

THE MARK OF MADAME ATOMOS

Chapter I

In a foul mood, Smith Beffort tore himself away from watching the street being scoured by blasts of rain, swung around and said, "It's not possible, Evans! Miss Icho Fuji can't be Madame Atomos!"

James Edward Evans just shrugged and tapped the file in front of him. "Icho Fuji's left thumb print is an exact match with the left thumb print of Kanoto Yoshimuta, aka Madame Atomos. You saw so yourself, right?"

"She's 30 years old," Beffort insisted, "and the latter's over 50!"

"I know, but that doesn't change the facts."

"There must be an error!"

Evans slowly shook his head. "No way, Smith. We've had Kanoto Yoshimuta's fingerprints for years and Icho Fuji's were just lifted from the room at the Lobatos Hospital where she stayed before escaping with Miss Ida Brown... I'm as flabbergasted as you, but we can't deny the evidence: Icho Fuji and Madame Atomos are one and the same person!"

Beffort's stomach turned as he flopped into an armchair and lit a cigarette. Since he said nothing, Evans continued, "Moreover, don't forget that Madame Atomos vanished at the exact moment when Icho Fuji showed up in Padanaram."

Beffort waved him off wearily. "I remember everything, Evans, everything... Still, how do you expect me to just sit here and accept such an extraordinary transformation? Who would believe that Madame Atomos could have succeeded in growing 20 years younger? Look, it's insane!"

Evans spread his hands out as a sign of helplessness. "I don't have a goddamn clue, but it's a fact! Before, she had flying saucers, a magnetic wall, a disintegrator ray, and she wasn't real, she was right out of a science fiction story. Now she's lost her formidable power, but she's become a young woman again, very pretty, very attractive. Okay, got it!"

"Coming from her, nothing surprises you anymore?"

"Exactly, I have to admit it. And to be perfectly honest, I have to say that I wouldn't be surprised if she's already managed to build a new laboratory. Speaking of which, still nothing in your search?"

Beffort shot him a sidelong glance. "If I had any news," he stated dryly, "you'd have heard. The San Francisco region has been gone through with a fine-toothed comb by hundreds of men over the last three months..."

"With no results."

"We can't dig underground for thousands of square miles! Now, given Madame Atomos' habits, it's obvious that her laboratory is subterranean. Under such circumstances, what can we do?"

"One fine day," J. Edward Evans grumbled, "she's going to bring out a new weapon as terrifying as before and it's going to start all over again."

Beffort stubbed out his cigarette, even though it was only half-smoked, stood up and as he picked up his raincoat and hat, said, "We're wasting time in pointless discussions, Evans."

"It's to take stock of the situation," the FBI director defended.

The G-man stared at him coldly. "I don't need to go over this again and again to remember that Icho Fuji disappeared three months ago and during all that time she's certainly been dedicated to finishing her laboratory. Truthfully, I'm expecting a heavy blow any day now, Evans. It's the end of September and we haven't found a trace of Icho Fuji or Ida Brown. In San Francisco with the A.O.F.M.A.¹ Ritter's hit a brick wall so hard it looks like the secret society was dissolved after the death of Arthur Trigg. But I know it's not true, that our enemies have been working in the shadows while we're running around doing nothing and that the start of a new Atomos operation is right around the corner. Therefore, I can assure you that all our forces are ready to go. Whatever happens, we won't

¹ American Organization of the Friends of Madame Atomos.

be caught off guard. In the meantime, you should inform the press that Miss Icho Fuji is enemy number one from now on. Tell them also that Madame Atomos is dead..."

"That's a lie," J.E.E. protested, "since her fingerprints..."

"Don't get all worked up! It's all just hoping that it'll wound her pride. As far as I know Madame Atomos, she will never accept playing dead. Her pride will force her to come out of hiding because in her desire for vengeance she'll only be satisfied if the United States knows unequivocally that Madame Atomos is behind the tragedy that strikes it."

Evans grinned. "I do believe you know her well," he said without the slightest hint of irony.

Beffort backed up toward the door, raised a finger and smiled. "Above all, mum's the word about that fingerprint. Make up a story. For example, tell the journalists that Icho Fuji is a lunatic, a fanatic who got the crazy idea of continuing the depraved work of her dead boss..."

"But she doesn't have her genius?" Evans offered.

"Okay! We're on the same wavelength! Get that out today and I'll take 50 to 1 that Madame Atomos/Icho Fuji will react before the end of the week."

"Agreed," Evans assured him. "The news will be out before noon."

Beffort winked, walked through the door, close it behind him and strode down the hallway.

At 12:45 Smith and Mie were in a restaurant on Rhode Island Avenue. They did not go there out of habit, but for an intimate celebration of their wedding anniversary. The young lady had finally regained her balance and a certain joie de vivre. She no longer obsessed over the death of her son. Time had done its job...

"Evans kept his word," Smith said. "If Yosho read the news, he ought to be wondering what we're cooking up. By the way, when was the last time you heard from him?"

Mie furrowed her brow and said, "Two weeks ago. He left the hospital when he called us. Say, Smith, don't you think we should be talking about something else? This is a special day, after all."

"That's true," Smith smiled, searching through his pockets. "Hold on, Mie, I've got a little present for you."

The box held a brooch. A beauty. At first blushing, Mie suddenly turned pale when she held it. "It looks like..."

"Yes," Smith confirmed, "the jeweler reproduced the model, but I can swear to you that this brooch is not radioactive."²

Mie got her color back and leaned over to kiss her husband. "Thank you," she whispered, "nothing could have made me happier."

Beffort hugged her, gave her a passionate kiss and then sat up straight when he saw that several customers were watching them.

Mie nibbled his ear. "Does it bother you to look like newlyweds, Mr. Beffort?"

"Out of practice. These last few years we haven't had much time to pay attention to each other, have we?"

Mie sighed, sat back and closed her eyes. "I dream of a cozy apartment without a single suitcase and without a phone, where we could live forever..."

"It's only a dream," Smith interrupted her. "If Madame Atomos showed up tomorrow in the North Pole..."

"We'd leave for the North Pole," Mie finished. "I know. Didn't you promise to talk about something else? If you've got no ideas, tell me what's on the menu. I'm starving!"

Beffort grabbed the menu and listed the dishes. Mie was only half listening. She was really just trying to distract him, to make him forget for a little while about his usual preoccupations. She thought that the atmosphere was perfect for it and the French wine would manage to plunge Smith into euphoria. It did not matter if the euphoria was artificial.

"Bordeaux?" Smith proposed.

"Bordeaux," Mie accepted, casually watching a man enter the restaurant. He was well dressed, tall and looked like a businessman. His briefcase seemed full and heavy; behind his tortoise-shell framed glasses his eyes shined with a feverish glare. Mie took in all these details without thinking and would no doubt have forgotten the man right away if he did not end up staring at Smith.

² See *The Seduction of Madame Atomos* in *The Resurrection of Madame Atomos*.

"In the old days," Beffort reckoned, "it would have called for a Cutty Sark."

"Naturally," Mie approved.

She was watching the man weave through the tables and head straight for them. He switched his briefcase to his other hand, yanked open the zipper, stepped closer, leaned over and asked, "Mr. and Mrs. Beffort?"

Surprised, Smith looked up at him. "That's us. What do you want?"

The man dug his hand into his briefcase and smiled very kindly. "I have a message to give you from..." He pulled out a Colt, pointed it at Smith and shouted, "Madame Atomos!"

Instantly a series of shots broke the silence that the killer's announcement had instilled. Mie screamed and started to jump to her feet, but was pushed to the floor by Smith, who leaped over the table. The man shot again before doubling over when Smith punched him hard in the stomach. Then he collapsed under the G-man as the glasses and plates shattered on the tile floor.

Coming out of the kitchen, a waiter hit by a stray bullet grabbed his belly and dropped slowly to his knees, stunned. In the rest of the place everyone sat petrified. They still did not understand, but the name of Madame Atomos had struck them with terror.

"Call the police," Beffort barked.

One of his ears was bleeding and the left shoulder pad of his jacket was torn off. He stood up, picked up the Colt and waved his hand around.

"Stay seated everyone and finish your lunch. The show's over!"

With shaky legs, Mie flopped onto the seat. She would remember this wedding anniversary...

The man woke up from his KO in a room next to James Edward Evans' office. His identification said that his name was Louis Radetich, a manager, living in Oakland. His briefcase contained a business contract typed in triplicate for the purchase of 50 tons of sheet metal for the Glenmont Company, whose headquarters were in Bethesda, northwest of Washington D.C.

Radetich snapped out of it and massaged his jaw. Beffort had hit him hard and the man was still feeling it. He looked around, confused, and murmured, "I've surely got a broken tooth..." Then he spoke more loudly, "Who are you and why am I here?"

One phone call had informed Smith that Louis Radetich had landed in Washington D.C. around 11:55. He had left his home at five in the morning and his plane had taken off fifteen minutes later from the San Francisco airport. He was in Washington on business. According to the FBI office on San Francisco, Radetich was an orderly man, a good father (of six children), a good husband and a tireless worker.

"You had an accident, Mr. Radetich," Evans said.

"An accident? Where's that?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" Smith asked.

The man wrinkled his brow. "Hard to say," he admitted, totally confused.

All of a sudden he looked completely out of it. Smith held out his pack of cigarettes, gave him a light, took one himself and sat across from him. "Mr. Radetich, your job obviously requires you to be clearheaded. You should have a good memory?"

"In general, yes."

"Do you remember taking a plane?"

"Of course. I was in the back, on the right in an aisle seat..."

"Was anybody sitting next to you?"

Radetich's face flushed slightly. "Uh, a woman."

Beffort tensed up. "Pretty?"

Radetich smiled and shook his head. "It's not what you're thinking. The woman was over 60 and a real chatterbox. When I lit my first cigarette she told me she worked in a cancer research institute and she painted a startling picture of what was going to happen to me if I kept smoking..."

He paused, touched his broken tooth and with a touch of humor added, "I don't know if it's important, but I can assure you that the lady had nothing to do with my 'accident'. Now, maybe you can tell me who you are?"

Beffort got straight to the point. "I work for the FBI and was calmly having lunch in a restaurant with my wife here."

Mie waved. Beffort continued, "Around 1 pm you headed straight for our table, pulled a Colt out of your briefcase and then shot at me seven times, *on behalf of Madame Atomos!* That's why you're here."

Radetich shrugged. "Ridiculous! This is some kind of joke..."

Beffort showed him his ear and jacket. "The first bullet grazed me, the second hit my earlobe, the third got buried in the belly of a waiter and the fourth tore off my shoulder pad. The others caused only material damage. Naturally I was forced to knock you out. There were still two bullets in your gun..."

Not saying a word, Radetich looked first at Beffort and then at Mie and Evans. The latter said, "It's all true, Radetich. The customers in the restaurant can bear witness. If it's any consolation, I can tell you that the waiter won't die and that we're sure that you weren't acting of your own free will."

"It's unbelievable," Radetich mumbled. "I've never held a gun in my life."

"Luckily," Evans said. "Otherwise Smith Beffort would probably not be sitting here right now. You shot at him from three feet away!"

The man wiped his forehead. It was all so disconcerting that he felt like he was living some unreal existence.

Beffort patted his shoulder. "I understand how you feel, Mr. Radetich."

"Thanks, but in my place..."

"In your place," Beffort interrupted, "I would try to figure out exactly when my memories stopped. In the plane did you eat or drink anything?"

"No. I just had a scotch at the airport bar."

"Which airport?"

"Washington-Virginia."

"Did you drink alone?"

Radetich shook his head. "I don't usually drink. I was invited by another passenger who had very kindly and skillfully got rid of the cancer researcher for me."

"And then what did you do?"

Radetich took a long pause and spread his arms in ignorance. "Sorry," he said in dismay, "I can't remember what I did after that drink."

Beffort and Mie exchanged a knowing glance. Not to be outdone, Evans said, "According to all evidence, Madame Atomos chose Mr. Radetich to answer the article published by the press. Since he came from California where we're looking in vain for the new Atomos laboratory, there's no doubt about the identity of the instigators of the attack... Now we just have to find out who drugged Mr. Radetich and how the drug can completely destroy his willpower..."

Chapter II

With Radetich's description, they made an Identikit portrait of the man he had had a drink with at the airport bar. It showed a young man, surely still in his twenties, with slightly slanted eyes and thick eyebrows. His nose was rather flat, his lips thick. His weak chin contrasted strangely with his square jaw and jutting cheekbones.

"Funny-looking guy," Beffort said. "He must be the product of a fascinating mix of races. His upper face is Asian, the lower negroid, but the eyebrows and chin are from a white."

Just then Eddy Witter entered the room. He was coming back from the airport where he had checked the list of passengers coming from San Francisco. "His name's Robert Costello," he said, nodding at the portrait. "But we shouldn't be too sure of it because his San Francisco address is false."

"And the old lady?" Beffort asked.

"Nothing against her. She really does work for a research lab. On the other hand, a waiter at the airport bar remembered a detail that might be important: after drinking with Mr. Radetich, Costello met up with a very pretty, young woman. It was because she was so pretty that the waiter has such a good memory. Here's exactly what he told me about her: 'She was built like a beaut. One of those birds you see on a magazine cover, you know?'"

"There are hundreds of women like that," Evans said.

"Sure," Witter agreed, "except most of them don't go riding around in a van riddled with antennas."

"Interesting," Beffort commented, "but you look like you're keeping something back, Eddy."

"Yes. The description that the waiter gave of the young woman reminded me strongly of Charles Hyde's description of Ida Brown."

Beffort whistled in surprise. "Damn! Aren't going a little fast, Eddy?"

"Mr. Radetich drugged, Costello on the plane, a van full of antennas with Ida Brown at the wheel," Witter enumerated, "I think it's a completely logical chain of events."

"Well said, but badly reasoned, Eddy. You're completely forgetting that the papers hadn't published the famous shock-statement when the plane with Radetich and Costello took off from San Francisco. Under such conditions how could Madame Atomos have prepared her retaliation when Evans and I hadn't even decided to provoke her yet?"

His words chilled everyone present.

"So," Evans proposed, "we have to conclude that Madame Atomos decided to attack during the flight? Knowing that Costello was on the plane, she contacted him by radio..."

"What radio?" Mie asked. "If that's the case, we should be able to check it. And more easily since the message must have come after the papers came out at 11:30."

"Good thinking," Evans declared. "Since the plane touched down at 11:55 and Costello had already buddied up with Radetich by getting rid of his chatterbox, we can deduce that the message was sent around 11:40 or 11:45."

"You're little geniuses," Smith congratulated them as he picked the phone. He quickly got in touch with the office he wanted at the Washington-Virginia airport, identified himself, and asked for any personal messages received by the Boeing flying out of San Francisco during the appropriate time period. He had purposefully not mentioned Costello by name, but it was precisely his name that he was given as the recipient of a radio-telegram coming from the San Francisco office.

"Okay," Beffort said, "the text, please."

"I'm quoting it here: *Father gravely ill. Stop. Take immediate action. Stop. Sister waiting in Washington with car 4. Stop. Signed, Aunt May. Got it?*"

"Got it. Thanks."

Beffort hung up and swung around to Witter. "Excuse me, Eddy. Now the presence of Ida Brown in Washington henceforth can no longer be doubted. Car 4 was brought in to remote-control Radetich to the restaurant. I don't know how Costello and Ida Brown influenced you, Mr. Radetich, but the result was remarkable!"

The manager nodded his head. "It was more than just influence," he said, troubled. "For almost an hour I was turned into a robot! Say, Beffort, do you think that this Costello could have made a mistake by talking to me before the plane landed?"

Smith furrowed his brow. "Why? What are suggesting?"

"He told me that he didn't like traveling by plane and that he planned to go back to San Francisco by train at 8:30 pm..."

"Today?"

"Yes, this evening," Radetich said calmly.

Beffort was speechless. It was stunning information and Radetich had been a hair's breadth away from not mentioning it.

The train station was flooded with people and even though the main nerve centers were being watched by a bunch of G-men, Beffort was not at all sure of being able to locate Costello in the human tide.

"He won't come," Mie prophesized. "To get to the West Coast by train takes three days. When you work for Madame Atomos, you're not allowed to waste time."

Beffort took a drag off his cigarette without taking his eyes off the traveling suspects marching by before him. "This is certainly part of a carefully prepared plan," he said. "Madame Atomos intended to kill me, but she also expected Evans to identify Costello and go looking for him. Though we have to admit that without Radetich we'd never have thought of coming here?"

"That's true, but no one can convince me that Costello didn't voluntarily confess his travel plans to Radetich."

Beffort stared at his wife. "Tell me, Mie, if Radetich took me out, what would have happened to him?"

"I certainly would have killed him," Mie said calmly. "My automatic was in my handbag and I can assure you that your murderer would never have got out of that restaurant alive."

"And if you missed?"

"A manhunt would have been organized..."

"Until Radetich would have been shot down," Smith finished. "So in the plane Costello was confessing to a would-be corpse. Since dead men don't talk..."

Mie cut him off by grabbing his arm. "Look, there, to the left. Costello and Ida Brown!"

"Unbelievable, but true, isn't it? We're going to kill two birds with one stone. As long as they lead us to the front door of the new laboratory..."

Mie shot him an incredulous glance. "You're not going to arrest them?"

Beffort smiled. "I'm being careful not to. As planned with Evans, I've given orders to leave Costello alone. How would you like to take a little trip, Mie?"

"With no luggage?"

Smith raised his arm. A few seconds later Eddy Witter appeared. He put two suitcases next to Beffort and said, "I hope I didn't forget anything. Here are your tickets. If you need me, I'll be in car 6, compartment 14. Goodbye."

"One minute. Where's Charles Hyde?"

"At the end of the platform. He's watching our marks get on board. What a stroke of luck, eh? Goodbye again."

"Did you think of packing my nightie?" Mie asked maliciously.

Witter blushed.

Smith intervened. "Don't bother him. Eddy didn't forget anything. I made a list. See you, Eddy."

"See you," Witter grumbled as he turned and left.

Smith picked up the suitcases and dragged Mie toward platform 5 which Costello and Ida Brown had just reached. In spite of his height, Beffort quickly lost sight of them in the crowd, but it did not worry him. He knew that Charles Hyde was waiting for the couple on the platform and that Eddy Witter was tailing them.

The tickets that were bought an instant beforehand gave them car number 27, which because of the last minute rush put them at the back of the train. There was only the baggage car behind them, the last car, which seemed a perfect position to the Befforts. As a lookout post and for any possible action, they could not have asked for better.

Mie and Smith climbed onto the train and into the "cross-country" compartment. It was equipped with two bunks, a movable table and a very comfortable little bathroom on the side. Mie was starting to take inventory of the suitcases when Charles Hyde showed up in the still open doorway.

“Costello and Ida Brown are in car 12, compartment 3,” he announced. “They didn’t talk to anyone and look totally relaxed.”

“Keep an eye on them,” Beffort advised. “After all, they might get off before the end of the line.”

Hyde puckered his lips, took out a timetable and after consulting it said, “That would surprise me. This is an express train. Between Washington and San Francisco via Chicago, Denver and Salt Lake City, there are seven stops. The first stop isn’t before six in the morning. So until then we’re safe.”

“Who’s watching them right now?”

“Witter’s in position in their corridor and the guys from headquarters are watching the other track. Basically I came to tell you not to go to the dining car without warning us. If you meet up with our marks...”

“Don’t worry,” Beffort jumped in. “We don’t plan to sound any alarms.” He looked at his watch. “We leave in ten minutes. Go and see what’s happening up there, Charley, I won’t be able to relax until this train gets rolling at full speed.”

Costello and Ida Brown went to the dining car for the first call. The Befforts went later and ate with Witter, who gave them his report.

“Everything’s okay. If they were ***ing on their honeymoon, they’d be acting no different... They locked themselves up in their compartment and immediately turned out the lights. The Atomos Organization must be going soft, eh?”

The train was rolling at full speed through the cold night. The hands of the electric clock read 10:30 pm and people were starting to clear out of the dining car. In the observation car fifty or so passengers were watching television, but everywhere else the hallways were empty. Apparently, the night would be quiet.

Smith looked hard at Witter. “Watch out, Eddy, it might be the calm before the storm. The people who work for Madame Atomos are generally shrewd. Anyway, they always act as planned. Since this train left the station in Washington, I’ve been wondering whether Costello and Ida Brown haven’t been sent to lure us into a trap.”

Witter looked up. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s been too easy, Eddy. Radetich gave us the exact time and place to find Costello and he arrived right on time, dragging along some extra bait named Ida Brown. Both of them, without a hint of suspicion, without watching their backs, as if they already knew that they were in no danger...”

“I told you in Washington,” Mie interrupted, “that it all seemed weird. You said that Radetich was a would-be corpse and that Costello had confessed to him without any fear because dead men don’t talk. Why did you change your mind, Smith?”

“I repeat: it’s been too easy. Look, logically, if Costello and Ida Brown could radio-control Radetich into our restaurant on Rhode Island Avenue, it would be silly to think that they didn’t witness the spoiled attack.”

“In that case,” Mie declared, “they saw us walking out on our own two feet while Radetich was lying unconscious on a stretcher. Conclusion: the attack failed and Radetich was dead!”

Witter could not help laughing. “At the rate you’re going, you could talk about it the whole trip! Personally I’d rather stick to the facts: Costello and the girl can’t leave the train before 6 am. They’re locked in their compartment and can’t hurt us in any case. That’s what you should be talking about! Excuse me, I have to take the watch.”

He got up, winked at them and headed for the exit.

“Just another way of reminding us that we’re sentenced to death by Madame Atomos,” Mie sighed. “Don’t you think we’re making the FBI worry an awful lot about us?”

“All Americans are sentenced to death by Madame Atomos,” Beffort corrected her gravely, “and every one of them can worry about the others.”

Mie straightened up a little and said with some satisfaction, “Don’t forget that we’re a priority. We’re alive and our enemy’s actions are limited, apparently just leading us into a trap.”

“You can say that again!” Smith confirmed. “We’ve captured Madame Atomos’ complete attention. If she kills us, she’ll get back to the United States. Therefore, we have to stay in good health. Let’s start by getting a good night’s sleep.”

They got up from the table, left the dining car and walked through half the train to reach their compartment. The door was closed and a man appeared at the end of the hallway leaning against the

wall. For an unaware observer, he was just a passenger like any other, going to smoke a last cigarette before heading back to his compartment. And the man, indeed, lit a filtered cigarette and watched the dark countryside flying by the thick window. In fact, there was nothing to see and the man pricked up his ears to know if the Befforts might not come back out.

A long moment passed before the man stubbed out the cigarette under his shoe and strode down the hallway. He stopped in car 25 and rapped the signal knock on the door of compartment 6. They opened up immediately and he slid in like a lizard.

"It's okay," he said, "they've gone to bed."

The other, a well-built man of mixed black and yellow races, just nodded and grabbed a railway map of Charleston, West Virginia. He put his finger on a point marked in red and said, "Is this the postal car here?"

"It's a baggage car," the man corrected, "but it's the same thing. The main point is to keep to this point, otherwise the whole thing'll fall to pieces. Do you have my guard's uniform?"

The black man opened a suitcase and pulled out a uniform and cap. "Everything's ready. What's going to happen with the car?"

"It'll be shunted onto an unused track and will smash into a dead end at full speed. After the crash it's unlikely that any of the employees will be able to say what happened. As long as you unhitch the car at this exact place..."

"When'll we get there?"

"Around 1 am. Don't doze off, okay? If you miss it, I won't be able to do anything."

The black smiled. "Don't sweat it, Downing. My job's a picnic compared to yours. How are you going to get car 27 evacuated without waking up the Befforts?"

It was Downing's turn to smile. "Don't worry about that, sonny, and never say my name aloud, nor the Befforts, without first checking under your bunk. This damn train is crawling with G-men. I hope Costello will be up to getting them all in the head car during the operation."

He wiped the sweat that was beading on his forehead and added, "Damn! It's all hanging by a thread! Who but Madame Atomos would have the gall to pull off such a thing?"