'd be paid in *blues* would likely squawk.

Yet, and much like a bank, the creditors should've weighed the risks before being suckered into lending trillions to idiotic politicians; for, it was plain to see it was they, and they alone, who had plunged Americans into the poorhouse.

Still, the Blue Dollar amounted to repayment of a kind; and on that, there was little dispute. Most Americans would never have access to the Blue Dollar unless they were holders of U.S. government debt obligations. If they were ever to receive Blue Dollars, and had no use of them, then they could sell or trade them, at market. The sole differences between the "greenback" and the "blueback" was in their use and value: the *blues*, at least originally would have three times the worth of the green, and they could only be used for the export of American goods and services. Blue, green, yellow, whatever. Paper, just paper, and a way to settle accounts.

Blue, to the savvier thinkers, was a device for stabilizing and then reversing the nation's nosedive, giving America time to get itself in working order.



In his shirtsleeves, Halburton sat behind his desk in the Oval Office, his eyes weary-looking, and hair, if anything, a shade grayer. A peril-packed month. The Congress was still in disarray, the national temperament smoldered, the unemployed clamored for more aid, the states—most of them—were broke as were all cities with populations of a million or more.

For how much longer could it go on?

Problems incubated other problems, with no week passing when tougher and tougher decisions plagued the presidency. The stresses showed in his body and sometimes in the speech, a reflection perhaps of a mind without any peace and that had run into too many dead-ends.

Now this Blue Dollar novelty, a bizarre idea to the few, just as was its companion, Hormuz. They were linked, or would be.

The Navy bellowed complaints that it was under-resourced for the Hormuz mission...a mission proposed by an amateur, Culhane, who hadn't an iota of experience in military-led operations of such far-reaching consequences.

Timidity existed at the top; an invitation for even more trouble and much more turmoil.

Again, sitting with Halburton, the exasperated Culhane pressed his point with, "I know you're not wild about this idea. I admit it's chancy, but there's no other way I can think of that's less chancy. You've got to swing the tide somehow. Stun them. Band-Aids and crossed fingers aren't going to get it for you. Another year of this and America will be in rebellion."

"Well, I'm worried," said Halburton. "Frankly, and I don't mind admitting it, that I 'spect I'm terribly confused. A laughing-stock."

"No one's going to be laughing, I can guarantee you. And remember, the Blue Dollar is one thing you can do that doesn't require an okay from Congress."

"What I meant was—

"Look, if you want to sit it out, wait for the Second Coming or something as unlikely, you'll be remembered in history as a joke, as a dud. Things are in motion. A few more dots to connect and that ought to do it. If you pull back now, you're done for. So is the country."

"I suppose I should confess I did show the memo to two of the members on the Council of Economic Advisers."

"Sorry to hear you did."

"They consider the whole thing a shakedown."

"More like a shakeup."

“Also, that it’s, ah, well you could say too confusing of a concept fuh the average American.”

“Is that so? I can tell you what confuses average Americans. What they want to know is why they can’t find a steady job, or how to feed the family. How long have they got a roof over their heads? That’s what confuses them. They don’t care and they won’t about the color of the dollar or much else.”

“You’re always so damn certain, are you not?”

“I am today, Halburton...and you’d soon better be. Before I forget, I appreciate your help in having my gold returned.”

“Yes. I suppose *yuh*-re owed an apology of some sort.”

“It’s done, that’s all that matters to me.”

“Not many people liked the idea of me becoming President. Through the side door, at that, after that black fool shot himself not ten feet from here. Few offered to help. I turned to Van Slyke for advice and, well, you know the rest.” The President’s face spoke its own apology.

“I don’t mind getting used once in a while. I like awful much being asked first,” Culhane said.

“I couldn’t be sure of you.”

“We’re even.”

He was used to Culhane’s brutish replies; still, Halburton jerked a little. He stood, went to the French doors looking out to the Rose Garden. Facing the doors, he spoke: “Would you consider taking over for Squires at Treasury.”

“No, thank you.”

“I’ve got to get him out of there. He tries to block me at every turn.”

“I’ll take care of Squires...”

“How?”

“You don’t want to know, believe me.”

“But I do want to know.”

“Someday, not now. You’re better off not knowing.”

“I’m the president.”

“And I’m your comprador, your middleman, the fixer...so listen and then try to trust me,” hearing Halburton let out a mournful sigh. “Have someone call Squires and tell him I’ll be in his office at five sharp, that he’s to clear his calendar if there’s a conflict.”

“Have you some sort of information on him?”

“I do.”

“And I can’t know?”

“You’ll know after I talk to him.”

“Why not now?”

“Because you’ll come up with ten reasons not to act.”

“I’m to be insulted again, too, I see.”

“It’s not an insult, it’s simply the way you are. You like everything tied up like a wedding gift. I’m making no gifts. I simply want action, fast, and with no resistance and futzing about.”

“I am cautious, I agree. Most people growing up on a ranch are careful. Careful of the land, what money they have, their herds, about everything else in their lives.”

“You have to understand that you’ll be a long, long time getting a second chance. So we must *move*, we must! We’re going to tilt the markets in America’s favor. The markets that count. We’re going to control most of the world’s food supplies for a couple of years. More even. If you have that on your side, you’ve got immense power as I’ve told you and told you...it’s set up, almost all of it and I’m not about to undo it. As to Hormuz, and the Navy...you’ll have a much better chance of overall success, if you support what we’re doing. What I’m doing anyway. When we square up the whole setup, Russia will be in shambles and Europe will have freed themselves from that mess. It’s damn near a perfect setup...but it awaits you. If you don’t consent, I’m through here. Washington is a pain in the canetta anyway.”

“All right, all right.”

“All right *what*?”

“I hope to God you know what you are doing.”

“I do know. I’ll be by your office tomorrow and let you know what strings I’ve attached to Squires. Very soon I’m going to return to Europe. I’ve got to clear some air with Joost Van Slyke, but the main reason is to meet with Pieggar, the senior Pieggar.”

“That banker at BIS?”

“Right. We’ll go over that tomorrow or very soon. I’ve got to go now and re-read a file before I see Squires.”

“I hope you have better luck than I do.”

“We’ll see. By the way, I’ve discharged Flickinger. He’s a tricky customer, and that’s another by-the-way.”

“I understand he introduced you to quite a lovely lady.”

“She did more of the introducing than he did. I will say I offered no maidenly resistance along that way. You ought to make her your press secretary. She knows the game and she’ll keep you out of a lot of trouble, when our battle plan breaks into the open.”

“I’ll be off now, unless you have anything else.” Halburton shook his head, and smiling to himself, Culhane departed.

Halburton had the same sense of things that Andrea had posed to herself in the early hours of this morning. He, too, wondered, if Culhane was readying himself for an escape from Washington. He’d be missed. He was very good at his business. Van Slyke had picked the right man.

Then, Halburton sat in his reading chair, carrying a top secret memorandum from the Department of Navy, listing the minuses of engaging in the proposed Hormuz incident. More grim reading, he thought, but studied it again for the third time.



From the phone in his office, Culhane spoke to Andrea, “I’ll catch up with you at six-thirty or so. Fredy’s got swordfish for us. We’re leaving for Europe in three days, so make sure your passport is in good order.”

“*We’re?* Me, too?”

“Unless you’d rather skip it. But remember, you’ve got business to take care of at Braunschweig. So do I, but mine’s quite different. We can fly over on a State Department courier plane. Paris, first. Shall I have them put you on the manifest?”

“Are you still in your right mind, mister...I’m packing...I’m packing...”



Squires had chosen the Cash Room at Treasury for their meeting. Culhane had never seen it before, nor even heard of it: it dated to 1860, was designed in the fashion of a palazzo, marble everywhere, gilt-edged ceilings that supported a series of chandeliers. Meant to impress, and it did. His second reaction was that Squires—that feather-headed peacock, with a multi-colored silk square tucked into his sleeve—wanted to send a message: that here, he was king, historically the second-ranking member of the Cabinet.

They sat in a corner of the Room that seemed the size of a regulation tennis court.

Squires, a displeased look on his face, said, “Let’s make this quick. I’m due in Georgetown for a reception. “

“You bet. I’ve excerpted three pages from a file that concerns you. Four intelligence agencies, to include CIA, compiled it over the years. It’s about drug money laundering, the St. Gallen Trust, the Reardens, the Doney crime family and then we get to you, Squires.”

Culhane slid a manila envelope across the table, the envelope traveling as if on greased glass, landing precisely at Squires’s right wrist.

“In that file you’ll find some interesting nighttime reading. About Lichtenstein and so forth. It seems you never reported your ownership in a foreign bank when you were confirmed by the Senate Banking Committee. You are now liable for perjury, a felony, and I assume you’re aware of what can happen to felons.”

“An oversight.”

“I don’t think other will see it that way, not when you add in the other stack of peccadilloes. You’re a damn fraud, Squires.”

“I’ve friends in the Congress, you know.”

“You’ll need more than friends, buster. I assume you’ve heard from Rearden.”

In a surly, sniffing tone. “I have. And so?”

“Same deal as his, the same everything. You sign over your Liechtenstein company to me, and I refer to the one holding the shares in Braunschweig and I’ll do as I’m doing for Rearden. I’ll destroy the originals and any copies of pages affecting you. I’ll pay you the minimum legal consideration of twenty-five dollars for Liechtenstein.”

“You’d better get the hell out of here or I’ll call security.”

“While you’re at it, ask if they’ll give me a lift over to the Attorney General’s office. He’d have to act against you, you know. Anything he left undone, and I doubt if it’d be much, I’d take care of it personally. And I’d start by hanging you by your *huevos* if you have any...like to try me out...”

“Who the hell do you think you are?”

“The boy that has you by your ass, that’s who I am. You and I are going to go over a litany of things that you’ll soon be doing. From now forward, you’ll take direct orders from me or from Halburton and you’ll not deviate a millimeter from any of them.” Pressing hard, Culhane shifted gears. “If you think I’m joking, put a call into the Attorney General and we’ll have a three-way tête-à-tête. You’ve got one chance to make up your mind, Squires, and that chance is fast fading. Or, as they say, you’ve got the right to remain silent and see what happens in the life and times of Joshua Squires...you’ll be nailed, I assure you.”

Squires’s shoulders rose, as if in defiance, then as suddenly they slumped as his gaze found his hands. He reddened. A nervous tic pulled at his right eye. When talk resumed, it was stiff and harsh, most of it coming from a spring-loaded Culhane who instructed the Secretary to ready his Department for the Blue Dollar; that, he

himself would be available to give a briefing at Treasury the following Monday, “Set that up, please. The announcement about the Blue Dollar will come directly from the White House in a network-speech to be delivered by Halburton. There’re bound to be leaks,” Culhane went on, “so any inquiries from the media or from any foreign ministry will be referred to my office and to no one else. I’ll be the one to brief Congress, not you...and you’ll be getting a to-do list from my office tomorrow morning. The White House will stand for no excuses and no delays...”

As Culhane left the building; he thought he had a fix, or a semi-fix, or as close as he could get it at this moment, to hand Halburton. Squires ought to be busted out of government, but who’d take the job during this muddle?

Endlessly, it irked him to think he’d been snookered into coming to Washington. Yet here he was, and there was nothing else for it now than to do whatever he could. Liking the odds of success, more and more, as long as he could count on the Magans to help hold the mud together, while events took their turn making some history.

## Davos

**T**he largest of the world's ski resorts, Davos was also Europe's highest city. On this day, Ambros Pieggar was coasting along on a high of his own. Swaddled in tangle of flannel sheets, after an afternoon rumpus with Panzi Molitor, he lay next to her in an oversized four-poster at the Chalet Mädl, a smallish and somewhat exclusive lodge at the foot of the Rinerhorn: it was Davos's so-called "magic mountain" boasting countless ski trails and snow-boarding runs, and where Panzi, twice ranked as Europe's top female down-hiller, had strapped on her first pair of skis as a five-year old. .

A day adorned with its own blessings. A dazzling, bridal-white, sunny morning, a lunch of Bündnerfleisch and salat verte at a hut-like restaurant they liked, indeed, where they first laid eyes on each other three years earlier. Then, after lunch, they had made a beeline for the sack and a session of what they jokingly referred to as a horizontal yoga workout.

Then the news, hers, first.

"...I mean, Godsakes, you'd think I was an invalid..."

"You must've known something when you were training in Portillo."

"Only that I missed my period twice, but that can happen when you're physically exhausting yourself every day. And then when I missed number three, I knew junior was on the way."

"I know it's a giant disappointment, but you've been skiing your gorgeous buns off for all these years, won everything that's winnable, and maybe it's time to hang up your poles. Competitively speaking."

“I wanted one last try at the World Cup. Out the window with that notion, according to the obstetrician anyway.”

“Let’s take no chances. I spent one whole night getting you knocked up.”

Panzi swatted him playfully. “You couldn’t name that night if it meant your life.”

“It does mean my life. Both our lives. Aren’t you excited about the baby?”

“Ecstatic. When you put your ear on my stomach, didn’t you hear the symphony down there?”

“Come to think of that, maybe we’ll have another Mozart. I can see the headlines: *Setting a record for hip-to-hip action, Panzi Molitor, famed Swiss skier, and Ambros Piegars, announce the birth of their first child, who was delivered, quite amazingly, with a conductor’s baton in one hand. The happy couple plan on ten children, intent, as they are, in screwing away until they can field a full string quartet—*”

“Shush.”

“How can I shush? It’s a future of sensational prospects and we haven’t even tied the knot yet.”

“To the great satisfaction of your dear father. What about him? He’s still against us teaming up, isn’t he?”

“I’ve not asked him, nor do I intend to.”

“He’s against it, I’m sure.”

“He’s against the sun shining unless he first gives his okay. Who cares what he thinks? He’ll never change and neither will I. I sometimes wonder if we share the same genes...I’ll have to check with my mother someday, see if she had a toss in the hay with a passing postman. She always likes her fun.”

“So does someone else I know. You’re your mother’s son, all right.”

“When my mother finds out she’s about to be a granny, she’ll have a street named after you. Panzistrasse. I like that, Panzistrasse has a nice solid ring to it. Sounds like one of our army tanks.”

“A *tank!*”

“I wasn’t comparing you to the actual thing. I was thinking about the *oomph*. The inflection denoting strength and fortitude—”

“Ambros, darling, you’ve got the best line of bullshit in all Switzerland. Speaking of inflection, why don’t you inflect your way over here and I’ll get you more acquainted with Panzi’s little intersection at the corner of Panzistrasse and Peigarstrasse. The intersection is feeling quite warm at the moment and you can make it even warmer.”

“What a girl! You’ll never keep me away,” and he rolled to her.

Afterward, dozing, they awoke to the first of the evening stars twinkling through the darkened glass of the bedroom window. A small debate, then, if they should have dinner sent up, but instead they decided to descend to the chalet-inn’s cozy, wood-beamed dining room. Panzi had stepped from the shower, toweling herself; still jay-naked, busying herself with a hair dryer while keeping up a casual patter with Ambros. Most of her was visible in the mirror’s reflection: the merry eyes that seemed to swim him into her very being, her five-foot-seven of packed womanhood; an amazingly coordinated body with those paired, pink-studded flattish breasts, and that fluffy triangular muff exactly matching in color the coal-black hair falling to her shoulders.

The perfect prototype, he thought—perfect for me anyway.

Often he ranked himself as the luckiest man this side of Honolulu, and right this second, gazing at her, loving her, crazed about her, he knew he was right as true North is to a navigator.

Thrilled, too, that she was expecting, that no longer would she gallivant off to months of FIS skiing competitions, especially since he hadn’t the time to trek after her.

Scanning her smooth belly as she turned away from the mirror, he wondered how there could ever be enough room in there for a baby. Almost four months gone and as yet no discernible rise, and he had twenty-twenty vision. Sweet mysteries of life. Earlier, before their afternoon rendezvous, he had placed one ear flat against her belly

button, searching for sounds. None, however, and Panzi had laughed at his silliness.

What was also silly was her refusal to accept support from him before marriage. In the off-season, she worked in sales for her father, the owner of a bar equipment business. Famous in her own right, she could get herself through any door anywhere in Europe, was so personable she wrote sales orders as fast as she could scribble the details.

On the road to motherhood now, he wanted her to take it easy, use his money, and to get used to the idea that he'd be the one bringing home the bacon. Reveling, as she always had, in her autonomy, prizing her independence, making him tentative about pressing the issue. Marriage would settle it, and the sooner the better for him; mindful, as he was, that she'd turned down that exact offer from other men three times already. She'd never mentioned the fact, but her father had, and Ambros had sent the competition packing, and wanted it left that way.

Enough of that song, he thought.

All around, it had been a marvelous day: stellar sex, broaching the topic of marriage, reassuring Panzi his father could like it or lump it, and even a short but telling discourse on life as an innkeeper as soon as he could shake loose of Braunschweig.

No simple decision, however. Piegars were bankers from way back. Shultheiss's, on his mother's side, were the leading industrial family of Switzerland. Likely, collectively, they'd remonstrate were he to tell them he was about to go into the hospitality game to cater to tourists and fun-seekers.

Therefore, he'd do it. His mind was made up. If Panzi wanted it, he'd do it and the hell with everyone else. Besides, who wanted to count money forever and a day?

Buttoning up a blue-checked flannel shirt, Ambros expelled another thought that had nagged at him for days. "Remember that gent I was telling you about? The American Culhane who came to Zurich a

few weeks ago. Had all sorts of incredible news, most of it enough to make you go gray overnight.”

Slipping on her briefs, she intoned, “Vaguely, I remember. What’s up?”

“He called a couple of days ago. He’s coming back to Europe and he wants Braunsweig to buy a small bank in Macau. He has someone out there to look after things, he says. A Haitian. I’ve never heard of a Haitian banker before in China...but this Culhane is an interesting dude. Would you like to meet him?”

“I don’t know why I should, unless he sells cars. Mine is almost ten years old and it’s giving me trouble.”

“He sells plenty, buys plenty too. But I don’t think cars are in his inventory. I’ll give you a car. Make it expensive, it’s your wedding present.”

“Are we getting married?”

“Are you thinking of having Mozart without a legitimate father?”

“All right, if you want to. You’d better cool off your father first.”

“I thought I said it doesn’t matter.”

“It always matters, Ambros.”

“I’m going to tell him that one more ear-bruising from him about you, and I’ll put my ski boots up his you-know-where.”

“I really think you’d do it, too.”

“I would, you’re right. He gets on my nerves. He’s been getting on them, since I was old enough to hear his tirades. A sour grape artist, if I ever met one. Also stingy. He makes my mother spend her own money to run their homes. I can’t believe she lets him get away with it. I don’t know why she hasn’t flipped him the adios-finger a long time ago.”

“Well. Let me know if it ever comes to blows. I’d like a front-row ticket.”

“Where were we? I’m losing my train of thought.”

“Cars, marriage, the American. A mouthful...what’s the American’s name?”

“C-u-l-h-a-n-e.” Ambros spelled it aloud. “Andrea Warren says he’s one of the big enchiladas in Washington.”

“Bully for him. Do you still gab with her?” Looking at him intently now.

“Andre and I haven’t had a pow-wow for a couple of years. She called several weeks ago, telling me Culhane wanted to meet. Some meeting. But bully is the right word. He’s a nice guy who eats nails. He’s managed to get his hands on quite a hunk of Braunsweig. With what my father owns, and I own, and Culhane owns...we can call the tunes at the bank whenever we choose to.”

“Is this Culhane your boss now?”

“Oh, no, I doubt it. Too pedestrian for him, I’d bet. He’s, ah, a sort of buccaneer.”

“I wish you’d leave Braunsweig for good. It’s been rotten for your health.”

“The doc says I’m practically a new man.”

“I know you don’t need any Viagra.”

“Happily, not. But if I left Braunsweig, what would I do? Sell autos?”

“We could plead for a bank loan and try to buy that inn we’ve talked about. Klosters or somewhere close by. Ski when we feel like it, harry the guests, rob them blind whenever possible, make some babies. Beats anything Zurich has to offer.”

“I like the idea of that inn. But I don’t know anyone who could lay waste to an inn faster than yours truly.”

“Never fret, my darling. I’ll be there to keep my eye on things.”

“You’d really want that life? You’re positive?”

“Yesterday, today, tomorrow—yes, I’d really want that life.”

“As matters stand, I owe Culhane some help. So, I’d have to stay at the bank another six months. At most, a year. I think he’s going to make us a great hunk of money. If that happens, you can have your inn or even a full-fledged hotel. You can have it right now, actually.”

“Now? You can afford an inn? You’re kidding. Would you have to sell your Braunsweig shares?”

“I’ve other money hidden under the mattress. I can handle anything up to twenty-million Swiss francs. Anything more and I’d have to haul out the abacus. But if buying an inn gets your gears whirring, then we’ll buy an inn. We may have to wait a little, though, as I said, because I want you within kissing range and a daily commute to Zurich from here is much too depressing a prospect.”

Clothed now, Panzi came to him. Standing before him, she lowered both hands, cradling his face and lifting it. “I’m with you, my man. Where you go, I go. What you do, I do. It’s us and that little passenger inside me. You decide.”

“I decide this...we don’t have to wait another minute. You see an inn you like, you dial up your old buddy, Ambros Pieggar, and tell him Christmas is arriving early this year.”

“You mean that, really?”

“In spades, hearts, and diamonds. Especially, the diamonds.”

Raising her eyes to the ceiling, she said, “Thank you, God, for sending me this lovely fool of a man.”

“Thank Him for me, too. I can never adequately explain how happy you make me. Are you ready to go down? I’ve released a lot of male energy in that bed over there and I’m famished.”

“We can still have dinner sent up. If you’ll add in some champagne, I’ll fuck you straight into this floor I’m standing on.”

“You’re my dessert.”

“Dessert, is it? Huh. Well, better than being a tank, I guess.”

“Let’s pull stakes before I faint. I want to tell you a little story. No, a big story. Immense, I think. Life is always a little crazy, but I think it’s about to go over the edge. If we can put off that inn for a while, I bet we can get it at some helluva discount.”

“Is that so? How do you figure on that?”

“It’s guesswork, but my instincts tell me Herr Culhane is fixing to light the firecracker of all time.”

“Tell me.”

“Downstairs.”

“Can’t you at least hint? You’re so secretive sometimes, Ambros.”

“That’s because when I’m not playing house with you, I’m a Swiss banker. You know about Swiss banking and secrecy. Fingers on the same hand. It’s how we manage to pilfer so much from the world’s tax collectors. But to answer your question, Culhane is Shang-Magan and—”

“Shangs what—?”

He told her a little of what he knew. Not much, for he didn’t know that much himself, but he knew more than most outsiders. Telling her it was a private coterie of high-rolling traders from several continents, who managed massive commodity transactions, always in the heavy millions and frequently in the billions. Very rich men, powerful, extremely talented; then, about to run out of descriptives, he finished with: “And while I’m shooting in the dark, I’m quite sure it’s all gonna end like two planets colliding. I wish to Christ I could hang around in Culhane’s head for a day or two...and if we don’t get downstairs pretty soon, they’ll have shut the kitchen.”

“You can always do one of your nutty balcony scenes and end by snacking on me,” Panzi teased, throwing him a hundred-watt smile. “Oh, all right, downstairs”—a little peeved—“but you know what the lobby’ll be like.” She backed away. “I must find my chap stick. Do you have it?”

“I don’t, no.”

“Where did I put it?”

“Who knows, I don’t.”

“I’ll only be a moment.”

Ten minutes later, after a search that would do justice to a toss of a prison inmate’s cell, looking for contraband, they were out in the hallway on the way to the stairwell. He wondered if he could pull off what every trader dreams of, the score of all scores. Say, the equivalent of what it would take to buy ten inns, not that he intended to. His thoughts churning, asking himself: well, why not go for broke?

Well, halfway for broke. Five inns worth, say, or something along those lines.

Nearing the lobby, he hoped no autograph hounds were lurking; insisting to himself that tonight belonged to them alone, and meaning to keep it that way. Everywhere she went, it was as if bees had informed humans how to find nectar, and tonight would be no different.

Soon as he put his foot on the lobby floor, the gawkers moved in, snapping photos, waving papers and beseeching Panzi for signatures; one idiot cupped an exploring hand against her rear, bringing forth her squawk of protest.

Ambros decked him with a single chop to the throat, combat style, lessons learned from army training. The ensuing scene broke up the gaggle, but by then the mood of the night had splintered. Escaping to their room, they dined on a bottle of Napoleon's favorite champagne—*Signature*—along with a plate of Gruyere cheese, Greek olives, and wheat crackers.

As midnight announced itself on the village bells, they were locked up in each other's limbs again. In bliss, riding the ether-waves, later, he ascended from a haze of contentment as Panzi slept. His mind turned again to Culhane, whom he was most anxious to connect with.

Those lunkheads at the The New York Corporation and the Singaporean, Liu Wai, were short the dollar to the tune of hundreds of millions. What was up? Was someone setting a trap? Ambros was a highly competent trader, not the best in Europe but the best at Braunsweig. He had the experienced trader's sense of things, the tiny price swirls and smaller ripples in the markets that signaled changes were likely afoot. He felt it, had felt it often enough over the past week so that it had perked up his wariness.

Culhane might know. But would he say, even hint? Culhane had urged him to buy gold, hadn't he?

Then: what would an inn cost? Panzi, so popular, would keep it booked to overflowing. It didn't matter what it cost. Ambros, just then, was loving life.

## Paris

A hefty part of that day was spent at Credit Lyonnais, rummaging through the files again, marking passages with a felt pen, or, in some cases, ripping out and shredding entire passages of a page's contents. He had promised Rearden and promised Squires that if they did as demanded, he'd comply with his promise. Because he had no time to review the tapes, he crushed them, then ran the pulp through the shredder.

He made copies of the parts of the file dealing with Liu Wai and Hans-Otto Pieggar, who, when he'd been Braunsweig's managing partner in its Zurich office, had made the link-up between his bank and Rearden and Squires; later, when Liu Wai and the Doney's of New York had needed a money-laundering haven to house their drug income, the St. Gallen Trust had been organized by Pieggar senior, and very profitably so for Braunsweig and all other parties to the cabal.

It was no worse than other similar enterprises operating out of the Cayman Islands, the Bahamas, Panama, Switzerland and, not least, Lichtenstein.

At four o'clock, wrapping up, he assembled the papers he needed and walked across Place Vendome in the fading winter light to the Ritz. Paris, no matter the season, had the best of all twilights, he thought. Pink laced with gray, like the fabric of a *haute couture* dress. A lovely sight, even a lovely feeling.

Ten minutes later, he entertained himself with another string of lovely feelings, sitting across from Andrea, drinking Armagnac, in the bar on the Rue Cambon side of the hotel. "I've got to spend the day tomorrow in Amsterdam with Joost Van Slyke. I'll be back by

dinnertime. I've a car rented, a Ferrari. How would you feel about making the drive to Davos tomorrow night after the traffic has cleared?"

"How glorious. What model Ferrari? It doesn't matter, does it? Any model is divine."

"It's a 612 Scaglietti."

"Ummh-yum. Can I do the driving?"

"Sure, if you prefer. You'll be all right by yourself, will you? A day of larking about in Paris."

"I'll be just fine, thanks. There's an exhibition I'd like to see at Musèe d'Orsay. They've a retrospective of the impressionists, and besides, I love those lunchtime concerts. Been an age since I've heard one. Have I ever told you I spent a semester at the Sorbonne?"

"No, I don't think you ever said."

"I did. My junior year at Vassar, and my family thought I was seeing too much of a Yalie, so they packed me off. I ought to see if I can find my old apartment house. I shared three rooms with five girls...it was horridly bad..."

"What happened to the guy from Yale?"

"Killed in a hang-glider accident. Out in La Jolla."

"Sorry."

"A nice guy, too. Captain of their hockey team and his sister rode in the Olympics. A family of trophy collectors. You're worried, aren't you?"

"Some, I am. These are worrisome times."

"Something's really gnawing at you. I can tell."

"You've got well-tuned female radar. Well-tuned many things. Yes, I'm worried but what worries me will have to wait. I've got to make a couple of calls, then take a shower. You're invited to the shower if you'd care for a little Culhane soap-work on your back. You can choose any place you like for dinner."

"Lasserre? Is that too expensive?"

"Not for you and me, kid. No scrimping for us."

"I'm for that shower, let's march..."

“You’re laughing.”

“I am laughing. I suddenly remembered something that happened in my student days here. I’d overspent my allowance and this painter, he was an older guy about forty who we’d met in a cheap bistro we frequented...well, after a couple of times bumping into him, he asked me if I’d pose for him. He offered me a hundred Euros. In the cause of poverty, I succumbed. It was a nude, although I had a pink scarf draped over my you-know-what. My mother probably would have had a good belly laugh about it, had she found out. Not my grandmother, she would’ve fried me in turpentine.”

“Enterprising of you. What happened to the painting?”

“Beats me. Probably collecting dust in the flea market.”

“If you can find it, I’ll buy it.”

“And do what?”

“Add it to my others.”

“You will *not!*”

“I’ve seen your many charms, many times. Never enough, of course, but I hope more frequently than your painter friend.”

“He was a convenience, nothing more. Besides, with you it’s different. *Very different.* And I don’t wish to be wall art for everyone to see, not when I’m naked anyway.”

“Okay, I’ll buy it and bring it out for an airing once every year. You can compare yourself on such occasions, check your weight and how the twins are holding up.”

“Twins? What’s...oh, my—boobs. God, you! I think it’s time for that shower.”

“Yes, it is. Let’s get there while you’re still thinking good thoughts.”

## Amsterdam

**F**reeze-rain slashed the city with its gloomy chill, but inside Van Slyke's somewhat drafty 17<sup>th</sup> century residence three roaring fireplaces threw heat everywhere. They sat where they always sat, in the great room, oak-paneled and oak-beamed, dark today but cozy in its Nordic comforts.

Interrupted twice by a messenger-boy who brought folded yellow sheets with text that demanded Joost's urgent attention. The second time, he told the boy no more intrusions, till he instructed otherwise.

"Apologies, Rushton...appears to be a shakeup at the Kremlin. A message from Kiev..."

"Nurischev?"

Van Slyke shrugged. "Didn't say. The press hasn't picked up on it, and likely won't for another day. Ka will likely use this to embroider her endeavors for you. Her break-out pieces were marvelous, and would have fooled me had I not known otherwise."

"She's a true star. I'm going to do something for her. I don't know what, but if you come up with an idea let me in on it."

"I shall try...let's go forward, you were mentioning something about Braunsweig when the boy came in."

"Yes, I was. I currently control almost a fifth of their shares. I make it at probably 700-million Euros, give or take. I wheedled the shares out of Rearden and Squires, paying nothing for them. I needed them for leverage. That's a story for another time. I won't be holding the ownership for long but you're entitled to know because Braunsweig is Swiss and Switzerland is in your zone."

“I appreciate your telling me. That’s substantial, very substantial. I’d like to know how you did it.”

After relating the gist of the tale, the coercion applied, the threats amounting to nothing short of blackmail, Culhane said: “It’s a sad-ass situation and you can see, or partly see, the bums they have in government and what it leads to. People don’t seem to care much who they elect until they’re down the tube so far you, well, who knows better than the Shan Chu...”

“Who do you plan to sell the Braunschweig shares to?”

“I plan to trade them for a bank in Macao.”

“Then you’ll have accomplished nothing, you’ll be in Liu Wai’s backyard and he’ll yell to the heavens.”

“I was just about to get to him. I’m fixing to kick his ass out of Shang Magan. Either he goes or I do.” Hesitantly, Culhane fished an envelope out of the inside pocket of his suit coat. Handing it across to Joost, he said, “There’s some highly incriminating material in there about Wai. He’s been mixed up with Rearden and that Doney crime family in New York. They’ve been laundering big swaths of drug money through a Swiss trust. Three national intelligence agencies know the score...that envelope tells much of what they’re privy to. They also know he’s a Magan, so that leads them to the rest of us. Eventually, a lot of trouble could result. We could all be named as accessories and I want no part of it—”

Joost Van Slyke raised a hand the size of a ping-pong paddle. “Enough said, leave it all to me.”

“I will.”

“We’ll want you back, resuming North America as soon as you finish up in Washington.”

“I’m about done in Washington. I plan to set up shop in China, probably Shanghai. If you give Liu Wai the pitch, I’d like to be considered for the Asia slot. I’ve got two people in mind as suggestions for North America. One’s a top grain trader in Winnipeg, and the other is an oilman out of Tulsa. Either man would be excellent. I can send you all the data on them you want, whenever you’d like.”

Nodding, Van Slyke asked, “Is there more for me to know on pending events. I refer especially to what Ka’s been drumming up. I’ve gone out on a limb for you, for America too...so I hope you’ll confide because I must guard our interests in Europe.”

“As long as it’s between you and me. Strictly us, Joost. You can tell the others how to place their bets, but not the specifics of why.”

When Van Slyke nodded, Culhane filled him in on the Blue Dollar and the impending operation in Hormuz.

“Christ’s bowels,” Van Slyke cried out, jackknifing his huge frame out of the equally huge chair, pacing his way to the bow-front window, staring out. “I know you’re serious, I’m trying to see the implications. How do we get our hands on the Blue Dollars?”

“Buy up U.S. government debt. You can get all of it you want at a sixty-percent discount to par. Trade it in for the Blueboys and you’ll be awash, making a helluva profit in the process.”

“You, too.”

Culhane shook his head. “Regrettably, I can’t get into it. I’m no lily but that would be twisting what’s left of my ethics into a pretzel. I’m not only an insider; I’m the promulgator of much of this. One day, it’ll get out, or a lot of it will, and there’re innocent people who could get tarred. If it were known I jiggered a massive situation to make a big killing for myself, well, you know the rest. More than that, when it does get out, how it all happened, I’ll be a marked man.”

“I see your view, yes. Good! Not so good about being marked, though. You may be safer in Asia...very good. Another point in your favor.”

Van Slyke regarded his younger colleague, always liking Culhane as a person and how he comported himself: his cool headedness, his deal-skills, a straight player. That respect was now rising to yet another rung, giving Van Slyke a strong sense of contentment about the future of Shang-Magan. An artist at his trade, Culhane had what it took: a knack for knowing what he wanted, where to find it, and how to get it.

Asia. Culhane wanted Asia. Interesting.

The world never stood still, did it? What the world needed, thought the big Dutchman, was something like a giant tetanus shot to ward off its many ills.

An hour after Culhane departed for Paris, Joost Van Slyke swung the largest trade of his life. Using his vast credit lines at a dozen banks, he bought futures on 500-million barrels of oil, 270 tons of gold, and 400-million bushels of wheat. When, an hour later, he flashed news of the reported Kremlin upheaval to the other Magans, he suggested they consider making similar trades...without, of course, telling them why, except that he had had a visit from the master American market-maker.

Though not a religious man, he prayed God that Rushton Culhane knew what he was about; many gears to turn, markets to engineer and then re-engineer, tea leaves to read and read them correctly. They'd all need the best *joss*, and plenty of it.

When was this incident at Hormuz to happen?

What if it didn't happen?

All this coursed this through his head as he hand-combed his red beard. He had to admit he was excited; at heart he was a trader, the biggest by far in Europe. Today, and foreseeably, he had plenty riding on the word of one American; an American he had coldly tricked not so many months ago.

## Paris Davos

Using the CIA communication lines at the U.S. embassy on Place Concorde, he talked with Halburton, submitting updates. Hormuz was still on, he learned; the linchpin incident designed to remake the transatlantic oil markets, shut off the Middle East for a time, and reset certain trade imbalances with Asia.

At nine that evening, he stood outside the Ritz, watching as Andrea poked her head through the driver's window, admiring the interior's hand-rubbed black leather and polished walnut burl trim on the dashboard and armrests.

"You promised I could drive."

Smiling, he said, "Keep it on the ground, if you can. These babies are faster than you think."

"You're gonna see what steel snake hips are all about," Andrea replied as she slid behind the wheel.

Davos lay 380 miles distant, a ride through some of the more attractive French by-ways, and then, across the border into Switzerland, and Andrea drove ferociously, whipping the Ferrari's engine into a protesting whine. He was impressed; she drove like a pro, handling the road curves perfectly, heel-and-toeing the brake and accelerator pedals, and shifting gears flawlessly. Words, passing occasionally and mostly unheard, were buried under the sound of hurtling speed. Signposts blurred. Tunnels howled their echoes. Andrea had spent but a few minutes consulting a Michelin map, and she seemed to know the way as if it were her own neighborhood.

Crossing the Swiss border near Basel, they pulled over to tank up and stretch their legs. Off again, Andrea still at the wheel, an hour later in the waning moonlight, Culhane searched across the scree of the ever-rising mountainscape. Everything had moved at once: themselves, the willowy shadows against the snowcaps, and the changing angles of the upflung peaks in the distance.

Just past dawn, they rolled into Davos, and, after two missed turns, they found the Mädl, and immediately checked in. Ambros Piegar had fixed it so their suite was ready upon arrival.



Past one o'clock, a crystal-bright afternoon, Panzi, Andrea, Ambros and Culhane finished a light lunch on the inn's glassed-in terrace. The two women were caught in their own cage of chatter, digging into each other's lives. Sitting next to each other, they were an eyeful: Panzi, ebony-haired, tanned, comely; Andrea, honey-blond, her skin blushed as a pink rose, and her ample bosom silhouetted by a form-fitting turtleneck sweater.

Catching Ambros's eyes, Culhane moved his own in the direction of the far end of the terrace, which was unoccupied. They found a couple of upholstered metal chairs and a table, ordered coffee, and then Culhane opened the talk with, "Quite a lady you've got there."

"Not doing so bad yourself."

"Yes," he replied a little glumly. "I've got business with you."

"So have I. You go first."

"Okay. I'm holding approximately twenty-two percent of Braunsweig shares. You can have them at my cost, which was a pittance but as you know better than I, they're valuable. What I want in exchange is for Braunsweig to buy a bank in Macao, hold it till I give the word, then transfer it to me or to my designee. I need a little time, a couple of months, to dethrone Liu Wai before I take title...the bank is Banco Oporto and it's owned outright by a widow who's got quite a moniker. Maria Alessandra Josefa Dolores Quina, if I have

that right. She's willing to sell for a little over three- hundred-million Euros. Contact her, I'll give you a number. Use the name of Jia Ming. She's in Shanghai and she's the one who's set up the buy. So, do buy it please and you'll be getting a very good deal on my Braunschweig shares."

"I'll say. It sounds very one-sided. And in our favor."

"Not so much. I paid so little, as I said. Technically, the way I did it was neither legal nor above board ethically. But that's my lookout and I expect no trouble whatsoever. The reality is that Rearden, Squires and Liu Wai are paying for Banco Oporto. Poetic justice, perhaps. That's the way I see it anyway."

"I was thinking the same thing. Rearden, I know about his shares, of course. Who had the rest?"

"Squires. Joshua Squires, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury. He's named in that file I gave you in Zurich. I assume you've read it."

"Twice. Couldn't believe it. Especially that part concerning my father."

"I was going to get to him. In a minute."

"What's next?"

"You've got to shut down that St. Gallen Trust. One day it'll bring trouble that no bank needs. To say nothing of your own name."

"That might turn out to be fulfilled prophesy. The trust's assets are pledged on margin for a big, big shorting of the dollar."

"Keep 'em right there. They're about to get creamed."

Ambros's face became intent. "Is that a sure thing? The dollar will go up?"

"It's the way I'm betting. I've one more favor to ask. I need to see your father. Can you arrange it?"

"Are you going to have him jailed? I'd like to forewarn my mother. She and I are pretty chummy and I don't want her shocked."

"No, I don't care to jail your father and wouldn't know how to do it anyway. I'm not in the law business. I want to persuade him to help back the idea of a second American currency. I can't say more about

it to you, at least for now. But I'll get you word after I talk to him. If I can talk with him, that is."

"Next Thursday he'll be in Gstaad for his winter holiday. Goes every year. I get this from my mother, who says she won't be joining him, though he asked her. Neither of us is on particularly good terms with him. I'll take care of the meeting for you. He's a crusty sonofabitch. A twenty-four karat jackass, so be prepared. But you've got him by the nuts and he'll come your way in the end."

"Does he know what you and I know?"

"I think he does. I let my mother read the file. Only the part about my father, just that and no more. I hope you don't terribly mind. But she really had to know."

"Perfectly all right. I'm glad you didn't show her the rest, though."

"I work for a Swiss bank. We're all born with a disease known as shut-mouth."

Culhane laughed.

Ambros then said, "Have you any idea how that file got started?"

"I know that various governments are interested in money laundering, especially if it's laundering for illicit drug cartels or other criminal endeavors. Intelligence agencies launder all the time for themselves, so they know how it works. The New York Corporation poses as a securities and commodity trading house but that's more of a front than anything else. Their specialty is laundering and it's easy enough to do if you're transacting billions every day in the stock or commodity markets."

"But why Braunsweig? How did they get on to us? I don't know why I'm asking you, I think I already know."

"Do you want to say?"

"It's just a guess. Do you know Andrea's mother?"

"I don't, no."

"She's some piece of eye candy, even at her age. In her fifties. She and my father had a fling when Mr. Warren was posted to Switzerland, ostensibly as a Foreign Service office. But he was a

spook, through and through. I found that out from my mother and my mother can be about as forthright as a gun muzzle when she feels like it. At some point, this is way back, she found out about my father and Andrea's mother, and she made sure Mr. Warren knew all about that scorecard. Some quadrangle, eh? Someone, either my mother or my father, must've let something slip about money laundering at Braunsweig and I suspect that put Mr. Warren wise and he got some sort of an operation set up to find out more. I started adding this up after you gave me the file in Zurich...remember I mentioned how several years ago this ghoul came nosing around...asking what I knew..."

"Flickinger, you mean?"

"Exactly. He wanted to know things, or maybe wanted to know what I knew and when I knew it, or if I knew anything at all."

"You're surmising, aren't you?"

"I sure am. Bits and pieces, however, begin to add up. But I'll agree I may be chasing the hole in the doughnut."

"Maybe you aren't. What you're suggesting, it's certainly a possibility."

"I could ask my mother, but I think it would turn her scarlet."

"Can't have that. Scarlet mothers don't look quite right."

"My mother is a Shultheiss. They're as prominent a family as any in Switzerland. You wouldn't tangle with them unless you had a very good reason. If my father were to be pilloried, she'd bear part of the brunt. I'd be sorely pressed to see anything like that happen."

"Are you asking me to comment?"

"I guess I am."

"What you've been telling me is possibly so, and possibly not so. Maybe your mother was irked when she found out about the Pieggar-Warren fling and she retaliated by passing on damaging information to the wronged husband, being Mr. Warren. Whatever happened, it's now a sleeping dog, and sleeping dogs sleep best when left alone."

Ambros beamed. "Thanks. Thanks very much."

“That does it for me,” Culhane said. “I think you said you had something to discuss.”

“I do. The Dufy money. Well, Andrea’s Dufy money. What’s to be done with that?”

“It’s hers. A hundred-percent hers. I’ll suggest to her that she follow your recommendations. Here’re my recommendations. Take half of her principal and buy futures on oil, gold and wheat. To diversify go long on dollars. She’ll clean up.”

“Dollars?”

“Dollars, right.”

“May I do the same?”

“That’s the way I’d bet, Ambros.”

“Are you?”

“I can’t. I’m being ethical this month. More or less ethical.”

Ambros nodded appreciatively. “I’m glad I know you.”

“As I am, you.”

“I may be leaving the bank. Panzi wants to live here or in Klosters. She wants an inn, fr’jesus-sakes. I’ll be promoted to tending the bar and supervising the slop closet, I guess.”

“Can you put it off for a year?”

“Oh, sure. We don’t even have a property yet. Maybe this one right here. An elderly gent owns the Mädl and he really is quite elderly. His one child, a daughter, lives in Beaulieu-sur-Mer over on the Riviera and plans to remain there. Panzi likes this place and so do I. Well, who knows? Life, right? A surprise every time you turn the corner.”

“An innkeeper. You’d be great at it, and so would she. Quite a gal you have there.”

“Thanks. That’s what she wants, an inn; that, and a passel of kids. She’s four months gone right now and she goes cranky if we don’t have sex every afternoon.”

“What’re you waiting for? It’s after two.”

“I’m soon on my way. I’ll make a call later to my father and get his Gstaad schedule in order for you. I think things will speed up if

my mother or I give him the news of what's in that file. God, do I ever wish I could see his expression when that cat makes its jump...how about drinks and dinner around seven?"

"Seven it is. Go lasso your girl and have a nice nap."

Ambros stood, lay a hand on Culhane's shoulder, giving it a friendly squeeze. With that, he was off and Culhane sat there, musing and even amused. Wishing he'd had a younger brother just like Ambros: a humorous, caring, bright light, with a first-rate taste in the woman he expected to share life with.

Ambros might be right about how Braunsweig had found itself in the crosshairs of a multi-national investigation on money laundering. Half the banks in Switzerland turned a blind eye to the sources of cash that came through their back doors. Braunsweig, too. Culhane recalled Andrea had once mentioned her mother had had a dalliance with Flickinger. A mother with active hips, apparently. Flickinger had come calling years later, gaming Ambros, trying to find out what he knew about the situation: the affairs, the remonstrance's, the bitter feelings, intentional or unintentional slips of the mouth, and, possibly, the divulging of sensitive banking information.

By his fuming mother? The wronged wife, a lofty Shultheiss who'd been betrayed, humiliated.

Human acts, human puzzles. All quite possible, he thought. History often climbs out of its grave, just as Jia and Michael Ming had climbed out of his own past. Everyone had something that could fell them; Rearden, Squires, Liu Wai, Hans-Otto Pieggar, and probably most everyone sitting on this terrace, including himself.

His speculations abruptly stopped when seeing Andrea marching his way like some very pleasant daydream, looking fresh and so alive, as if she had just posed for a *Vogue* magazine ad. She arrived, sat, and playfully tousled his hair. Her eyes were lit up to a bright blue, and, gazing at her, he was reminded of how lucky he was to know her. Very lucky, indeed, considering she had come into his life at its nadir.

He'd have to tell her, but not now. Too nice a day and she was still smiling radiantly.

## Gstaad

Hans-Otto Pieggar would only agree to a meeting, of all places, at the stables of the Gstaad Palace, another of Switzerland's showcase hotels. The stable housed the horses and winter sleighs for guests. Inside the stone barn, a small, unheated office lay in one corner, and somehow Pieggar had gotten the use of it.

Likely, Culhane supposed, the choice was made after Pieggar had learned from his son or wife what was contained in that incriminating file; thus, deducing that for years on end he'd been bugged, spied upon, watched. Here, in this barn, with the odor of hay and manure ever present, he'd be safe.

Or safer.

He had demanded that Culhane unbutton his flannel shirt, so he could be checked for a wire. Fair enough, so Culhane complied. Their encounter was bare of pleasantries, and, inevitably, given the stakes of peril for Pieggar, friction quickly arose.

"...I talked with Joe Rearden the day before yesterday," said Pieggar. He made certain I understood how it is that you came into his Braunsweig shares. I've a mind to report you to the Swiss government."

"Go right ahead. Figure out how long it would take to prove your assertions. You can be damn sure Rearden won't be riding to your rescue. Or anyone else either."

"You're intending to blackmail me into doing something, I assume."

"What for?"

“Isn’t that the purpose of you wanting to meet?”

“No, not at all. I want to persuade you to help America with a plan that’s nearing its completion,” said Culhane, finally sitting down on a rusty metal chair. Leaning forward, he explained the Blue Dollar concept, its whys and wherefores to his audience of one, quite aware of Piegar’s tightening skeptical face.

“A classic swindle, that’s my view of it,” Piegar insisted when Culhane finished making his points. “Moscow will never approve.”

“They will if they want to eat. They’ll be so hungry this time next year their guts will sag. And Europe will be left to wonder when the Russian Army will storm in through Berlin or the Fulda Gap so they can steal what food you’ve got.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means what you damn well know it means. Besides, Russia doesn’t have anything other than gas and oil. No one wants to buy anything they make. Vodka and caviar maybe, but that’s about all. Trade-wise, Russia is a skeleton. There’s no meat there on those bones.”

“That’s your opinion.”

“Right, you are. It is my opinion. It’s Van Slyke’s, too.”

“I want to know, now, if you intend to blackmail me.”

“What I want is for you to shut your mouth until I tell you to re-open it.”

And Culhane proceeded to set the table for Piegar’s future. “You won’t be returning to Braunschweig, of that you may be certain. Your term at BIS is up in five months. I can ensure it won’t be extended.”

“That’s what I said before. It’s blackmail...”

“What is?”

“Revealing the file. Quit playing dumb with me.”

“I’ve not mentioned that file. You keep mentioning it, not me.”

“Why do you say I won’t be reappointed?”

“I can have the Shang-Magan talk to the central banks of various key countries. All they have to recommend is to vote for a...let’s say

a more appropriate candidate. I'd wager it would be a lead-pipe cinch that you'd be out on your keister, where you belong."

"Fuck yourself, Yankee."

"I've made you a good-faith offer to see to it no one else gets that file info. A sensible man would help us out. I like your son, and, from what I hear, I'd very much suppose I'd like Frau Piegear. I'd not want embarrassment to come their way. All I'm asking you to do is to encourage your member countries at BIS to go along with the Blue Dollar. They'll be much better off...just for a willingness to accept and clear Blue Dollar payments, and the same goes for BIS. Will you or will you not? You may speak."

"I don't like your tone."

"I don't like you. I don't like this stable or this rickety chair. I don't like a lot of things but I'm leaving now, and I'll expect a message by nightfall that you're on board. If not, I'll be coming after you and I won't need that file or anything like it...good day to you..."

"Who in hell do you think you are?"

"You may soon be finding out. Check with Van Slyke..."

With that exit-line, he wheeled and left. Trudging the snow-covered walkway, making his way to the hotel, he turned up the collar of his overcoat to ward off the icy air. He hadn't gone lightly with Piegear but not that hard either, not nearly as hard as he had with Rearden and Squires. He had a deep burn in him about that ilk of person, having suffered through Karin's addiction and her death, a death that had finally freed her. He could not forgive these bastards, and he counted Liu Wai among them, thinking that Joost Van Slyke had relieved him of yet another showdown with that fat bastard Singaporean.

Through the bank of clouds, a triangular patch of sunlight shone high up on the rounded shoulders of the pearl-white mountains. The shaft of downlight, reflecting off the powdery snow, made a great copper dome over the valley. A searing color, yet somehow oddly soft.

## COMPRADOR

Up ahead loomed the Palace, with its castle-like turrets on each of its corners. All of white, like undersea marl, almost like the snow itself, except for the gray stone roof; the hotel was surrounded by green firs draped in purest bridal veils of snow. Fairyland, he thought, or tourist art. Looking how it was supposed to look—an elegant playpen for the permanently rich seeking winter amusements.

Not too amusing for him.

Soon it would be Andrea's moment. A sigh escaped him, becoming a pillow of visible air in front of his mouth.



Never an idyllic time for what he had to say. Never had he had the experiences, as a young man, of dating teenage schoolmates, neighborhood girls, or any girls at all. He grew up hard-scrapple, grew up competing against older boys for his everyday existence. Hand-me-down clothes. Till he became twelve, he'd never owned a pair of new shoes, and he had boosted those off the back of a delivery truck. Not much else, either, but a pubescent boy's hopes and dreams of the unreachable. Not so much as two dimes in his pockets, allowing him to invite a girl out to a movie or for a soda drink. By the time he really got interested in women, he had already fled to sea, serving as a deckhand and then as a bosun's mate. His women, such as they were, were bar girls, sometimes women off the street. He had known plenty; some in Australian ports, some on the long, long coast of Indonesia, in the fleshpots of India, South Africa and numerous places in between and beyond. Women who vessels of pleasure, that was all, and, for his part, he was their vessel of payment for services rendered. One-nighters or two-nighters, about as romantic as a trip to the dentist. Man and woman, that was it, and sometimes a few hearty laughs or a little boozing and carousing; but now, though he could recall faces, the names for those faces were lost to him. They were legs, thighs, breasts, arms; they were night fun and not more.

Jia Ming, she had been his first bewildering excursion into the mysteries of love or what passed for love; then Karin; then Andrea—women of consequence to him. He had known strings of actresses, socialites, jet-setters and some very appealing career women, but only at an emotional distance; never close up, never in bed, never with impact.

Simply, they were other women; friends or mostly friends.

He had, therefore, never learned anything about how to say good-bye to someone in his life who really meant something. Maybe there wasn't a decent way, only the empty words propelled by confused and frail feelings.

Odd, wasn't it? He hadn't the slightest trouble telling the likes of Rearden, Squires, Flickinger, many others he had dealt with over years, where to head in, and how to get there.

But with women? Or children? No so.

He was who he was, neither less nor more—a world-scale trader. That was enough; that, and a shot at a second family. More than anything, he wished for a family, one that had a godlike durability. On that, he placed great weight, having spent his first twenty-two years without any semblance of one. Not until falling into the orbit of Ken-chou Ming, Jia and Richard had he really known what it was like. He had once forked out a considerable sum to a private investigator in Hawaii to track down the identity of his parents, wanting to know his roots. His paternity, as it turned out, was unfindable. His mother had been a prostitute who worked in a house on Hotel Street in Honolulu, an area of brothels frequented by sailors and soldiers. Her real name, as opposed to her working name, was Clarissa Jane Morarity, of a South Dakota farming family. She had been liked by her cohorts—those who could still be found and interviewed—and otherwise described as a somewhat naïve, hard-luck type who had a desire to please everyone: not always a useful attribute in her occupation.

Eventually, she had turned to religion, journeyed to India to join a Zen-sect, never heard from again.



With aching heart, he had ordered a bottle of good wine sent up, and now he sat with Andrea in the parlor of their suite, fidgeting as he searched for the sincerest way to state his case.

“We have to talk,” he said finally, reluctantly. “Like some more of the Batard?”

“I’m peachy fine, thanks. Great wine, isn’t it? How will I ever get used to life back in Washington? Are we having a real talk-talk or just a talk? Are you going to tell me what sort of dance you had with Ambros’s father? That number-one shitheel of all shitheels.”

“I may be able to, if he calls me within the next couple of hours.”

“You sound unhappy.”

“I am and it has nothing to do with Ambros’s father.”

“Oh?”

“It’s us.”

Good Christ, she thought, remaining silent. Fearing what lay behind his tone.

“You chided me in Washington for keeping mum about Shanghai, and that Jia Ming had called me several times. I told you why she did, but I didn’t tell you the rest. I didn’t really know what to say...or even how to think about it.”

“What’s *it*? What’s that mean—*it*?”

“Is this some sort of newspaper interview?”

“Sorry.”

“Jia Ming and I were lovers about twenty-four years ago. Her father gave me my start in life in Hong Kong. When I left there for California, I was working on a project for him and afterward I went out on my own. What I didn’t know, had no idea of, was that Jia was pregnant. With my kid. He’s twenty-two now or maybe he’s twenty-three. His name is Michael, and I like him. Like him a lot. I like all the Mings, all of them who I know...well, that’s the short of it and the long of it is I’ve decided to return to Shanghai and make my future

there. It's all the family I have and I want to be with them. I *have* to be with them."

"Marry and all that?"

"Not necessarily. I dunno. It's my son...my son who doesn't yet know I'm his father. That ought to be quite a curtain-raiser when he and I get around to that story. Bad as telling you what I'm telling you as we sit here."

"So, you're saying there's no place for me?"

"How?"

"Shanghai? It's a big place, isn't it?"

"Three-thousand square miles."

"I can do quite a lot inside of three-thousand miles."

"It'd never work."

"We'll make it work. We'll make it *everything*. I'd love to meet your son. Hell, I'll wash his shirts and darn everyone's socks...I'll..."

"Andrea..."

"Oh, don't say anything more. Not now, please...not right now..." She left her chair at catapult-speed. "I'll be back. It's just that I have to vomit for about an hour or so. But don't worry, I'm not knocked up, I'm really not. I'm just crucified."

She didn't get all that far. She went through the bedroom door, and then, within ten seconds, she returned.

Still wet-eyed, she blurted, "If you take me with you, Rush, I'll never be in the way. I won't, I really won't."

"But don't you see, I'd always want you in the way. That's precisely why you can't come."

"Never?"

"It's better that it's never. I'm not the type for two families. Look, when I was down, and even when I wasn't down, you meant so much to me. You still do and you always will. If you hadn't come to Bel Air that time, I think I'd be in an asylum by now. I will never forget what you did. But I must go where I must go."

"Just tell that Jia-whomever you've got someone else. Me. My God, it's been two decades. More than two decades."

“You don’t know the Chinese. Family is everything. Not two families, one family.”

“I may not know the Chinese, I certainly agree with you there. But I know you. I know how good I can be for you.”

“And so do I. You’ve been wonderful and I love you for all you’ve done, and the way you are, and who you are. You’re a star, a real-live star in every way.”

“If you loved me, you’d take me along.”

“It’s because I do love you that I cannot. Hard to explain, I know, but you’ll have to accept how I feel about it.”

“It’s this Michael, your son? You said that’s why you’re going.”

He nodded.

“And her, let’s not forget her,” Andrea insisted, eyes flaring.

“I don’t forget her. I can never forget her and I don’t want too either.”

“You’re honest, anyway. Too goddamned honest sometimes.”

“I realize you think you’re being deserted and that you think that I think you’re second best, but it’s not so. I find this extremely hard, Andrea. It’ll be hard for the rest of my life. Try to see it my way, that I lost two children and that I cannot make a decision that could cost me another one.”

And she was thinking of how he had come into her life and so much had happened and he had ruined her for another man; not that there would be another like him ever. Not ever, ever. Not for her. It was as if he had stolen her very being from her. This was too much pain to bear at one time, especially now, especially right in front of him.

Suddenly, vehemently she blurted, “I knew something like this was coming. I just knew it...I did...I really did...”

“You never let on.”

“A premonition, it was something like that, the oft-acclaimed female instinct. Our built-in disaster-detectors. The awful part of all this is that I’m never going to get over you. It’s like being...it’s like being crippled the rest of your life.”

“For me, too.”

“But you’ve a new family—”

“Well, you’ve got your—”

“No, you don’t. Oh no. You’re about to say I have my mother. Jesus Christ and amen, do I ever know it. Do I ever! It’s hardly the same. Not at all the same, in fact.”

“I know.”

“No, you don’t.”

“All right, I don’t. At least, it’s someone. And you’ll be able to afford most anything you need.”

“A major plus, I do admit. Eternal thanks to you and Monsieur Dufy for making me solvent. More than solvent.”

“Incidentally, listen to Ambros when he tells you how to invest your money. He’ll know what to do. Probably, he can triple it within the next year.”

“That’s nice. I can be a miser, a miserable miser. But you see you must take me to China, darling. Can’t you...you’ve *just got to*, Rushton...goddamn it, you have to... ”

“One day, who knows? Not now, though. Believe me when I say you’re as fine a person in so many ways as I’ve ever known, ever even imagined, you’re—”

“No more, please, don’t say anything else or I’ll murder you...when do you go there—” Sniffing then, her eyes welling up again, feeling so emptied, it was though nothing was left inside, no ballast, nothing but a hollowness, and that all her blood was draining away.

“It’s back to Washington, first,” he answered, “tie up some loose ends, and pack up my socks and undershorts.”

“A week?”

“It’ll take two weeks probably.”

“How do you get over there? To Shanghai?”

“I’ll have to wangle something, I suppose.”

“Wangle. Wangle, it is,” she repeated nervously. “You’re probably the goddamnest wangler in all history.”

“Maybe this year I am, anyway.” Trying a smile, then, but it never reached his lips. “I wish I had a way to wangle you somehow.”

“Are you going to tell her about us?”

“No, I won’t. You’re a very private matter with me, Andrea, and you always will be.” Words that were a straight reflection of his feelings. And, if the right thing to say, it was the wrong time to say it.

Her face suddenly went hectic and it swung to one side as she muttered, “Shitto, I’m going to cry. Really cry, and all because of you...how can you, after all we’ve—”

The back of one hand swept her brow. She bent forward a little, as if ready to tumble to the floor, but then suddenly shot out of her chair again, scurrying toward the bedroom. This time she didn’t return, and, haplessly, he was left to wonder what came next? Go to her, or not? He couldn’t bear to see her weeping. Hold her, press her tight; that he could easily do, but not suffer her tears. He was without capacity for more sadness, either for her or for himself.

It wouldn’t do, not at all, to worry her. Or trigger her fears.

About to upend the wine bottle, pour its remnants into his glass, when the phone sounded. It rang five times before he decided to answer. He accurately guessed the caller, saying: “Piegar, is that you?”

“Meet me at the Grill in the morning. Six-thirty, it won’t be crowded then. We’ll go over a few points that I want to make sure of.”

“You’re smarter than anyone gives you credit for,” he said and then hung up.

Thinking quite lucidly, then: *The man was in a position to point the finger, mark me.* Still, he had not destroyed the file with the contents on the BIS banker nor on Liu Wai, either. A useful sledgehammer, if ever it came to needing one

That’s it, he thought. Keep things glued together and advise Halburton he could pull the lanyard at any time, and then sit tight while earth trembles

Back to Andrea again.

They must cut each other loose, and let memories do the rest for the short life they had had together. He went sad, a sort of happy-sad, but mostly tilted toward sadness. She'd been a brick, solid as she could be, and the woe was that he'd never forget her or the times they had shared.

So, what to do now? Love her, love what they had had.

## Near Moscow

Gregor Metzilov was half-enjoying a Saturday lunch with his wife and daughter at their dacha, twenty miles outside the city. Of solid limestone and oak, a gabled roof, half-hidden in a copse of birch and pine, the mid-sized villa was Metzilov's reward for past services to the Kremlin sovereignty. Were he to attain minister's rank, an even larger residence awaited him at the *residentza Omeira*, an upscale lakeside enclave reserved for the elite of the party: United Russia, the monastery for ex-communist ideologues who, by any other name, were still hard-bent on re-working the world order to match up with the socialistic model of justice for the poor, for the trodden upon, for the forgotten—or so went their eternal, vote-seducing pitch.

Himself, he had been a rising fair-haired apparatchik, a functionary of the first quality. The Kremlin, noting his abilities as a planner, had given him free rein, allowing him to run roughshod across the bureaucracy, earning him the usual quantity of foes, yet making him knowledgeable about the skeletons tucked away in a sizeable array of closets.

He was a reservoir of secrets now, giving him levers usually reserved for the top state investigative agencies: the keepers of the dossiers.

Lately, a spate of worries had gouged Gregor; lately, too, scurrilous articles had appeared in many Mid-East news outlets, serial attacks that labeled him as a Russian meddler, an interloper without portfolio, an agent provocateur who had large designs on the emirates and Yemen and seaports on the Indian Ocean where Russia could gain more warm-water footholds.

Twenty such articles. He had counted them. One, a particularly repugnant piece, had tagged him as a fixer, a bribe-taker on the order of the notoriously corrupt Afghani, Karzai.

It dug deep at Gregor's entrails; for, it was the essential truth. And where and who was the source of this flammatory, dangerous information? He couldn't find out? It appeared to be dozens of sources.

And not fewer than ten times he had had to explain to party bosses that he had no agenda they had not cleared; that he didn't know who was behind the lies, who was bent on sullyng Russia.

He was loyal, a servant of the party and the Russian people. He claimed and claimed it again and again as he looked at those cold-eyed party ghouls who could swat him out of existence as if he were a mere housefly.

Lately, too, Nyurischev's had raged over the failure to secure adequate grain supplies on the world markets. Not since World War II had Russia confronted the exigencies of feeding its populace. A daily battle now, a daily headache at the migraine level. Food riots had broken out in Moscow, followed by others in St. Petersburg and Novisibirsk; the army had taken over from the municipal police to control unrest.

Unrelenting pressure had pushed Metzilov into a surly mood; looking up now as his daughter, Tamara, rounded the corner coming from the kitchen, carrying a tray laden with steaming beet soup, sliced hard-boiled eggs, herring, dark Russian bread (hard to come by), and saucers of thickened cream flecked with Beluga caviar.

The daughter's breasts, unaltered—the *modish* fashion of her Moscow peers—shifted about like loose melons under her woolen jersey. As she placed a bowl of soup before her mother, the elder Tamara, she heard a loud *crack!* Her father's fist, whacking the tabletop, startled her. Jerking, she spilled the hot borsht over her mother's lap.

"Uu-ooah," the young woman moaned, disgraced by her ham-fisted act. Another *crack!* from the end of the table.

"You clumsy fool!" shouted Metzilov. "You can't even dress properly. Look at you! Walking around here looking like an Odessa field slut."

## COMPRADOR

“Gregor, it was only an accident,” said his wife soothingly, though plainly upset at the widening wet circle staining her dress.

“A slut, I say.

The phone interfered, ringing loudly.

Disgusted, Metzilov ordered his daughter, “Stop your mewling. Answer the phone. God, however did we end up with *you*?”

Her mother bent to clean up the broken crockery, as young Tamara fled to answer the phone’s insistent ring.

A moment later, returning, she told her father, “It is Pyotr Lanives. Very urgent, father, he says.”

“What isn’t!” said Metzilov, knocking over his chair as he went for the phone, cursing wildly.

Cowering, heaving in fright, Tamara backed up against a wall, giving him a wide berth as he charged out of the small dining room.

Metzilov grabbed the phone, untwisting the cord, and again he swore. Outside, through the laced-curtain window, sheets of snow fell blindingly. All was a foreboding white, but he, nervously red-skinned, was oblivious to the storm.

“Lanives!” he yelled at his assistant in Moscow.

“Yes, Gregor. Have you heard?” asked a shallow, tight voice.

“Heard what!”

“Petchloff himself at the Finance Ministry was advised today by the Bank for International Settlements that all U.S. dollars held outside the U.S. can only be redeemed for American goods. A special agreement of some kind.”

“What’s that? Say it again!”

Lanives repeated himself.

“When is this supposed to happen?”

“It has already happened. Several hours ago. It’s been reported on the BBC in London.”

“It couldn’t be! Impossible. I’d’ve been informed directly by Piegar.” Metzilov’s head shook in disbelief at what was coming at him in a series of shockwaves.

“Gregor, President Nyurischev has been with Petchloff all morning. There is even a rumor that rubles cannot be converted for dollars, or even

accepted for grain purchases. Very serious, do you hear? A car has been dispatched to fetch you back to Moscow. You had better—”

“Nonsense.”

“How will we cover our dollar liability without the cooperation of the Americans?”

“Have you verified any of this?”

“I’m merely passing the news.”

“Rumors. Pure bullshit. BIS would inform me first, before an official release.” But inside he was fast being cut into smaller pieces that seemed to be vanishing, and that he was about to disappear, and wishing madly it were so..

“I thought you should know. State security is at the offices, no one is allowed in. The cabinets are being sealed. Guards—”

“Enough!” Metzilov threw the phone on the floor, shattering the receiver.

Stifling a gasp, he looked at his wife and daughter lurking at the doorway, their faces in stark confusion, trying to comprehend the meaning of Metzilov’s shouting at Lanives. His wife, moving first, stepped forward, her arms outstretched in a supplicating gesture.

“Get away!”

“Gregor.”

Growling then, “Away, I say,” raising a threatening arm as the daughter cried out again.

Outside, a horn honked. Close, it was much too close, obviously not from a passing car; not in this storm. Metzilov hadn’t heard it; he heard nothing else but his badgering wife, coupled with all those wildly shifting fears inside his head, drowning out all else.

Closing his eyes, blinking back images of catastrophe, he recalled months of debate over his insistence that Russia smash the Yanks by short-selling the U.S. dollar massively.

Had it all backfired? How so? Incredible. Impossible.

He had dodged the recent shakeup at the Kremlin, but now what, and Lanives had said they were sending a car to fetch him. *That* kind of car, and it could only mean one thing.

This time he heard the horn. He looked at his wife, who stood there wringing her hands, her eyes wide and unblinking.

Stumbling out of the room, slamming into a wall as he went, knocking a framed picture off the wall. Up the stairs he raced, the women hearing his pounding thud against the wooden steps. Slipping, hitting his shoulder on a newel post, he raced toward a storage room at the end of the hallway. Opening the door, he flung aside clothes, kicked a box out of the way, reached inside a field boot, gripping the barrel of a Makarov semi-automatic pistol.

Down the stairs, breathless, he spoke in a lower tone this time. “Upstairs, the both of you. Pack one suitcase apiece.” Speaking directly to his wife, then, “Is your passport in Moscow? Hers?” Nodding at his daughter.

“Yes, where else?”

“Shit.”

His wife, confused, stood still as a tailor’s dummy

“Pack the bags. Stay upstairs until I call you. Dress in your oldest clothes. Look like country people. We’ll be driving in the truck.”

“But where do we go, Gregor? And who is doing that honking?”

“We drive to St. Petersburg, and will take the ferry to Finland.”

“And what about your gun? Why the gun, Gregor?”

“I have to get rid of them. You want to spend the rest of your life in gulag? Move. Go! If you don’t do as I say, we’ll lose time. Every hour counts, Tamara. Every minute.”

Metzilov, ignoring the squawking horn meant to summon him outside, waited at the shadowed side of the dacha’s front door. Expecting impatient, insistent knocks, he soon heard them. He opened the door gingerly, cautiously, but smiling as if the two bruisers were guests here for a visit. Waiting till they were inside, dusting snow off their sleeves, eyeing him somewhat pitifully, he closed the door with enough force to startle them.

He startled himself, too, when, minutes later, four shots rang out, two per invader: 9 mm hollow-points ripping into their hearts. It all had gone so fast that Metzilov was amazed to find that one body belonged to a woman, with enough heft on her to pass as a circus weight-lifter. Much

the harder one to roll down the cellar steps, too, but finally she lay in a heap, splayed, and he thought he would never explain events to his wife and daughter.

What did they know of currency manipulations? What did they know of a husband and father who danced on a tightrope among the long-knives of Moscow bureaucrats and internal security ghouls?

Even there in Moscow, did they somehow expect that he could call on some fairy godmother to reverse the drought in the Ukraine? It was Russia. Justice could be had only if you bought it, and knew who to buy it from.

And, he also thought, in the quickest second of his life: *I'm a dead man if they catch up with me.*

Blood on these hands, blood on his shoes, and more of it on the cuffs of his trousers. He'd have to change. As he went up the stairs, he saw his wife and daughter standing at the top, their bags nearby. He went by them. No one said anything. Nor were any looks exchanged.

Inside a matter of minutes, the wife, the daughter, knew their first killer. Up close.

## Washington, D.C.

**A**t 7:21 A.M., Culhane and Efram Halburton sat in the Treaty Room, with only the trader aware it would be their last business meeting. Sipping ersatz coffee, he watched the President fork down his favorite breakfast of buckwheat cakes and smokehouse ham. Tempted to light up a cigar, Culhane refrained.

“You ready to go into the rest of it?” he asked.

“Yes, please go ahead.” Halburton wiped his mouth.

Culhane told how the trillion Eurodollars—the Blue Dollars—could be funneled back into the U.S. economy: so much for loans to fund the banks, as was once done in the thirties; so much loaned to industry to produce the wares exchanged for Chinese and Mexican oil; and so much to be taken out of circulation to satisfy the gold-to-currency ratios proposed under the Deficit Reform Act.

“...So long as politicians can’t attach an engraver’s plate to a printing press anymore, then you can avoid many problems,” concluded Culhane.

Halburton grunted. His face looked as if it had just been introduced to horseradish for the first time. Ignoring Culhane’s bait, he thought it was perhaps time for compliments or cajolery.

“This currency-reform legislation is going to the floor of the Senate next week. Darned if they didn’t push the bill like a bulldozer. How do you figure that?”

Culhane only smiled.

“I didn’t hear what you said,” said Halburton.

“There are some things you’re better off not knowing.”

“I’m still President, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t know,” answered Culhane.

“You’re close to the vest, Culhane...I suppose you’ll be leaving us soon?”

“Within the week.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes, get me a seat on an Air Force plane headed as close as possible to Hong Kong.”

“You’ll be there, in Hong Kong? That where your-*ah* be doing your livin’ now?”

“Actually in Shanghai. But I’ve business first in Hong Kong.”

“What if I need some discussions with you? What do I do about that?”

“I’ll send you my whereabouts as soon as I get settled. Meanwhile you can reach me through the U.S. Consulates in either Hong Kong or Shanghai.”

Giving Culhane a measured look, Halburton said, “I owe you, I think.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“I do.”

“Are you an investor? Stocks, commodities, anything like that?”

“I’m a cattleman and ah’ve been land poor all my life.”

“I can change that, if you’ll let me.”

“Never look right, if someone were to find out.”

“I’m not proposing anything illegal, Halburton.”

“I ‘spect not. Yet, it’d never pass muster with some. Thanks plenty, though.”

“Well, I’ll drop by before I leave town. In about an hour, I’m due at the Navy Department for some sort of briefing. They didn’t say what the briefing is about. Care to tell me?”

“I won’t spoil the fun. I hope you’ll be as surprised as I was. God-damn, if it isn’t amazing what those boys come up with over there.”



Halburton was right—*amazing* was no exaggeration.

He had arrived an hour ago at the National Maritime Intelligence Center near Silver Spring in Maryland. Signing in at the visitor's desk, he was promptly escorted by a girlish, pretty yeoman to a small theater reached through two sets of heavy steel doors.

Greeted there by a commander who introduced himself as Cloyce Burrell, a freckle-faced red-haired South Carolinian with a molasses-thick, low country drawl. The commander was a senior briefing officer assigned by Naval Intelligence's to its DEC-OPS SECTION, a highly classified group tasked with executing deceptions against unfriendlies.

Hormuz, all along, had been his idea. All he knew about its status was that the Navy was balking, but had begun the operational planning at Halburton's orders. The second and final thing Culhane had been told was that the mission's codename was SCORPION.

Shown to a leather bucket seat, he settled between the leather armrests, about to be astonished.

As the lights dimmed, a curtain drew aside to reveal a large bluish-green screen. A life-sized picture of himself suddenly appeared, obviously taken by a security camera when he had signed the visitor's register. Watching intently, he saw his suit change from its actual gray to a blue, then to a Panama white; next, he saw himself inside a gym, wearing the blue suit and performing on the rings and doing various acrobatic leaps and tumbles on a mat. Then, he saw himself on the bars, this time attired in a gymnast's rig of tight-fitting leotards and a sleeveless red shirt.

Burrell intoning, "This always gets the attention of our friends, when we show 'em doin' the handstands. This part, what you're seein' now, it's the same technology used by the folks who design computer games for entertainment. The Navy has powerful computers, so we can do up these little stunts pretty quick...then we add in a

little get-together. A marriage, you might call it. For thirty years, the Navy has employed Electro-optical MASINT technology to fool our enemies. Give yuh an example, sir. What MASINT does is it takes a virtual image of, say, the aircraft carrier, Ronald Reagan, and projects its, oh, say five miles ahead of where it actually is at sea. Does a few other things, but those're classified...so now, let's say if the Reagan should ever be attacked by missiles, the missiles are fooled into thinking the real target is the one five miles up ahead...let's have a look at another scene."

Up on the screen, a roiling cascade of water burst forth, and then spearing its way into his sight was the gray bow of a submarine.

"That's a boomer-class Russian sub named the Murmansk," Burrell commented. "She's usually on station in the Indian Ocean on patrol. With our sonar buoys, we can count every fart on that boat, no matter where she is...now, have a close-up look, sir. We're going to see what we can do with the Murmansk but she won't know it. Not right away, anyway. We've taken one of our photos of the boat, we've got about a thousand of 'em, and using MASINT, we've made an exact replica of her, image-wise. Then, we'll put her where we want her, and doin' what we want with her. Sort of a Disneyworld underwater...the illusion..."

Burrell moved again to a console. Culhane was thinking how Ka Bernardsdottir would have fits of ecstasy if she were here.

The sub was shown cruising underwater, making its way around a series of sea-bottom formations, then down into a deep trough, then laying inertly on the bottom, and now rising to a new depth, its firing tubes open. Sudden spumes of water depicted the release of two torpedoes.

"We can put Murmansk at Hormuz," said Burrell, a note of unconcealed glee creeping into his drawl. "The imagery could be sent down by a satellite, anywhere and at any time; then, the image of the underwater optical illusion is retrieved by yet another satellite and instantly beamed to the Pentagon. Or sent here. See how this works?"

"I'm seeing and slowly believing."

“Great stuff, huh?”

“Beautiful. A question, may I?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Just curious, but if an American sub and a Russian sub were facing off underwater, could the Navy project several more U.S. subs into the same area, making the Russian skipper think he was surrounded?”

Havoc swept Burrell’s youthful face; a startled, almost painful look, as if he’d just been shot in the knee. “Very impressive, sir, very astute. I’m advised you do not have any security clearances, so I can’t answer you. I’d need an okay from upstairs to comment.”

“Well, as I said, my curiosity is aroused.”

“Mine is too, but on another subject. We need somethin’ special from you, Mr. Culhane. Need it pretty soon.”

“What’s the something?”

“We’ve got ourselves ten old Lykes Brothers grain ships in port near New Orleans. Rust buckets but fixed up pretty good. We need grain to fill those ten holds. And we need you or someone to get the Russians to buy that grain for delivery at Bandar-e-Lengeh.”

“In Iran?”

“Yessir.”

“How soon?”

“Yesterday.”

He could put the trade through Camero in Buenos Aires, who could readily lay off the grain to Moscow. Keep the U.S. out of it or as distant as possible.

“What time is it in Moscow, about eight o’clock?”

“Eight-eighteen,” Burrell replied.

“The deal will be done by the time you get out of bed tomorrow morning. The grain is already stored in the Delta, in elevators. We can barge it to wherever you say, starting the day after. Will that do?”

“Famously, sir...very famously...”

“I think I know what’ll happen to that grain. Should I ask?”

“I’d be hung for sure, sir.”

“You put on a great show, commander. You ought to be at Disneyworld. My thanks. I’ll tell the president what a nifty Navy he has,” a parting remark that seemed to please the commander.

As he left the building, on a whim, he turned and saluted the flags whipping in the breeze. Feeling a genuine lift. It was all up to the Navy now, awaiting only Halburton’s go-ahead. Damn lucky to have gotten away with even half of the scheme; hard toil, yes, and a friendly hug from Lady Luck.

For the umpteenth time he wished for a ringside seat at Hormuz. Be some helluva show, he supposed. Still, an event he never wanted linked to his name: it’d be his death warrant signed by the losers, if they ever suspected him. One more cold statistic in the ledgers of the dead.

In China, he’d be safe. Safer anyway.



Waiting till Andrea had left for work, he hurriedly packed two suitcases. The maintenance staff would crate the rest and his art and have it shipped to where he wanted it shipped in China. He was leaving the Cezanne for her, along with a note.

*In the crate, a French fortune cookie for you. When looking at it...think of us...and the image of you doing it is what I'll live on and love on. Make a great life, my darling, for it's surely your turn.*

*Many Kisses,*

**R**

## Hong Kong

Ten testing months and finally they reunited; though it was not like old times, it was as good as either of them could expect, given the compacted string of troubles and tragedies.

Herbsant Saxa had found himself a spacious two-level condo with a commanding view of Repulse Bay, distant enough from Hong Kong's Central District, so thick with so many humans, buses, trucks, cars. The closeness of the hectic crush could be nerve-jarring, and the Haitian Jew required peaceful surrounds.

A cooling bay-breeze fanned the terrace where they sat, working on a bottle of single malt whiskey. In an hour, a limo would pick them up and drop them at a nearby dock. From there, a private launch would boat them across Victoria Harbor to the Kowloon side, where they'd dine at Gaddi's, a world-famed restaurant at the Peninsula, a hotel equally as famed.

Arriving that morning, Culhane had come directly to Sant's, and, jet-lagged from a horrendously long flight out of Andrew's Air Force Base, with an unexpected five-hour delay in Jakarta, he'd dived straight into the sheets. Sleeping soundly for seven hours, now refreshed and anxious to confer with his much missed colleague.

Over their second drink, he began to paint a bit of the future as he saw it, making sure Sant Saxa knew to chime in whenever he chose.

"I'll be here three days," he replied to a question of Sant's. Then it's Shanghai and, after that, I'm to meet Joost in Singapore for a go-round with Liu Wai. A shoot-out, I'm afraid, but it can't be helped. His damn drug business has me really worried. So, I'm fixing to

bounce his ass into oblivion and it won't be easy. Joost is doing the honors but I'm to be there in case of trouble."

"That shit-pot. He bad as that Rearden bastid. I hope you roller over heem."

"Well, anyway, there's a lot for us to go over, Sant, and I can begin now or start in tomorrow. Whichever."

"What'd'matter wi' now?"

"Nothing, nothing at all." Culhane went into conference with his drink before continuing. "I've been reactivated with the Magans. I feel like a sergeant put out to pasture and now recalled to duty. I've had enough duty to last me forever. Some helluva year! Well, here we are, Sant. We're back in the chips and there's still too much to do..."

"I be sittin' here on my ass all this time. Act-*shun*, that be for me. What come next?"

"I'll be taking over the Shang-Magan's Asia Zone, so we're about to buy ourselves a bank over in Macao. A small Portuguese operation. The family wants to sell. We can operate more privately with our own bank and it's just about perfect as a vehicle for phantom trades."

"Right...that be good..."

"I want you to oversee it."

"D'bank? Me?"

"Not run it, I didn't mean that. Just go up there weekly and check things out."

Sant nodded. "I need da accountants."

"Get the best. Get a Brit, one that's chartered."

"I know where to find....that be good, Rush. I do for you. How much bank cost us?"

"Nothing really."

And then he explained how he had pried Braunsweig shares out of Rearden and Squires in exchange for keeping them out of prison, then asking Braunsweig to buy the Banco Oporto in Macau; afterward, they simply swapped ownership, one tranche of shares for the other.

Turning to a new topic, he asked Sant: "Where's the art kept. I may want it moved up to Shanghai."

Sant gave his report about the paintings removed months ago from Bel Air and shipped to Hong Kong out of Long Beach. The art was now stored safely in a temperature-controlled warehouse, owned by a Madame Elizabeth Miahua. Of Indian-Chinese extraction, her family originally were spice traders from Goa, in western India. Saxa related how an art expert examined the paintings every month, adjusting the temperature if necessary.

“We be having the dinner tonight with Eliza-bet. You lika her, I sure of it.”

“She your new lady friend?”

“Not so new...”

Culhane laughed. Women liked Herbsant; his innate kindness and generosity, and, though uneducated, he had natural smarts. His size seemed to ignite motherly instincts. Then, in fairly quick time, his women learned how much man was folded in that jockey-sized frame, and what had started as a motherly feeling usually converted itself to the real man-woman thing.

“I’ve got two matters you need to know of. Shall I make another drink for us, first?”

“Please.” Saxa extended his glass, adding, “So good for us be ‘gether again.”

“You bet it is. I missed you like I’d lost all my ribs or something as bad.”

He made drinks, resumed his seat, and told the story of Richard, Jia, and Michael, the son he’d never had the slightest idea of. Had he not gone to Shanghai to work out some trading arrangements with Richard, seen Jia again, he might never have known. “I’ve got to square this soon, tell the boy. I might want him down here with you at some point, if he’s willing, and interested. He’s got a girl he likes. “

“Why he need know you hees father? He get along all these years.”

“He knows he’s half-Caucasian. Why shouldn’t he know the rest of it?”

Saxa pumped his hands twice, palms upward, a signal of disagreement. “Some theengs best be left dead.”

“Maybe. I dunno. I’ll think it over. I hope to see a lot of him, however, and I’m not at all sure I could conceal that kind of truth for years on end. Or that I should. I’ll see what his mother says....now, for the big one, Sant...”

He described the preparations for Hormuz, what he knew and didn’t know about its military aspects. What it would mean for America, or likely mean, and mean for Europe and Asia. South America, maybe yes and maybe no—how unscathed things would turn out for them. Same for Australia. Camero and Tomlinson were protected, either way the situation flopped.

In all, the event at Hormuz was designed as a mammoth shock-job, the repercussions probably lasting for a couple of years.

“The big cathartic,” Culhane said, finishing his explanation.

“What es cathar-hic?”

“Like an enema.”

“Huge ene-mema, ha, I see that for sure. Ha-ha.”

Dusk set in and they left the condo for the quay to pick up the launch that would take them to Kowloon, across Victoria Harbor. A former Admiral’s barge, the vessel gleamed white as an altar cloth, and the brass bright-work shone with a lot of polish and elbow grease. The men sat aft in comfortable wicker chairs, upholstered in sea-blue fabric, with red cord piping.

He was home, or what he like to think of as home, or his first real home—Asia—when he’d been all but adopted by Ken-chou Ming, Jia and Richard.

Then, out of memory, he silently recited Kipling’s sonnet:

*Now it is not good  
For the Christian’s health  
To hustle the Aryan brown,  
For the Christian riles  
And the Aryan smiles*

## COMPRADOR

*And he weareth the Christian down;  
And the end of the fight  
Is tombstone white  
With the name of the late deceased,  
And the epitaph drear,  
“A fool lies here  
Who tried to hustle the East.”*

He'd not come to hustle anyone or anything; but only for the chance to remake his life and all he believed in. Here in the East he could dream freely, do freely, re-open the Ming Trading & Shipping Ltd. and, with luck, get squared up with his son Michael.

His capital: nine tons of gold on deposit in New York and London with the Hong Kong & Shanghai Banking Corporation. More than he needed for another beginning, but then who knew for certain? The past year had been filled with so many uncertainties; it likened itself to a bad dream. Here he was, however, a clean slate staring at him, a time for new dreams.

Illegible dreams, except for the very few.

He sat in the launch's stern, inhaling the harbor air, its smell of sea-salt. A hundred yards distant, a million lights were winking from blocks and blocks of towering buildings. Tomorrow, or the day after, he'd go with Sant up the Pearl River to Macao on the hydroplane and get a gander, at least from the outside, of Banco Oporto.

A start.

Everything needed a start, or a re-start, including a nation once as vaunted as the United States.



Not till the next day did he and Sant learn of the shockwaves kicked into life, under a nearly starless sky, in the Straits of Hormuz at exactly 9:34 p.m., Mid-East time. Navy Seal teams had arrived on ten ocean-going grain freighters, steering them right into the neck of

water and there sinking them *en bloc*, detonating, in turn, a worldwide panic.

The entire waterway in the neck of the Straights was blocked by countless tons of plate steel, and other detritus. The Navy estimated it would require eighteen months of salvaging operations to clear the rubble. Or ten years, if the Navy activated mines that it could, if instructed, affix to the rubble.

Oil cargoes were stopped cold. Russian exports were zeroed out, save for the natural gas sent directly into Europe. Depending on Moscow's behavior, the gas exports could be paid for in ways of legerdemain, and trading maneuvers, that could cost Moscow almost endlessly.



The five-billion-year-old blue-green ball we call earth was to begin another of its countless phases, convulsing, this time, in an orgy of wildest speculations. Overnight gold tripled; wheat shot up from \$9.70 per bushel to \$24.67; the U.S dollar, to everyone's amazement, increased from the equivalent of 18-cents of its former worth to 47-cents; the last recorded price for oil leveled off at \$412 the barrel, this, before trade was suspended due to product unavailability. .

Some dreams crashed, others incubated, still others came true; a dependable cycle that never changed and never would as long as humanity engaged in trade.

When Culhane woke to the news the next morning, he smiled somewhat grimly. He had known it was to happen, though hadn't been informed as to when. He thought about a six-way conference call to The Council, but decided against it.

After all, what could he say? That it had been his idea to bash the markets so that one day they could heal themselves. Who would believe him? Van Slyke, yes? But who would think it a wise thing? Better to let it all hang, sort itself out, let the chips roll where chips always roll—to the winners.

## COMPRADOR

He had done all he could, had paid a memorable price, more than any of the losers. Had it really been worth it? Would America fall back into the clutches of its politicians, and tailspin once again?

No one knew and neither did he.

## Epilogue

**T**he Incident at Hormuz—as the press dubbed it—made front page news in every metro newspaper throughout the world, while, for months, topping the surveys as the most watched topic in t-v news-casts.

Repercussions in the markets lasted for two long and grim years, and, being so profoundly consequential, left most people smoldering, enraged, doing without, yet eminently wiser. The social policy of something-for-nothing delusion was over, at least for a time.

The Incident was splattered with speculation and idle assertions; none proven, none unproven.

Arguably, the best account of that historical night in the Straits was authored by Jackson R. Reckinger, Commander, Flotilla Squadron Four, U. S. Navy, Central Command. In his supporting role, he had filed the after-action report for his sea-unit that eventually made its way up the military chain of command, thence to the National Security Council. The report remains classified to this date.

However, Reckinger entered his own notes (a rules violation) in a private journal he either mislaid or lost on a flight from Jacksonville, Florida to North Island, a Naval air facility in San Diego, California.

A civilian aircraft mechanic, who requested anonymity, recovered the journal and passed it to Fox News, where the airing of Reckinger's "take" was fiercely debated by the editorial staff. The journal was intriguing to say the very least; more, it was "a look from the inside" where no other solid report of that night's activities existed. In the end, the story was killed in the interests of national security, and because Reckinger wisely refused to corroborate what he had written privately, presumably for his own consumption.

*Reckinger's Notes, verbatim:*

*I commanded three of our sleek speedsters, versions of the old Cyclones; black-hulled for night work, fifty-feet in length, and fast as starved sharks except in heavy seas. We lay three miles off two rendezvous points; our mission, most secret, was to extract ten three-man Navy Seal teams. The teams had been in a two-month training exercise to block the Straits by detonating mass explosives, sending ten grain freighters, fully laden, to the sea bottom of those tight-throated shipping lanes within the Straits.*

*Estimates say that roughly twenty-percent of the world's oil moves through the Straits, and obviously choking off this source would have repercussions almost beyond imagination.*

*I was not part of the planning for the overall operation, except for the small part we played at its end. I did, however, just as did my boat crews, have a close-up view of the goddamnest fireworks I ever expect to see.*

*The freighters, each almost the length of a standard football field, sailed into the neck of the Straits, in file. The night was very quiet, dark and starless, but we had no trouble tracking the ships' movements with our VS-560 night vision scopes, made all the easier because the ships had their running lights lit, and various other lumination could be observed at the bridges, the sterns, and other areas, especially along the decks. An impressive sight, like a gigantic, lit-up snake making its way into an ebony night. Ten ships, separated by roughly a hundred yards each, is a string of iron more than a mile in length, collectively weighing in at something like 450,000 deadweight tons, not including the cargos.*

*Right in the heart of the shipping lane, where it bends, the convoy of ships slowed, forming themselves into a sort of star shape. One ship, Orion, lay back, perhaps a couple of hundred*

*yards off to the rear of the ninth freighter, Gideon. Once the star was formed, and the huge metal mass assembled, the Seals debarked for various rendezvous sites.*

*Say, ten minutes later, enormous synchronized blasts speared the sky, setting off a thunderous rumble across the waters that suddenly flashed brighter than the sun that seemed brighter than a Sahara sun at noon. It looked a lot like a napalm blow-out. Very fierce, with heat waves rolling across the water, so blazingly hot you had to shield your eyes or they might be seared shut. No one, oddly enough, had thought to lay in a supply of goggles. We waited till the flames abated, as they always do, obviously so, whenever ships sink. Most sank bow first, though a couple broke apart amidships.*

*Until it's cleared, the Straights are completely blocked to all commercial or military sea traffic.*

*On signal from a passing satellite, we fired up our engines and high-tailed it for the pre-arranged pickup points. We retrieved all Seal teams within eighteen minutes, turned south and juiced the engines into a deafening roar.*

*Next day, only an hour off schedule we met up with our carrier group and that is the end of my journal entry at this time; a sparse account, to be sure, but the action played out fast, and this is nothing more than my recollection of this never-to-be-forgotten event that'll always remain as being the most stunning hour of my life.*

(One week later, another entry):

*The Orion, still adrift, was boarded by an inspection crew from Dubai on the day after the actual Incident. Photographs provided to NAVINTEL indicate an unexploded Russian Kursk-class torpedo embedded in the forward hull of the ship.*

## COMPRADOR

*Why, one is left to wonder, would the Russians destroy their much needed grain imports? Hell, they haven't enough grain to keep the vodka distilleries operating, or so we hear. Who'll run that country if there's nothing to nip on all morning long?*

*Call it a payback to the jerks in Moscow who've taken such delight in pulling our chain for so much of the past decade.*

(One month later, an added entry):

*The Great Crack-up still gets itself gobs of ink in the papers. The Salt Lake Morning Star describes it as a catastrophic accident. It was never an accident, of course, though it had similarities to one. Like all accidents, even the ones of birth or love, or war, who can predict the outcomes? Or, indeed, why accidents happen at all? It was no accident where my flotilla was on that night. It is a marvel how the cover-up, and the contrived confusion that made the cover-up possible, has succeeded so well for this length of time.*

(Two months later, a final entry):

*According to Jacksonville, Florida's "Times-Union", Lloyds of London's lead underwriter, Forbes & Fairawell, of the syndicate who carried the maritime insurance on the affected ships, has issued a statement saying the Russian government adamantly denies any role whatsoever in the Hormuz Incident that has caused enormous oil shortages worldwide...then the "Times-Union" account goes on to say the saboteurs, if indeed there were any, remain unidentified. Apparently, in an effort to clear themselves, the Russians are chasing leads worldwide, leaving no stone unturned; that is, if they can find the stones at all. Other observers claim the Russian investigation is a sham intended to deflect blame from themselves. Further, the same account says that Lloyd's is preparing legal action against the Russian government in a bid to recover the insurance losses, estimated to exceed 600-million old Euros.*

*Ah, well. This retired seadog sees it this way: everyone with two ears knows Moscow always denies everything when caught with its pants at half-mast. In the end, it was a masterful operation that caused rancorous upset but then so do all wars, so have many political movements, so do religions. It is the way of the human schema. History confirms our follies, beginning with our first known records: for instance, take the Bible and all its lovely fables and moral teachings. The Bible had to have been edited dozens of times; you can tell, for its all in the same voice and style. Hollywood can learn a thing or two, and has, from those ancient storytellers.*

*And whoever dreamed up The Incident was pretty savvy at the same game. It's on a par with raising Lazarus from the dead, or pretty close. Whoever that Whoever is, he or she will have much to moralize about over morning coffee, and for years to come, eh?*

*God alone knows what will come of it all. Still, it can't be worse than what we've been through the past decade. Or can it?*

*J.R.R.*



Culhane, when assessing The Incident and its wreckage of the world markets, knew he had pushed the tipping point too hard and too far, though he took a certain solace from Sant Saxa, and even Baster Muldaur, who stated that “too hard” was better than not hard enough.

He was quite surprised that his part in The Incident never came to light, at least not to the public. The cover-up had been flawless and the U.S. government did nothing to dispel the notion that the Russians had “perped” the incident as a means of unsettling grain markets.

For Culhane, the outcome of rigging and re-rigging the markets had never been a coin-flipper. He well knew what a chain of ensuing

disastrous events would occur, as did the other Magans. Still, no one could predict the extent of the price rundowns that bottomed into all-time lows for a range of critical commodities that fed the world's mouths, or were the essence of its many product line-ups meant for consumers.

On the uptick side, industry's costs of production began to slide sharply, opening the way for lower selling prices of goods and services, fatter margins, or even both. After a century of up-spirals in prices, deflation set in gradually.

All in all, it is still widely accepted that The Incident served to regrind the gears of how the global economy would function for decades to come. For some, it was to become a game-changer; for others, a life-changer; and for still others, the wide-open speculators, it spelled ruination.

Shortages became commonplace, then surpluses, as supply and demand—the ultimate ruler of all markets—skewed around like some out-of-whack teeter-totter. Still, history is littered with economic busts, the implausible happening with a kind of cyclical regularity, called by some as a Black Swan Event, when much goes wrong and so quickly. Even though, unlike a genuine Black Swan Event, the Incident was directed toward an intentional end game, and the fullness of its outcome could hardly be predicted.

Moralists have termed The Incident as a criminal event concocted by the vilest of minds.

Inquiries as to who owned the sunken ships have only met with dead ends. The ships, as it turns out, flew under the Liberian flag, and were owned by a Panamanian shell company that, in turn, was owned by a Hong Kong concern, that, in its turn, was controlled by a Moroccan firm, whose owners of record are all buried in a family plot near Marrakech.

There, the trail ends, possibly for all time. One clue, perhaps telling but perhaps not, is that the broker, who arranged for the sale of the ships to the Panamanian shell, was quoted as saying, "...the buyers were Russian, or at least they spoke with Russian accents..."

The Incident, whatever else it did, wizened the public. Opinion swung rapidly—that is, that life, and the world itself, was too important to entrust to a relative handful of politicians. Who were they, after all, to chart the fate of the multitudes?

Halburton, who might be labeled as a politician by some, but really wasn't, served another term as president. His great accomplishment was to foster a constitutional amendment that prohibited, other than in times of a declared national emergency, any instance of deficit spending. This so hobbled the politicians that few were willing to run for more than a single term of office. The corruption possibilities had become too limited, and it became nearly impossible to buy blocs of voters with freebies, handouts, earmarks and the like. Thus, the system itself could no longer be gamed, or not nearly as easily.

Squires stayed put, did what he was told, well aware of what might happen were he to breach his agreement with Culhane. Rearden, who had been a sonofabitch when alive and would still be a sonofabitch when dead. If he was dead, that is, for he had simply vanished. Rumor said his departure was sped by the Doney crime family, who, like Liu Wai, suffered immense losses when the St. Gallen Trust had shorted the U.S. dollar, on margin, to the tune of \$8-billions. The trust imploded, of course, when the dollar rebounded after The Incident.

As for Russia, it had poked its finger in its own eye. With the shutdown of the Straits, its (and Iran's) massive oil exports to western outlets were reduced to a relative trickle. Blustering about, threatening, and fiercely on the prowl to find scapegoats to blame for its plight—an entire nation starving, or, at best, facing wholesale malnutrition. Mass uprisings occurred with frequency. Further, the Kremlin found itself overextended due to Metzilov's grand plan of shorting the dollar, hoping to create unbearable pressure in the currency markets, forcing the Americans to renege on its financial obligations, and to bow to the more stable Russo-Euro combined currency, long a dream of the Kremlin.

Instead, Russia had trapped itself in its own web of chicanery. When it all backfired, the battle was won by Washington with no shots fired, so to speak, other than the blocking of the Straits.

American leverage, which was gained by controlling so much of the western world's food supplies, was further enhanced when Van Slyke bought up quantities of wheat harvesting contracts from the Ukraine, being Russia's main breadbasket. To feed its peoples, a stymied Moscow was forced to drop the price for gas piped directly to Europe, and, though that supply kept dwindling, its flow was largely unaffected by the Hormuz Incident.

Net, net—Moscow had paid prohibitively for its misadventures.

North America made a steady yet slow turnabout. Gradually, factories began to hum, unemployment dropped slowly and stubbornly; though griping was rampant by America's foreign creditors, the Blue Dollar performed famously, accounting, as it did, for a stream, over time, of trillions of overseas orders by nations wanting to redeem the U.S. Treasury paper they held. Yet it had taken time for the industrial gear-cogs to grip, take hold. America, after all, had lapsed into a torpor and, like a drunk recovering from a non-stop binge, it took some steady nursing to shake off the hangover.

Meanwhile, the arrangements with Canada and Mexico fell neatly into place. The U.S. grain surpluses were swapped for oil and natural gas, also, in Canada's case, for nickel. Once underway, it worked without a hitch.

Europe bumbled along, trying, as always, to find its newer place in the sun.

Delighting his mother, almost as much as he had himself, Ambros Piegear married his fetching ski champion two months to the day after the meeting with Culhane in Davos.

Bing! Bing! Bing!—two boys and a girl had joined the human race, separated by intervals of only a year. He and Panzi had bought the Mädl at a thirty-percent discount to what the owner had in mind before Hormuz had sundered property values in Europe. Ambros, having quit the everyday banking world, still sits, as does his mother,

on the board of directors at Braunsweig und Sohn, private bankers, who, if anything, became more private than ever, after skirting a close call over the St. Gallen Trust that might otherwise have blemished their reputation for years.

Hans-Otto Piegear elected to resign from the BIS when his term of office expired. No longer welcomed at Braunsweig, he formed a business partnership with his old ally, Gregor Metzilov, who had made good on his escape from the motherland. Two years later Metzilov succumbed to an agonizing death due to strychnine poisoning. No suspects emerged, and the case, from an investigative angle, remains unsolved to this day.

In Asia, after its recovery from The Incident, things rolled along quite merrily.

Not so, however for Liu Wai of Singapore.

It was Joost Van Slyke who discovered that Wai had been under scrutiny for some time by that government's Security and Intelligence Division, and, separately, was the target of yet another inquiry by its Monetary Authority.

After the meeting in Hong Kong with Herbsant Saxa, Culhane had journeyed to Singapore to join Van Slyke for the showdown with Liu Wai. The wily Singaporean threatened to expose highly confidential dealings of the Shang-Magan that likely would pose future problems for its operations. Wai, who had always disdained Culhane, tagging him as an upstart, rigorously protested the idea of the American heading the Asian Zone. In this, however, he was talking to the winds of changert that blew, wide, and unobstructed.

Infuriated over his heavy losses when the St. Gallen Trust had collapsed, and now seeing he was to be booted out of Shang-Magan, Liu Wai pulled a wavy-bladed Indonesian dagger—a *kris*—thrusting it in Culhane's face. Culhane disarmed him. The dust-up ended when the three Magans agreed upon a series of weighty payments to Liu Wai. The Singaporean eventually removed himself to Rangoon in Myanmar, where, according to later reports, he continued to consort

with the army generals in the opium and heroin trade conducted in the notorious Golden Triangle.

In Shanghai, the days passed bountifully. Legend told that all light touching earth from above falls first on China. It seemed so to Culhane. Riding pretty high, stroked by the feathers of happiness, a feeling lost to him for a span of years, he set about reestablishing himself. He had promised to keep to the sidelines prior to the cataclysm he had engineered, but the fact was, that having recovered his nine tons of gold, he had to invest it somewhere. So had kept his capital in bullion until he was ready to function on his former scale. Within a month after The Incident, gold's price tripled; blind luck this time and he readily admitted it, though to no one except himself.

For him, a Eureka moment!

Because he intended to hang his hat in China for good and always, he was replaced in the American Zone by a highly respected grain and commodities trader, Gilbert Guilfoyle of Winnipeg, Canada. When nominating Guilfoyle to the Council of Six, Culhane had this to say: "Give Gil a phone, a yellow pad and a pencil, and I'd bet he could liquidate something the size of Nicaragua over a long weekend...make no mistake, he's our man..."

A weary Joost Van Slyke had pleaded for his own replacement. And it was Culhane who succeeded him, when the Council chose him a year later, to be the Shan Chu (Chief of Hill).

Though living together, he and Jia had not married. Several times they thought of having another child, but, in the end, decided it made little sense at their time of life—being in their forties—so the idea never really found its time or place.

Back and forth, Jia and Culhane kept changing their feelings about acquainting Michael with the truth of his parentage. They didn't, for the reason that Michael was not a youth of five in age, or even ten; young enough, in other words, to accept a reality and then adjust to it. Michael was by now married, succeeding on his own, so why rock that boat with a revelation of unknown consequence? What was to be gained?

Truth is always best. But too much of anything, especially if wrongly interpreted, can do irreparable damage. That was Culhane's take; he had lost one family, he'd not risk alienating another.

Speaking of Michael, yes, he had married Teng-li-Fwen, the radio astronomer, a passion she relinquished after bearing two children, one being delivered in Sydney, Australia to circumvent the rule in China of one child per family. Michael and his family resided in Macao, where he soon learned the ropes at Banco Oporto; and, in the process, he became a boon companion of Herbsant Saxa. At age thirty-two, he took over as president of the flourishing bank and set about becoming, among other things, a prime lender to Macao's prolific gaming and hospitality industry.

Which was not exactly what Culhane had in mind when buying the bank, but he knew better than to meddle with triumph...for, Michael was rapidly gaining ground against his formidable, larger competitors. He was a fast thinker, utterly reliable, a man of his word, and he knew how to dispense favors to clients who ran into life's troubles.

Andrea Warren, in a turnabout that left her mother gasping in cold rage, had gone to Italy to redeem the older woman, as if she were an almost forgotten bauble left in a pawn shop and was in need of reclamation. Andrea redeemed her all right, when, in an almost inconceivable reversal, she married the dashing Count Valfiore herself. The couple now divide their days among Venice, Capri and Cortina d'Ampezzo. Andrea, without much fuss, picks up the chits for a way of life she was, in actuality, born for. The golden spoon of her youth had found its way to her mouth once again.

On occasional Sundays, she is seen in church, there to seemingly pay homage to one or another Gods. When in her pew, she is always seen to wear a black lace *mantilla* over her head that also shields part of her face. Added in, is a pair of Carrera sunglasses; this, to conceal her dribble of tears.

She sits in her favorite pew to meditate upon a man she knew she'd never get over, nor did she ever wish to. It was the gift of the

Duffy that had reversed her fortunes. But that wasn't all; for, upon Culhane's departure for China, she found the much admired Cezanne, and the overly brief letter he'd left for her. She loved that painting, though not as much as she did its lordly giver.

As Shan Chu, Culhane bore burdens taking him to far-flung lands, and, when wanting a break, he escaped with Jia to a teak-built mountain retreat he had bought in Nepal, not far from the famed Tiger Tops in the Chitwan National Park. Lazing there, loving with her, sometimes camping deep in the jungles, he used the breakaways to restore his bones and renew his spirit.

Then was soon off again, dealing with the Magan's inter-zonal business, finding new government "advisers", coping with the trickier and more ethereal situations in the markets. Aided by Direct Access Trading technologies, trading activities—his and others—had become an instant thing. What happened in New York, London, Shanghai, Paris was mirrored on other global market within seconds. The markets had become thus become riskier. A misjudged move somewhere and one or another of the Zones could be seriously damaged.

Among his tasks was to see to it that errors and misjudgments happened only once, if that often—and usually it worked out that way.

He was busy. Liking it, too.

Sometimes he would think he needed the eyes and ears of the Almighty to keep his breath regularized, keep the keel straight of Shang-Magan, and the ever-need to keep markets everywhere in balance. He knew the truth of Frederic Bastiat's observation of old, that: "When goods don't cross borders, armies will."

When looking into life's rearview mirror, he sometimes speculated if his personal world would've turned out the way it had, had the U.S. government not withheld that nine tons of gold it owed him.

He'd never know—he was a comprador, not a soothsayer.

## The Author

DAVID CUDLIP holds a master's degree in business administration from Dartmouth College's Amos Tuck School and served in Europe with United States Army Intelligence before entering a business career with the private bankers, Brown Brothers Harriman & Co. Afterward, he was elected a senior vice-president and director of an airline, then went on to become President of Pathfinder Corporation. He also co-founded a privately held company—Datamerx—engaged in electronic in-store marketing services. When living in California, he was an active member of Fictionaires, a group of well-known west coast writers. He now lives in Tryon, North Carolina with his wife. Other of his novels—*A Moveable Verdict* and *Dillon*—are available at Amazon, Kindle Store, and Barnes & Noble's Nook.