

Chapter I

For more than four months there was dead calm. Madame Atomos seemed to have disappeared at the same time as Smith Beffort and Mie Azusa. Some thought that the sinister Japanese woman had given up the idea of reducing the United States to ashes. That was, of course, the opinion of the public at large. But the specialists, James Edward Evans, Yosho Akamatsu, Doctor Alan Soblen and many others knew that there was a better chance that it was just the calm before the storm.

On this particular day, Soblen burst into the office of James Edward Evans and slammed the telegram down on his desk, smiling as he said, "It's official—it's a boy!"

J.E.E. let out a sigh and grumbled, "And none too soon. I was wondering whether Mie was going to manage to give birth before Madame Atomos got back on their trail. Damn, it's a big day, doctor!" He wiped the smile off his face and added drearily, "Even if Beffort's son is French."

"Don't talk nonsense. Smith is American and Mie, also, since they got married. So, little Robert is too. And don't forget that he was born in the American hospital in Neuilly."¹

J.E.E. nodded unenthusiastically. For him, an Americans couple should be making babies in the United States. "This Robert," he asked reluctantly, "what color is he?" Soblen was speechless. J.E.E. lit a cigar. "What? You looked surprised, but you shouldn't be. Mie is Japanese..."

"And you're afraid that the boy will be yellow!"

"As the future godfather I am fully entitled to worry about it."

Soblen crossed his arms. All of a sudden he was in a bad mood. "Who said you would be the godfather?"

"No one. It just seems natural."

"Not at all, not at all," Soblen said emphatically. "I've known Mie and Smith for much longer than you..."

J.E.E. raised a conciliatory hand. "Let's wait for Smith to come back. No need for us to argue over it, doctor. Especially since no one has asked us anything yet and there could very well be a third scoundrel in the mix. When is Smith and his little family planning to leave France?"

Soblen sat down, wiped his glasses and admitted glumly, "I don't know. Since he's been there, he's become a very mysterious character. We never were able to get his address and the funds we supplied always went through the bank."

"And his famous Green Dragon Force?"

Soblen nodded. "No news. You know that Smith was especially keen on Madame Atomos not finding out that he was in France. And for this he practically burned all his bridges with us."

"Okay, but he achieved his goal," J.E.E. objected. "If the world hasn't heard anything about Madame Atomos for four months, we have him to thank for it. Personally my hat's off to him. And then in spite of everything, we know that Mie gave birth in the Paris area, right?"

Soblen grinned and put a finger on the telegram. "All Smith said was, *Robert Smith Beffort, born today at the American hospital in Neuilly*. And you can be sure that if he risked telling us where he was, it's because he was counting on moving fast."

"So he just may be coming back to the United States?"

Soblen shrugged his shoulders and grabbed his hat. "There's no way to know. We can think whatever we want. Anyway, his wariness is justified. At this moment, Madame Atomos must be moving heaven and earth trying to find him and his wife. Frankly, I wouldn't want to be in their shoes." He held out his hand and added, "Now I have a little work to do. If you get any news, you can call me in the lab."

J.E.E. shook his hand.

"I'll be sure to, doctor, don't worry."

Soblen left the office, went down two floors and then left the Federal Building. After crossing the street to the paid parking lot, he sat behind the wheel of his car. When he went to start the ignition, his fingers felt a thin roll of paper lodged against the handle. He unrolled it and read:

Watch out, doc. Don't look suspicious because you're probably being watched by one or more members of the Atomos Organization. I've been in the U.S. for 15 days. Mie and our son are with me.

¹ See *The End of the Brotherhood of the Sword* in this volume.

The telegram you received just now was only meant to throw Madame Atomos off our scent. Now, without telling anyone, get to Kennedy airport. Your plane heading for St. Louis, Missouri, takes off in 20 minutes. The ticket and reservation are in the glove box. In St. Louis take a taxi and go to the Midwest Stock Exchange (319 N. 4th Street). When you get there, one of my men will take care of you. See you soon, doc. The Green Dragon Force awaits you!

Soblen crumpled the paper into a ball and swallowed it discretely. He started the engine, in the same movement checking to see if the ticket and reservation were really in the glove box, and then set off. St. Louis is less than 900 miles from New York. With a jet he would be there in exactly 2 hours and 15 minutes.

The plane landed on time at the Lambert-St.-Louis municipal airport, located 13 miles north-west of the city. Soblen went down the steps with hands in his pockets and crossed the hall to go and find a taxi. 50 minutes later he stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the Midwest Stock Exchange and waited.

Around him the street was crowded. Too crowded for him to spot a possible lookout. Besides, Smith Beffort had said that one of his men would take care of him, which kept him from taking any action himself. Ten minutes went by and then a small, thin man, carrying a batch of the German newspaper *Deutsche Wochenschrift* under his arm, brushed by him and whispered, "Enter the building and leave through the other door."

Soblen let a few seconds tick off before entering the Stock Exchange. He found himself in a hectic environment among groups shouting in front of boards on which the latest stock values were written. Soblen slipped along the long central wall looking for the exit that the fake newspaper seller had mentioned. He found it without too much difficulty at the end of the south corridor. It was a narrow door, probably used very rarely. Soblen tried the handle and the door opened easily. The doctor entered a corridor and immediately met a man whose face was held together by old scars.

"Keep going, doctor," the stranger huffed as he closed the door and turned the key.

Soblen nodded, strode down the corridor that led into a street behind the Stock Exchange.

"Dr. Soblen, over here!" The call came from a gray Mercury whose door was wide open. Soblen climbed into the car, closed the door and sank down in the front seat. The Mercury shot off, made a sharp turn at the corner and started flying down a quiet street that must have led out of the city toward the west. Soblen glanced at the driver and noted right away that he looked suspicious.

"Were you followed, doctor?" the man asked out of the corner of his mouth.

"I don't think so... but even if someone was tailing me, I have the feeling that he must be far off now. Where are we going?"

The man did not give a straight answer. "My name's Sammy," he drawled, "and I've got to ask you a few questions."

Soblen noticed then that he was driving with one hand. The other had disappeared under his coat where there was a telling bulge. "Go right ahead."

"First of all, can you tell me the number of your hotel room at the Hilton in Palm Beach?"

"302," Soblen answered straight off.

"Second, tell me exactly what the business card said."

"The business card? Can you be more precise?"

Sammy slanted a glance at him; his jaws clenched. The weapon he was hiding under his coat was suddenly pointing at Soblen's belly. "The business card," he repeated coldly.

Soblen wrinkled his brow and said, "To my knowledge there's only one business card that Beffort could think important. If I'm not mistaken, it's text was this: *Mie Azusa, Public Relations Manager, Southern United States.*"

Sammy relaxed a little. "Third, doctor, how many witnesses were there in the shop of Toubinsky Junior after the young messenger left and before the stretcher arrived?"

Soblen's mouth dropped open and his face became flushed. The question require a precise answer about events that took place more than a year ago². "Say," he protested, "don't you think that's going a little too far?"

² See *The Sinister Madame Atomos* in *The Terror of Madame Atomos*.

Sammy sat like stone. "Answer doctor. If you are in full possession of your senses, you should remember."

Soblen suddenly realized that the test was really necessary. Smith Beffort was being overly careful, demanding precise answers about particular events in which only he and Soblen had participated. After a four-month absence Beffort wanted to be sure that Soblen had not been enrolled in the Atomos Organization.

Soblen tried hard to remember. "I think there were seven witnesses. Four women and three men. The young messenger was Jack Uron or Uri, I can't remember exactly."

"Jack Urey," Sammy corrected, smiling. "Doctor, Mr. Beffort was right when he said you had a damn good memory!"

Soblen heaved a sigh of relief. "Now can you tell me anything?"

Sammy grimaced, "It wouldn't do any good. Look at this instead."

With a quick movement he pulled out his weapon and handed it to Soblen who took it and was surprised at how light it was. Apparently it was a firearm, but its shape held a few significant differences. Its clip was replaced by a transparent reservoir in which a thick, oily liquid splashed around. The trigger was just a red button on the grooved surface. The thin barrel looked like a welding torch that ended in a kind of sprinkler head with thousands of microscopic holes. The whole thing was about eight inches long and probably weighed around one pound.

Soblen was intrigued. "What is this?"

"A paralyzing pistol, doctor," Sammy informed him calmly. "It freezes in place for 60 minutes every human who's less than 1,000 feet away."

Soblen smiled. "So, Smith did it! We finally have a weapon that can rival the diabolical inventions of Madame Atomos."

It was a gift of fate, but Soblen did not forget that the weapon came from the sinister Japanese woman's arsenal and that Beffort and Mie had barely escaped her after the partial fire in the Governor Clinton Hotel in New York. Four months earlier, being chased by the Atomos Organization, the couple had, in fact, been able to board a Pan Am flight to Paris at the last minute. Since then, Madame Atomos seemed to have given up her merciless vengeance against the United States in order to devote her time to recapturing Mie Azusa, ex-Miss Atomos, whom she had been hunting for months. But this would not last forever. Sooner or later Madame Atomos would resume her attacks because in the end it was the best way to make Smith Beffort come out of hiding.

"We're here," Sammy said. For a while the car had been cruising in the countryside.

"Where are we?" Soblen asked.

"Somewhere west of Saint Louis, doctor. As things stand right now, it's better if you didn't know the exact location of our base."

The Mercury turned sharply onto a narrow path in the forest. Sammy crossed a clearing at full speed and headed straight for a thick bush. A crash was inevitable.

"Watch out!" Soblen shouted.

The Mercury slipped harmlessly through the bush and into a faintly lighted tunnel.

"It wasn't a real bush," Sammy explained coldly.

Soblen relaxed, a little embarrassed by his emotional outburst. He understood that Beffort had completely changed his traditional methods to more or less adopt those of Madame Atomos. The false bush, the tunnel, the paralyzing pistol, all these creepy men in the Green Dragon Force... The Mercury came to a sudden halt in the middle of the deserted tunnel.

Soblen looked around and asked, "What's going on?"

"Nothing, doctor. We're just going through the entrance exam. Right now a camera in the ground is filming certain marks engraved on the chassis of the car. If the codes aren't right, a paralyzing rifle will open fire and we'll be put out of action."

Soblen pursed his lips. Obviously, Smith Beffort had adopted more and more of Madame Atomos' methods! All of a sudden the Mercury shook, turned 45 degrees and shot out into a shaft in the concrete wall. After going down 50 feet or so, it was pushed onto a metal cart and carried like a common package onto a platform under a blinding light from a battery of projectors.

"Get out, doctor," Sammy told him.

Soblen protected his eyes as he stepped out and found himself on a moving walkway that carried him away at 25 miles per hour. Soblen clung onto the handrail and grumbled. Heading down another

tunnel he watched the walls fly by until he was thrown into a square room. He stumbled forward and was whisked up by J.E.E. and Smith Beffort.

“Hey, doc,” the latter said cheerfully, “good to see you again!”

Soblen stepped away grumpily and pointed a finger at a smiling J.E.E. “So, you were in on all this!” he shouted indignantly.

“Don’t be upset, doc,” Beffort intervened. “J.E.E. was safe from any Atomos operation whereas you and Akamatsu were prime targets. I couldn’t take the risk of letting you in on it. And you can imagine that I couldn’t build this base all alone!”

“Still,” Soblen muttered, “you could have used me for your research on the paralyzing ray.”

Beffort took him by the arm and said solemnly, “Without knowing it, your role was much more important, doc. Thanks to you, being constantly under surveillance by members of the Atomos Organization, we know about one of the hideouts of our mortal enemy. Come on, I’ll explain it to you.”

Chapter II

Not at all happy, Soblen sat in a comfortable armchair that Beffort pointed out while J.E.E. took a place on the other side of the desk. The room was in the center of the base, which was set up fifty feet underground level. There was total silence there.

Beffort pulled down a wall map representing the St. Louis area, picked up a ruler and pointed it at a point between St. Peters and the right bank of the Mississippi. "Here, doc, is where we are. It's practically in the middle of the United States. Therefore, our geographical position is perfect—it allows the Green Dragon Force to get as fast as possible to anywhere in the country."

"Okay," Soblen said, "tell me a little about this Force."

Beffort and J.E.E. exchanged a knowing glance and Beffort sat down. "Doc, I'm going to surprise you."¶"About the paralyzing ray, I know all about it, so you'll have to surprise me with something else."

"I think I will. You see, doc, to fight against the criminal organization of Madame Atomos, I had to create an organization that was like it. It's no longer possible to keep risking the lives of policemen and soldiers in a lopsided fight that hits them hard."

"Yeah, and the FBI agents?"

"There aren't enough," J.E.E. interjected, "and they're already busy with the different crimes that they've been trained for. The life of the nation can't come to a standstill, even if Madame Atomos murders a million Americans!"

"So," Soblen was intrigued now, "where did you fish up the members of the Green Dragon Force?"

"In prison," Beffort said. "Every one of the men here were serving a sentence of at least 20 years in prison. But most of them had got the death sentence."

Soblen's jaw dropped. "Well, I'll be!"

"Keep your cool, doc. Just tell yourself that to crack the whip you have to be holding the handle. My 300 men have nothing more to learn about using weapons, driving cars, burglary, hold-ups or anything else you can imagine."¶"Outlaws! They're going to..."

"Not now," Beffort cut him off coldly. "Society is going to use their knowledge to fight the greatest battle of history. This battle might last for years and will be chock full of hard fighting. My men will risk their lives and whoever finishes their contract will be granted a full pardon and reintegrated into the society that had banished them forever."

"But come on, Smith, they're gangsters!"¶"Of course," Beffort admitted calmly. "And that's exactly why we chose them. We needed killers, commandoes of peace, and now we have them. Your driver, Sammy, was sentenced to 120 years. You could say he was practically dead. Now he knows that he has a chance to pull through and if Madame Atomos or any other member of her Organization runs into him, they're goners for sure!"

"Who knows about this?" Soblen asked.

"A dozen people," J.E.E. answered, "among whom are the highest authorities of the country. Of course, there was never any question about informing the general public through the press. This is and will remain an undertaking stamped top secret! You see, doctor, we trust you."

"Thanks," Soblen stiffened up. "I'll try to live up to it. That said, Smith, what's the lead you discovered thanks to me?"

Beffort smiled to himself at the unspoken battle pitting Soblen against J.E.E. The latter was the head of the FBI. His participation in the formation of the Green Dragon Force was necessary, but it was a fact that Soblen was refusing to admit after he himself had been kept in the dark. "Eight days ago, doc, you attended a conference being held in Houston at the center for space training, the headquarters of NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, right?"

"Right," Soblen confirmed.

"It was your first major trip in four months and we figured that Madame Atomos would follow you. With this in mind, Eddy Witter and Charles Hyde were charge of your protection. During your trip they noticed that you were being followed by a suspicious couple, so they took some photos and sent them here. After examining them in our archives, we found that the man was Bob Sanders and the woman Madge Geary."

“The girl from the Curtis Hotel in Phoenix³?”

“Exactly, doc. Well, the Atomos Organization was interested in you and it was up to us to take advantage of it. After you returned to New York, Sanders and Madge stopped watching you and two other members of the Organization took over. Naturally, Witter and Hyde continued following the Sanders-Madge couple who went directly to Wilmington, North Carolina, which is one of the states that Madame Atomos has not attacked yet. They rented a room in a hotel downtown. The next day at 10 a.m., just after the period of neutralization⁴, they suddenly split up. Sanders got away from Hyde, but Witter, who was literally on the heels of Madge Geary, was able to follow her to a small house located on the seaside about 12 miles outside the city. Since then, the girl’s been invisible. From our office in Wilmington, we know that the house belongs to a certain Arthur Flower, widower, no children, officially on a pleasure trip somewhere in Europe.”

“Hmm,” Soblen said, “I’m afraid his trip is going to last forever.”

Beffort nodded. “You’re probably right. The house looks uninhabited, but our men have noticed some strange comings and goings between the house and the shore during the night. If you knew that the house was only 50 yards from the sea, you’d think like us that Madame Atomos is certainly using it for a port of entry.”

“Does that mean that Atomos City isn’t far?”

Beffort lit a cigarette and pulled down another map that showed the east coast of the U.S. from Miami to Norfolk. “Off the coast of Wilmington there’s a three and a half mile trench. If you remember the attack against Florida...”

“You mean the trench could be the main underwater base of the City, don’t you?”

“Everything is leading us to believe that, doc. If we take a few steps back, we see that Atomos City crossed the United States from west to east after suffering serious damage on the Coconino Plateau in Arizona. Now, it was precisely in this area that our radars lost track of the City, which was unable to fly at its usual speed and was visible all the way up to a secret base where it could perform the necessary repairs.”

Soblen was interested. He took off his glasses and unconsciously wiped the lenses. Beffort’s reasoning was strong, based on real facts, absolutely unquestionable. On the Coconino Plateau, Atomos City had indeed flirted with destruction. Attacked by air at a time when its electromagnetic dome was not protecting it, it survived only by fleeing frantically.

But Soblen also remembered that the huge machine seemed seriously damaged. “Great,” he said. “Let’s say that the City is taking refuge in this trench and that it’s still there. What do you plan on doing?”

Beffort leaned toward him, his brow furrowed in concentration, and answered, “This is all very recent, doc, don’t forget that. Your trip was only eight days ago and we found out about Arthur Flower’s house only 48 hours ago! We got together the Green Dragon Force to try to find a solution. That’s why you’re here now. No need to tell you that Yosho Akamatsu will be here soon.”

A smile smoothed out Soblen’s face. “When is he arriving?”

Beffort looked at his watch. “My telegram should have reached him last night in Tokyo. I don’t think he’ll be long.”

At that very moment, Akamatsu was getting off the plane in the Lambert-St. Louis Municipal Airport where Soblen had landed just three hours earlier. When he left Tokyo, he had destroyed Smith Beffort’s telegram, being sure to remember the instructions telling him to take a taxi to 411 North 7th Street, the address of the Swiss Consulate, and wait there on the sidewalk to be contacted about the next step.

Carrying a small suitcase, Akamatsu crossed the hall in his smooth, cat-like walk and headed for the cab stand. He got into the first taxi in line. On the road, the special agent from the *Tokkoka*⁵ did not

³ See *The Return of Madame Atomos*.

⁴ The hour of neutralization (from 9 to 10 a.m.) freed each member of the Atomos Organization from the grip of the Great Brain. Remember that it was thanks to this dead time that the surgeons in Atlanta operated on Mie Azusa, Yuri Belof and Jean Marchand.

⁵ Japan’s secret police.

bother to look behind him, which was unusual, but he had no reason to be suspicious. For four months in Japan he could not imagine himself being followed by a member of the Atomos Organization.

When he arrived at his destination, he paid the cab, got out of the car and started pacing back and forth in front of the consulate. Three minutes later a big black Chevrolet pulled up to him. "Mister Akamatsu, would you like to get in?"

Without hesitating Yosho climbed into the back seat of the vehicle next to two men already there and the Chevrolet took off straightaway. As he was putting his suitcase between his feet, he felt a hard blow to his head and collapsed without breathing a word.

In front of the consulate a newspaper seller, who had seen the incident from a distance, ran to the nearest telephone booth.

Yoshō Akamatsu regained consciousness much later and he realized immediately that he had been drugged. A bitter taste on his palette; his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth; it was extremely hard for him to come out of the fog. After a minute the pain in the nape of his neck reminded him quickly of his waiting in front of the Swiss Consulate, the arrival of the Chevrolet and the movement he had made to put down his suitcase.

He groaned, opened his eyes onto total darkness and stood up with a crick in his back. They had not even taken the trouble to tie him up, so they must have been sure that he could not escape.

Akamatsu searched his pockets but they had all been emptied. He moved in the darkness, hands held out, and met a rough surface. It was just a wall. An old stone wall whose cement was cracking in places but which would hold up against attack. At least against an attack of fingernails... Farther on there was a door, which was a change—a cold, flat surface. Steel.

Akamatsu finished his little inspection tour, sniffed the air and listened hard. He heard a background noise, a constant, low rumble broken by dull crashes, which he recognized immediately: the sea. As for the air, it was fresh. So, there had to be a ventilation hole somewhere in the utter darkness and he had to find it, no matter how small it was.

He probed the walls again, concentrating on the wall opposite the door, until he felt a light breeze. He jumped, grabbed a rusty iron bar and pulled himself up. Even with his nose against the grill he could see nothing. Beyond the bars the darkness stretched out unto infinity. An infinity that very well could have been just another wall. He let go and sat on the hard clay ground. For the moment he could do nothing constructive. His prison had a few weaknesses but whoever had kidnapped him knew that he could do nothing about it for a long while.

After who knows how long, a key turned silently in the lock and Akamatsu jumped up, glued to the wall, at the very second that a light bulb went on in the high ceiling and a voice said, "Don't tire yourself out, Mr. Akamatsu. If you want to eat, go and sit in the middle of the cellar."

Yoshō obeyed, noting that he was in a cellar and that they were watching him in spite of the darkness, probably by means of a wide-angle, infrared lens.

"Thank you," the voiced continued. "Now we can bring your meal. No need to attack your server. Even if you manage to get by him, you will be stopped on the other side of the door by rays that will not be pleasant to your body."

For a minute Akamatsu tried to figure out where the strange voice was coming from. It was the voice of a man, rather metallic, speaking in fluent English. He looked up and right away saw the small speaker, out of reach.

The door turned heavily on its hinges and a man entered the cellar. He put a plate on the ground and stood back up. Akamatsu recognized him easily: Bob Sanders, the third man from the Marchand/Belof team, both of whom the surgeons in Atlanta had operated on four months earlier. For now he was under the control of Madame Atomos, but he would come back to himself tomorrow morning between 9 and 10 a.m.

Akamatsu sat without reacting. It was vital that no observer see that he knew Sanders. The latter looked at the Japanese agent with a cold, empty eye and said, "When you are done, let us know by knocking on the door. Do you need anything else?"

Akamatsu smiled. "I would love to get out of here and back to St. Louis."

His useless request was only made to see the reaction. Soblen, who had already been in Madame Atomos' prisons, had said that there was a delay in the response coming from the Great Brain in Atomos City. In fact, Sanders was only an intermediary. His eyes captured the image of Akamatsu, his

ears heard sounds, and everything was collected by the motor-brain in his skull and immediately transmitted to the Great Brain, which responded through Sanders' vocal chords. Therefore, the delay between the question and answer might give an approximate distance between the City and the cellar.

Akamatsu counted 12 seconds before Sanders said, "We will speak about that again when the time comes, Mr. Akamatsu. We know that Smith Beffort and his wife are hiding around St. Louis. Beffort should know by now that you have been kidnapped and he will not stop until he finds you. When we have eliminated Beffort, we will transport you to the City to undergo the operation that you know about."

Through the mouth of Sanders, it was Madame Atomos who was speaking. Akamatsu could have sworn it. "Why are you waiting for the operation?" he asked.

Again the answer took some time to come. 12 seconds. "Our operating room was destroyed on the Coconino Plateau. It has been unusable ever since, but will be ready in a week. You will fight by my side, Mr. Akamatsu, and believe me, I am happy for it. Bon appétit and see you soon."

Sanders turned around, walked through the doorway and carefully closed the armored door behind him. Akamatsu shivered. His chances were one in a million to get out of this one!