

METAL DRAGON YEAR

Chris Roberson

* * * *

* * * *

Illustrated by Kenn Brown

* * * *

Chris's forthcoming novels *The Dragon's Nine Sons* (Solaris) and *Iron Jaw & Hummingbird* (Viking) are both part of the Celestial Empire sequence, as is the work in progress *Three Unbroken*, a novel for Solaris that will be serialised online.

* * * *

Yusuf Ounaminou cast his gaze over the figures chalked on the slate before him for the hundredth time, looking for something that simply wasn't there. He wanted to weed out any final flaws in their calculations but, so far, had found none. All around him the Fujian shipyard bustled with activity, distant hammering rising above the low rumble of voices from all corners, the air laced with the ozone scent of electricity.

"Everything is going well, Foreman Ounaminou," said Hsiao Junlong, standing patiently at his side. "We are less than a day behind schedule and, considering the strain under which we labor, I have to consider that a resounding success."

Yusuf smiled and glanced over at the man beside him. A Han, he was overfed, running to corpulent, with thinning hair and a lopsided smile that revealed crooked, tobacco-stained teeth, but Hsiao possessed one of the finest technical minds Yusuf had ever encountered. Yusuf counted himself lucky to have the man as one of his chief subordinates, and could think of no one better qualified to oversee the final preflight checks for the Tiankong One launch.

"My only concern," Hsiao went on, "is the speed of the rocket at launch versus its thrust. In all the simulations we have gotten back from the Imperial House of Calculation, the rocket takes a longer time to pick up initial speed than a rocket-propelled aircraft, due to its larger mass."

“Yes,” Yusuf said, standing straight and rubbing the bridge of his nose, wearily, “but it doesn’t matter how fast the rocket is when it starts the journey, just that it reaches escape velocity at the appropriate point. The Arab horse speeds fast, but short, while the camel plods slowly, but it goes by day and night. Constant acceleration is the key, but a quick burst of speed at launch.”

Hsiao nodded, and looked at the figures chalked on the slate. “Fair enough. But still, I wonder whether the gains of having less mass in the later stages, by producing more acceleration in the early stages, might not make the additional expenditure of propellant at launch worth the initial cost.”

“You revisit old ground, Hsaio.” Yusuf smiled, and crossed his arms over his chest. “There was an alternative design I originally considered, when we first worked on the Huixing project. I don’t believe I ever showed it to you, did I? It would have meant for a much more massive first stage, to punch the rocket into escape velocity almost with the initial thrust, before the first stage even fell away and the second stage rockets fired. But the expenditure of fuel necessary in such an approach made for an inefficient design, even considering the mass savings in the latter stages.”

Hsiao shrugged. It was all academic at this point, anyway. They had so few days left until launch, that any but the most minor of alterations to the rocket design were out of the question.

Over the crackling loudspeakers came an ululating sound, the voice of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer from atop the shipyard mosque, for the noon *zuhr* observances.

“Well, back to work,” Hsiao said with a smile, giving a small wave. “I’ll update you on the final fuel tests when you get back.”

Yusuf nodded, and started across the gantry towards the exit.

Since the days of the Yongle emperor’s Treasure Fleet, whose storied admiral Ma had been of the faith, a significant percentage of those who served in the Imperial Navy were Muslim. To save on time lost shuttling the faithful to and from prayer services, five times daily, in generations past a mosque had been constructed on the grounds of the Fujian shipyards—a modest structure, to say the least, but sufficient for the needs of the faithful.

Stepping out into the midday sun, Yusuf walked to an empty stretch of pavement in the narrow shadow of the launch scaffolding, the towering spire of the Tiankong rocket looming overhead. He faced west, towards

Mecca, unrolled his mat, and began his bowing, feeling guilty that his present thoughts were still on the fuel trials, and not on the verses he was reciting. "O Allah, our Lord, all praise belongs to You."

It had been just over two years since the successful launch of the first Huixing unmanned probe into orbit, almost a year since the launch of a monkey into orbit aboard Huixing Four, and the newly formed Ministry of Celestial Excursion had been demanding regular reports on their progress on putting human pilots into orbit ever since. The year of Metal Dragon, the thirty-second year of the Xuanton emperor's reign, had just begun, and Foreman Ounaminou's orders were clear: launch human taikonauts into orbit and return them safely to Earth by the year's end, or else.

Yusuf completed the final sitting position, the midday prayers nearly complete. "O Allah, I bear witness that what Muhammad taught is true. And that the Garden is true. And that the Fire is true. And that the Hour is coming, there is no doubt."

From high overhead came a popping noise, and Yusuf looked up just in time to see the tip of the rocket explode, high overhead, sending out a huge plume of orange and white flame, billowing noxious black smoke against the clear blue sky.

* * * *

Yusuf had left behind his home in Tangier when he'd been just twelve years old, moving to Cairo and Al-Azhar University, where he'd studied law from a master of the Maliki madhab, as well as engineering and aeronautics.

When he had arrived in Cairo he already spoke both Arabic and Tamazigh, the native language of Morocco's Imazighen which, as an Amazigh, he'd been required by tradition to learn; at university, though, he also learned the Official Speech of the Middle Kingdom, the language of empire.

By the time he had departed Cairo on his *hajj* pilgrimage, traveling to the sacred cities of Medina and Mecca, Yusuf had mastered both the laws of god that governed man, and the laws which governed the flight of bodies through space. He had wanted nothing more than to become a pilot and take to the skies himself; unfortunately, following the War Against the Mexica, the ownership and operation of aircraft had been forbidden to all but the servants of the Dragon Throne. Once he had completed his *hajj*, then, and had followed in the footsteps of the prophet, Yusuf planned to

journey on to the Middle Kingdom, to the offices of the Imperial Navy of the Air.

Many long years had passed, and the closest he'd ever come to realizing his dream of flight was as a passenger in imperial cargo craft, while he spent his days using his knowledge of aeronautical engineering to build aircraft, and then rockets, to carry others beyond the bounds of Earth. All the while, Yusuf had remained on the ground, praying.

* * * *

It was late evening before Yusuf left the shipyards. An investigation was already underway, but the little that was known so far was that Hsiao and four other members of the ground crew had been killed in the explosion, along with all three taikonauts—Deng, Loong, and Wei. Eight men dead, and along with them the Taikong One launch.

Taikong Two, which had originally been scheduled for early the following year, was in the final stages of construction, but its crew had not yet even been selected from among the potential pool of taikonaut candidates.

When Yusuf had radioed to the Northern Capital the unhappy news of the explosion, his only response from the Ministry of Celestial Excursion had been that, despite the tragedy, Yusuf was still expected to meet his mission goals by the year's end. Taikong Two was to be pulled forward, and launched before the end of Metal Dragon year.

It was almost time for the *isha*, evening prayers, when Yusuf arrived home. He opened his door, slipped off his shoes, and began to step inside, when a voice called from the shadows outside.

“As-salam alaikum.”

Yusuf turned, startled, but sighed with relief when a familiar face entered the pool of light spilling out from the open door—a Khalifah, broad-nosed and ruddy-skinned, thick black hair completely hidden from view by the folds of his turban.

“Wa alaikum as-salam,” Yusuf responded with a smile. “It is good to see you, Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit.”

“And you, Yusuf Ounaminou.” Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit stepped closer, and embraced Yusuf like a brother. “Now, my friend,” Abdul-aziz

continued, speaking in his heavily-accented Official Speech, “I heard about an explosion at the shipyards today, and worried that you might have been injured in the blast.”

“No, I am fine.” Yusuf stepped back, holding Abdul-aziz’s elbows at arms’ length. “I was outside, and a considerable distance away, when the explosion happened.”

“And the launch?” Abdul-aziz asked, sounding genuinely concerned. “Is it in jeopardy?”

“You might say that,” Yusuf answered, his tone grim. “Taikong One is dead. It died with those eight men in the fire.”

“But you’ve put so much of yourself into the project.” Abdul-aziz shook his head, sadly. “I should know,” he added with a wry smile, “I’ve heard you complain about it often enough, these past years.”

Yusuf placed a companionly hand on his friend’s shoulder. “And I thank you for endless encouragement and support, my good friend. I’m not sure what I would have done without you.”

“Come,” Abdul-aziz said, stepping towards the doorway, his arm around Yusuf’s shoulders, “let us play a game of go, yes? Perhaps that will take your mind off your troubles, if only for a brief while.”

“No.” Yusuf shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m much too exhausted to concentrate on a game tonight. Tomorrow, perhaps? If you come early enough, I can arrange for Shui to prepare us an evening meal to share. Another dish from Khalifah, perhaps, to remind you of home.”

“That would be splendid, Yusuf. A pleasant evening to you. Masalama.”

“Masalama, my friend.”

With that, Abdul-aziz disappeared back into the shadows of the night, and Yusuf closed the door behind him.

* * * *

Yusuf’s wife, Lin Shui, was waiting inside for him.

“My mother is asleep, and I have already put our son to bed,

husband,” Shui said, after they had exchanged their greetings, “but the boy is waiting up for his father to come and read to him.” She paused, and read the worry writ large on Yusuf’s face. “Go to him, and I will be waiting for you in our bed.”

Yusuf smiled, lingered as he kissed his wife, there by the entry, and then went down the hall to his son’s room.

“Ma?” Yusuf said, slipping through the narrow doorway into the small room. “You are awake?”

“Yes, father,” the boy said, sitting up on his low cot, rubbing his tired eyes. “I’m not sleepy at all.”

Yusuf smiled, and sat on the cot’s edge. “Of course not. A son of mine, tired at this hour? Unthinkable.”

The boy tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn, and then grinned sheepishly at his father.

“And what shall we read tonight, Ma?” Yusuf said, clapping his hands lightly.

“We started that fable about the lamp two days ago, remember?”

“Ah, I remember now.” Yusuf nodded, smiling, as though he had actually forgotten. “Shall we continue it, then, or move on to a treatise on the aerodynamics of lift bodies?”

“Noooo, father,” the boy said, rolling his eyes and sticking out his tongue. “The boy and the lamp, *please*.”

Yusuf shrugged, broadly, and then reached over to the shelf set into the bedside table. He pulled out the slender volume, glancing at the cover. *‘Ala al-Din and the Magic Lamp*, written by the Francais fantasist Antoine Galland.

“Shall we begin?” Yusuf asked, but the boy had already settled back onto the cot, pulling the sheets up to his chin, ready to listen. Yusuf smiled, and flipped through the pages, looking for their place. “Very well. Now, where were we...?”

* * * *

That night, Yusuf dreamt of Mecca. But not Mecca as it had been when he'd gone on his second *hajj*, ten years ago, nor as it had appeared in photographs in news reports in recent years, after the bombing attack by an elite battalion of the Mexic Dominion's Eagle Knights, but as he'd seen it when he first traveled on the sacred pilgrimage, when he left Cairo, and traveled to the holy cities of Medina and Mecca.

When he woke, in the small hours of the morning, he could still feel the sense of community that he'd experienced circling the Kaaba in the circumambulation, surrounded by thousands upon thousands of his brethren from around the world, faithful Muslims from Africa, Arabia, Choson, Nippon, Espana, even far Khalifah on the other side of the world. Shi'ites and Sunnis, side by side, praying to the same god, following in the footsteps of the Prophet. He'd had a sense of euphoria that lasted throughout Dhul Hijjah, the month of hajj, a sense that he and his brothers and sisters of the faith spread across the whole of the Earth, the world made one through their peaceful devotions. A euphoria that did not dissipate until weeks later, when he arrived in the Middle Kingdom, and presented himself at the offices of the Imperial Navy of the Air. A low ranking bureaucrat, who could not pass the examinations necessary to rise to a more prestigious posting, sat across a broad table from Yusuf and explained to him, in no uncertain words, why he would never pilot an aircraft. It took that crushing blow to drive the joy from Yusuf's heart. But had it ever really returned?

Years later, at his wife's insistence, he'd taken a few weeks off work at the shipyards, dressed in the clean white *ihram* robes, and flown to Mecca for an abbreviated pilgrimage. The journey from Fujian to Arabia had only served to make him envy the pilot his chance to fly. The pilot, a dullard from the steppes of Mongolia, took no joy in his office, laggardly shuttling his charges from airstrip to airstrip, as though he were steering a ferry across a sluggish river, not racing across the skies. Yusuf, whose astigmatism had kept him from qualifying for the pilot's exam, seethed in annoyance, clutching the hem of his *ihram* robes.

On landing in Mecca, Yusuf and the other pilgrims walked together to the Holy House, dutifully reciting the prayer of submission. But as they made their way through the narrow valley, their little company joined with the hordes of others, who had traveled overland across the desert from Rabigh in the north, or Riyadh in the east.

Yusuf had felt nothing of the elation of his first *hajj*, only an insuppressible annoyance at the jostling, foul-smelling mob around him,

and the still, dry heat of the valley air, which he'd scarcely noticed in his youth, was now inescapable. The crowds, swirling around the black-curtained walls of the Kaaba, were so dense that, when passing the eastern corner, Yusuf never came near to touching, much less kissing, Al-Hajarul Aswad, the Black Stone.

At the time, Yusuf had felt that the holy city had changed somehow in the intervening years. That the world had become a meaner place when he was not looking. But now, lying in his bed in the still dark hours of the early morning, the sound of the Tiankong explosion still ringing in his ears, Yusuf knew that it was not the world that had changed. It was he himself who was no longer the same.

* * * *

Yusuf arrived at the shipyards early the next morning. Before he'd even had his morning qahwah, he called the three surviving members of the Taikong One launch crew to appear before him—Ruan, Yan, and Diao.

When the men had assembled in Yusuf's small office, he explained to each of them their new roles, from this point forwards. "Ruan," Yusuf said, addressing the man previously responsible for environmental mechanics in the crew capsule. After Hsiao, he had been the most senior member of the team. "You're now my second."

His mouth drawn into a tight line, Ruan nodded. Yusuf knew that the man had been angling for an advancement in station for years, but knew too that Ruan had been a close friend to Hsiao for just as long, and that he took no joy in accepting the blood-stained position.

"Yan—" Yusuf addressed the man who heretofore had overseen propulsion "—Diao—" he turned to the man at Yan's side, who had been a back-up member of the Taikong One launch crew "—you are both now elevated in rank as a result of yesterday's ... tragedy ... and each of you will be required to take on additional responsibilities.

"However, given the short time before we must accomplish our goals, I'm afraid you don't have time to train your own replacements. As a result, you must continue to do your original tasks, while taking on your new roles. Everyone—" Yusuf looked around the room at the three men with a gesture that included himself, as well as everyone beyond the walls of his office "—*everyone* will have to work double shifts, if we are to get things done in time."

The men scowled, and Diao grumbled beneath his breath, but none of them complained outright. They were all as emotionally invested in the Tiankong project as Yusuf himself, and he knew that they all wanted just as badly as he for their mission to be a success.

* * * *

After the noon prayers, Yusuf was back in his office when his assistant, a Hindi named Jaiveer, entered to tell him that he had a visitor.

“Who is it?” Yusuf said, not looking up from the papers spread before him.

“Commander Qiu Liwei,” came a familiar voice, and Yusuf looked up to see a man dressed in the uniform of the Imperial Navy of the Air standing in the doorway. Yusuf had spoken with the commander on several occasions, since the first days of the Taikong project. A decorated pilot, Qiu had been seconded from the Imperial Navy to the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, and his was the responsibility to oversee the selection and training of taikonauts.

“Come in, please, Commander Qiu,” Yusuf said, motioning the commander to a chair while Jaiveer backed out into the corridor, closing the door behind him. “What is it I can do for you?”

“What...” Qiu broke off, rubbing his blood stained eyes. Then, blinking rapidly, he continued. “Sorry. I’m ... I’m not quite flying at full speed today.”

“You’ll have to forgive me saying so, commander, but you don’t look very well.”

The commander gave a rueful chuckle and, climbing to his feet, began to pace the length of the small office. “I was up all night on the radio. First with my superiors at the Imperial Navy of the Air, then with my superiors at the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, and then again with my Navy superiors, asking me what the Ministry bureaucrats had said, and finally radioing to the families of the three taikonauts who got themselves killed in yesterday’s explosion.”

Yusuf drew a heavy sigh, and nodded. “Yes, I had to radio the families of the five engineers and technicians yesterday afternoon. An ... unpleasant task.”

“Well,” Qiu said with a shrug, “it *is* one of the necessary burdens of

leadership, but I'd gladly pass it to other hands, if I could. I'd prefer the bickering and intrigues of ministry and military politics to that unpleasant duty, any day."

Qiu had continued the course of his pacing, and now stopped before an antique pistol, framed in a glass case on the wall. He looked at it admiringly for a long moment, and then glanced over his shoulder at Yusuf. "You know, I don't believe I've ever noticed this before. It's the vintage of the War Against the Mexica, is it not?"

"Yes," Yusuf said, a little wistful. "It belonged to my wife's father, Foreman Lin, my predecessor at the shipyards. He served in the Army of the Green Standard during the last years of the campaign, and carried that pistol with honor. When he died, a few years after he'd given me his daughter's hand in marriage, I inherited his position, his office, and his wife who now lives with my family. In many ways I am living a continuation of his life, so it only seemed fitting to leave his heirloom there, on the wall."

A long silence fills the room, stretching out.

Finally, Yusuf took a deep breath through his nostrils, his chest expanding, and spoke. "But I doubt you have come to exchange news of our evenings, Commander, or to hear about my family's history."

"No," Commander Qiu said, shaking his head sadly. He slipped into the seat opposite Yusuf, and rested his hands on the front of the desk. "I've come for a status update on the Taikong project."

"But I gave the Ministry of Celestial Excursion an update this morning, and the Imperial Navy of the Air an update the night before. Nothing has changed since my reports."

"I have heard the official reports—" Qiu waved his hand in a dismissive gesture "—but I want to speak to you about the realities of their situation. We should speak as men, not as pawns of distant bureaucrats and politicians. I lost three good pilots last night, and you five of your best techs, to say nothing of a fortune in precision-engineered machinery that was blasted into dust and charred debris. And now our masters are instructing us that, while a delay of a few months is acceptable, pushing the date of the manned launch to next year or the year after is most definitely not. If this mission isn't successful, I'm going to find myself in a junker, flying patrols on the Vinland-Mexica border, and my life expectancy will be shorter than that of a bowl of rice in the hands of a starving man. I'm not sure what they'll do to you, but I assure you it won't be any more pleasant."

Yusuf steepled his fingers, and looked at Qiu thoughtfully. "You're asking whether it's possible to pull in the schedule of Taikong Two far enough that we can launch and land before the end of Metal Dragon year."

"Yes," Qiu said simply.

"Will you have the taikonauts ready to crew the mission?"

"If you have a rocket ready to light, I'll have the pilots to squeeze inside."

Yusuf nodded, and thought for a long moment. "Then you should start selecting your taikonauts at once. We will launch Taikong Two into orbit this year."

Qiu clapped his hands, and rose to his feet. "Well, then, I suppose I should let you get back to work." He opened the door, pausing only briefly to call back over his shoulder. "Good luck, Yusuf," the commander said, and then he was gone.

"I'm going to need it," Yusuf whispered, turning his attention back to the papers before him. "We all are."

* * * *

A few days later, Yusuf was in his office, again, going over the reports from his crew. For the last several days the engineers had been combing over every bit of data they had about the accident. They were in the final stages of constructing the Taikong Two rocket, and if they could discover what caused the explosion of Taikong One, they could change the design to eliminate the flaw.

Yusuf's thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Yes, what is it?" he asked, as Jaiveer appeared in the doorway.

"Ruan needs to speak with you, Master Foreman, and there is a man waiting at the gates to see you, as well."

"What's the man's name?" Yusuf asked.

Jaiveer consulted a slip of paper in his hands. "He says that it is Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit."

Yusuf nodded, and pushed back from his desk. "Have the guards escort bin Kitsepawit here, and go ahead and show Ruan in."

Jaiveer dipped his head in an abbreviated nod, and then ushered Yusuf's number two into the room.

"Ruan, what news?"

"Well, Foreman Ounaminou," Ruan said, drawing a heavy breath, "I'm pleased to report that construction on Taikong Two is proceeding more or less according to schedule, with our productivity impacted only marginally by the ... by the change in schedule."

"Good, good." Yusuf nodded. It was to be expected, really, since the construction of the two Taikong projects had been performed by separate, more or less autonomous teams. The team responsible for Taikong Two had the same reporting structure as the Taikong One engineering team that was lost in the explosion, but from the mid-level managers down they were completely independent of the other team, for all intents and purposes.

"Unfortunately," Ruan went on, biting his lip, "the team analyzing the data from the explosion is no closer to discovering the cause of the conflagration."

Yusuf has hardly left his office in days, and then only to visit the site of the explosion on the launch pad, going home only for a bare few hours every night to try ineffectually to sleep. He'd become a stranger to his son in less than a week.

"We'll need to continue to pore over the data until we know the cause of the explosion. I just *can't* in good conscience put another flight crew and ground support team in the same situation, if we don't know what caused the explosion the first time."

"Foreman Ounaminou?" came a voice at the door, and Yusuf looked up to see a guard standing there, a familiar Athabaskan lingering behind him. "An Abdul-aziz bin Kitsepawit to see you?"

"Show him in," Yusuf said with a wave. "Abdul-aziz. I apologize for missing our dinner appointment earlier this week, but I have been busy."

"As I can see," Abdul-aziz said, squeezing into the room, moving to stand beside Ruan. He glanced over the papers piled high on Yusuf's desk.

“You look tired, my friend. You are working too hard.”

“I have duties to perform, Abdul-aziz,” Yusuf said, shaking his head. “We have an unfinished rocket to launch into orbit by year’s end, and there are only so many days in the calendar.”

“Well, we all have our duties, but if you don’t take better care of your health, you won’t make it to the year’s end yourself, and then where will your project be?”

From speakers in the corridor, they can hear the broadcast sound of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer for the *maghrib* sunset prayer.

“Come, my friend,” Abdul-azis said. “Come pray, and when we are done, you and I shall go to your home, and your wife will cook for us.”

Ruan stepped forward, a concerned expression on his face. “Foreman Ounaminou, I’m going to be staying late to supervise the investigation tonight, so we can do without your presence until tomorrow. You should go home, be with your family, and get some rest.”

Yusuf rose wearily to his feet, placed a weary hand on Ruan’s shoulder, and then, without another word, followed Abdul-azis outside to pray.

* * * *

Yusuf had met Abdul-azis several years ago, shortly after he returned from his second *haji*. He had been disillusioned after his trip to Mecca and, wanting to try to recapture the faith of his younger days, once back home in Fujian he sought out a Sufi master, or shaykh. After studying with the shaykh for some time, Yusuf had been welcomed into the *zawiyas*, or lodge. Here Yusuf found some small measure of comfort, studying the sacred writings. The succor that he could not find in the pages of the Qu’ran he now found at the feet of his master. He came to understand that there were three forms of knowledge, and that the intellection to which he’d clung since his days at Al-Azhar University was the lowest and least of the three. In time he came to grasp the knowledge of states, emotionalism, coming to perceive something supreme but not able yet to avail himself of it. He continued to strive for Knowledge of Reality, through which man can perceive what is right, what is true, beyond the boundaries of thought and sense—to attain to truth.

At the *zawiyas* Yusuf came to know another of the shaykh’s

adherents, Abdul-azis bin Kitsepawit. Abdul-azis had only recently come to the Middle Kingdom from the far distant Khalifah. He was an Athabaskan, one of the native peoples of the continent whose ancestors had adopted the faith of Islam brought to those shores by the early Muslim settlers from the Middle Kingdom. Abdul-azis worked in the records department of the Fujian division of the Imperial House of Calculation. He had a wife and family back in Khalifah, who he wrote to often, but who did not visit him in the Middle Kingdom, as they could not afford the passage overseas. Someday Abdul-azis hoped to save up enough to bring his wife over to the Middle Kingdom to live with him, but for the time being their constant correspondence would have to sustain him. Abdul-azis also had a large extended family of siblings and cousins to whom he wrote, and who wrote him, on a frequent basis.

At first, Abdul-azis was just a familiar face at the lodge. In time, he and Yusuf began to talk, informally, before and after the sessions with the master, and as months became years their informal talks spilled out into their lives, as the two met for meals, prayed with one another, and became closer than brothers. Yusuf had never had any siblings growing up, and found in Abdul-azis a companionship he'd never known before. He praised god for his good fortune at finding such a friend, who was always at his side when he needed assistance or guidance.

Abdul-azis had a quick wit and a strong mind. Often, when Yusuf found himself at a difficult juncture in developing a design, he would show his friend his schematics and, in many cases, simply the process of explaining the workings of a design to Abdul-azis helped Yusuf to identify a flaw. Officially, Yusuf was not meant to show his designs to anyone not authorized by the Ministry of Celestial Excursion or the Imperial Navy of the Air to view them, but if his superiors had any notion of the invaluable assistance Abdul-azis had provided to any number of projects over the last few years, most notably the Huixing and Taikong rockets, Yusuf was sure that they could not object. Yusuf had even shown his friend designs which Yusuf ultimately did not move past the initial development stage, using him as a sounding-board for ideas before bringing them to the rest of his engineering team. So far as Yusuf was concerned, Abdul-azis had been sent to him by God himself.

* * * *

Yusuf and his family—his wife, his wife's mother, and Ma, their young son—were joined by Abdul-azis as they sat around a small table, eating their evening meal. Lin Shui, perhaps out of joy at having her husband back at home, if briefly, after so many days, had prepared several meals' worth

of dishes, and the table before them was piled high, crowded with plates of bisteeya, a large mound of couscous, a bowl of fish tangine, chicken with lemon and olives, and even a lamb kefta.

They ate in silence, for as long as they were able, each of them making a valiant effort to clear as much of the food off the serving plates as possible, but after a time each of them felt the need to take a break, their bellies swollen and their appetites well sated. Yusuf leaned back, sipping a cup of hot tea.

“Father,” his son Ma began, pushing a pile of couscous from one side of his plate to another with a slice of chicken. “Today, in madrassa, we studied sura 122, about the Jinn?” The boy had a way of pronouncing simple statements as though they were questions.

“Yes, son?” Yusuf said.

“Well, I wanted to ask you whether the Jinn that the Prophet Muhammad—”

“Peace and blessings be upon him,” Yusuf interrupted, scolding the boy gently.

“Peace-and-blessings-be-upon-him,” his son repeated, hurriedly. “Are these Jinn the same from the stories, like the Fisherman and the Jinn, about demons and spirits trapped in jars by the seal of Solomon, obliged to perform services for any who free them from imprisonment?”

“Some would say so,” Yusuf said. “The fifteenth sura teaches us that while the almighty created man from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape, the race of the Jinn, created before man, was made from the fire of a scorching wind. Thus are the Jinn lower than the angels, and are not immortal.”

“And is it true that they live in the emerald mountains of Kaf which surround the flat surface of the Earth?”

“Who told you that?” Yusuf asked, eyes narrowed.

“A boy at my school.”

“That is just superstition and nonsense, child,” Yusuf said sharply. “Leaving aside the fact that the Earth is not flat, if there were emerald mountains of supernatural beings surrounding our planet, our

remote-viewing mirrors would surely see them. They don't. If we do not credit the evidence of our senses we dishonor the almighty god who bestowed them upon us."

Yusuf's son shrank back into himself, cowed, and Yusuf quickly realized that his tone had been more strident than he'd intended.

"It is possible, Ma Ounaminou," Abdul-asiz said, leaning forward, "that many superstitions, though we may know them to be not literal truth, can still be instructive."

Ma smiled slightly, looking up into the face of the Athabaskan sitting opposite him.

"Now, finish your food, or you'll be sitting here all night," Yusuf said, playfully assaying the role of the stern parent. But Ma still shrank from his father's gaze, and kept silent for the remainder of the meal.

Later, the meal completed, Yusuf's wife and her mother cleared away the dishes as Yusuf and Abdul-asiz went out onto the patio garden, to smoke the hookah. Yusuf's son followed along, still somewhat cowed by his father's strong words.

"Do you see the stars of the Northern Ladle?" Abdul-asiz asked Yusuf's son, pointing up at the night sky as he arranged himself on a cushion.

"Yes," the boy said, lifting his eyes.

"Well," Abdul-asiz said, "in the land of my birth, ancient peoples thought that those stars marked the presence of an immense jaguar, one of four brothers who originally constructed the Earth. He was once shaped like a man, this jaguar, until he overstepped his bounds, and his brothers flung him into the seas. When he resurfaced, he had been transformed into a jaguar, and after sending his new jaguar brethren to eat all that lived and walked upon the earth, he went to live among the stars. His brothers were forced to create the Earth all over again, rebuilding a better world in the jaguar's wake."

"That's not true, is it, father?" the boy asked, turning wide eyes to Yusuf.

Yusuf smiled, and shook his head. "No, but it makes for an amusing story, doesn't it?"

Yusuf's son nodded. "Yes," he said, gravely, and looked back at the Athabaskan, who smiled broadly in return, teeth shining white against his ruddy skin.

"Go get ready for bed, son," Yusuf said, reaching over to muss the boy's hair.

When the boy had gone, Yusuf drew the cool smoke of the hookah deep into his lungs, and shook his head, thoughtfully. He expelled twin streams of smoke from his nostrils, and glanced at the doorway through which his son had just passed. "It is ... a difficult age."

"Do not worry, my friend," Abdul-asiz said, wearing a gentle smile. "This, too, shall pass."

* * * *

After the evening prayers, as they prepared for bed, long after their son was asleep and their guest had gone home, Yusuf's wife's mother already snoring in another room, Lin Shui sat on the edge of their cot, a quizzical expression on her face.

"Do you ever wonder, husband, about the wife of Abdul-asiz?"

"What do you mean?" Yusuf changed out of his work clothes, into the long tunic he wore to sleep.

"It just strikes me as odd, given the frequency with which Abdul-asiz mentions his wife, that she has never yet moved here to the Middle Kingdom, nor even visited. I know that for years Abdul-asiz has said that he would move his family to his side when he could afford to do so, but surely he's saved enough by now."

"What are you suggesting?" Yusuf asked, sitting beside Shui on the cot.

"I'm not certain," Shui said, her lips pursed. "Do you ... do you suppose that he might prefer the company of men to that of women, and that's why he keeps his wife so far away?"

Yusuf sat bolt upright, shocked at the thought.

"Of course not," he said, perhaps overly quickly, overly loud.

“Abdul-asiz is ... He is *not* like that.”

Shui’s eyes widened, and she continued as though Yusuf hadn’t spoken, still caught up in thought. “For that matter, do you suppose that she might not even *exist*.”

“Wife!” Yusuf said, jumping to his feet and rounding on her. “You forget yourself. That is my friend, and a brother in Islam that you malign.”

Shui lowered her eyes, meekly, and muttered her apology.

“Now,” Yusuf said coldly, slipping under the sheets, “let us sleep, and forget these words were ever spoken.”

That night, long after his wife had fallen sleep, Yusuf lay sleeplessly on the cot, staring into the darkness. He could not help but wonder. The year before, Yusuf had rushed to his friend’s side when he first heard the news of wildfires tearing through the southern countryside of Khalifah, verging dangerously near the township where Abdul-asiz’s family lived. To Yusuf’s surprise, Abdul-asiz had not seemed the least bit worried at the initial news, and it was only when Yusuf pressed the issue, asking whether he had word of his wife and parents, or any news that they had escaped the flames, that Abdul-asiz evinced any concern.

* * * *

Yusuf was in the shipyards, looking at the skeletal frame of the crew module of the Taikong Two rocket. Ruan was there with him, as were Yan and Diao. They had discussed the matter from every possible approach, and the opinion was unanimous. While they had been able to incorporate any number of improvements into this new rocket, having learned from the development of Taikong One, they had still found nothing in the design itself which could account for the explosion.

“What about the atmospheric mix in the crew compartment?” Yusuf said, scratching his chest through the fabric of his tunic. “If it was too oxygen-rich, might a spark from some of the exposed electricals have caused an ignition?”

Ruan shook his head. “I was personally responsible for the development of the environmental mechanics in the Taikong One crew capsule, and we had made a careful study of the appropriate mix of nitrogen to oxygen to prevent just such a conflagration, and all of their early tests bore out that they had devised the appropriate ratio. Even if we hadn’t

done, though, an explosion of that sort wouldn't have carried beyond the reinforced walls of the capsule to engulf Hsiao and the others on the platform. The metal and ceramics of the hull are designed to protect the crew from the heat of re-entry, but they should just as easily protect anyone outside the hull from temperatures within."

"How about a fuel leak, Yan?" Yusuf asked. "If fuel were to ignite, it might be possible for flame to travel along the lines to the reserve tanks themselves. Obviously the tanks for the main stage rockets didn't fire, or none of us would have survived the blow, but there was sufficient fuel in the attitude adjustment rockets on the crew capsule to create a pretty big blast."

Yan, who had overseen propulsion on Taikong One, just as he now did with Taikong Two, thought for a brief moment, then shook his head emphatically. "No, Master Foreman, I'm afraid it just isn't possible. I personally checked over all the fuel lines and junctions on the crew capsule of Taikong One the morning before the explosion, and they were all sound."

"That's as may be," Diao said, breaking his characteristic silence. "But a fuel leak, and the resultant explosion, is the only reasonable explanation for the blast pattern that I've heard so far."

"Those fuel leads were *flawless* just a few hours before the explosion!" Yan said, arms folded. "There's no way that this system could have caused the explosion."

Yusuf turned his attention back to the skeleton of the crew module. There had to be some explanation for the explosion. It just was hidden somewhere they hadn't yet thought to look.

* * * *

Yusuf arrived at the taikonaut training facilities, just outside the shipyards, questions and formulae still whirling in his thoughts.

"You requested to see me, Commander Qiu?" he said, as the commander approached him across the swept floor of bare, unvarnished stone. A short distance away stood a collection of boys that Yusuf at first took to be some school group touring the facilities.

"Yes, Foreman Ounaminou," Qiu said, waving him over to the group of boys. "I want to introduce you to the new men." Qiu pointed at each in turn. "This is Chieu, Chaim, and Ouyang."

Yusuf looked from the commander, to the fresh-faced, eager young men, and back again. “These...?” he began, then trailed off. “These are ... the Taikong Two crew?”

“New-minted taikonauts,” Qiu said, with a trace of irony, “fresh from their training regimen at the Imperial Navy of the Air.”

Yusuf nodded, and shook each man’s hand in turn, and though Yusuf spoke with them briefly, as soon as the conversation was over he couldn’t remember anything that was said.

Finally, Commander Qiu dismissed the three new taikonauts and, as they left, Yusuf stared after them, disbelieving. “They seem so...”

“Young?” Qiu said. “I know.” He shook his head. “Believe me, I know. I’ve had a time finding even these three. The Ministry of Celestial Excursion is adamant that the first men to be launched into space must be either Manchu or Han. It is the emperor’s wish, apparently, that one of these two noble bloodlines be the first to pierce the heavens. Which is all to the good, if the best candidates for the job that I continue to find in the corps of the Imperial Navy of the Air weren’t Hindi, or Arabian, or Ethiop, or Athabaskan, or Briton. I’m having to pass over qualified pilots to meet the political agendas of bureaucrats.”

“What happened to all of the qualified Manchu and Han pilots?”

“Honestly?” Qiu raised an eyebrow, and leaned in conspiratorially. “Most of them are dead. They tend to get the choicest assignments, which include piloting new, experimental craft, which leads to a higher mortality rate than is average. And those that survive to a reasonable age are usually promoted out of the cockpit and into an administrative position, which our bureaucratic masters view as a ‘reward’.” Qiu scowled, and was silent for a long while.

“You want to go up there, don’t you?” Yusuf asked, at length. He pointed, not to the ceiling, but beyond it. “Into orbit.”

“Don’t you?” Qiu asked.

Yusuf nodded. Then he pointed to his left eye. “Astigmatism. Kept me out of the pilot’s seat when I was a younger man.”

“You wanted to be a flyer, too? I don’t think I ever knew that.” Qiu

nodded slowly, looking at Yusuf with new respect. "That's a damned shame. I think you would have made a fine one. Me, they need too badly here on the ground, I'm afraid. The only way I'd be going up would be if they couldn't find a single other pilot to take the spot, and even then they'd send paperwork up in the capsule with me, to keep me busy."

* * * *

Yusuf and his family dined again with Abdul-asiz. That night, after the evening prayers, when Abdul-asiz had gone home, Yusuf read to his son from the adventure of Sindbad the Sailor. In the story, Sindbad finds himself in a barren, rocky valley, the floor of which is littered with fabulous gem stones. The sailor is preyed upon by merciless rukhs, giant birds who swoop down from their perches high above the valley floor, preying on anything that is luckless enough to fall in their path. Only by tying himself to the skinned carcass of a dead sheep, which a rukh plucks up and carries far away in his talons, is the resourceful sailor and merchant able to survive to enjoy further adventures.

Yusuf struggled to go to sleep that night, and when he did, he dreamt fitfully of riding atop a huge, ferocious bird, who shot flames from his mouth and from his hind end, screaming through the sky. The bird carried Yusuf higher and higher, the ground below dropping away until it was no longer visible, and just as the air thinned around him and the stars twinkled into view on all sides, he woke up.

Lying in the darkness, his heart pounding in his chest, Yusuf could still feel the sensation of movement in his stomach, and he grit his teeth to bite back tears.

* * * *

Yusuf signaled to Yan that they were ready to proceed, and retreated behind the bunker. They were testing out a new firing configuration for the rockets in the final stage. The test rocket was bolted to the ground, set to be operated remotely, and instruments were gauged to determine the amount of thrust produced. Only bare months remained until the launch.

Yan was worried about the final burst of speed needed to reach escape velocity, as he had been for weeks. "I wonder," he said, his hands lingering over the firing controls, "whether we shouldn't consider adding an additional pair of thrusters to the final stage module."

Yusuf shook his head, a weary but gentle expression on his face, the

one he wore when he answered any of his son's seemingly interminable questions about the logic in his bedtime stories. "And add the attendant mass for the rockets themselves, to say nothing of the fuel? No. Tie two birds together, and neither can fly, even though they now have four wings between them. Don't worry, Yan, the calculations are correct."

* * * *

Yusuf and Abdul-asiz sat out on his patio, smoking a hookah, looking up at the stars overhead.

"So how is the Taikong Two rocket progressing, my friend?" Abdul-asiz asked, his tone mellow and relaxed.

Yusuf sighed, deeply. "I worry sometimes that we are too incautious, and other times that we are being too careful."

Abdul-asiz thought this over, and shrugged. "I find it hard to see how one could be *too* careful, in such an enterprise."

"It is like the story the shaykh told us at the lodge, that summer, of the king whose astrologer told him that he would die at a certain hour, on a certain day. The king had no desire to leave this life, and had constructed a fortress of solid rock. When his fortress was completed, he posted numerous guards at his gate, and went inside. He would remain within, until the appointed hour had been and gone, safe from any calamity. One day, within his fortress, he realized he could still see daylight, at the top of a doorway. He found an opening, a bare space through which a poison snake or scorpion might pass. And so the king sealed up the opening, to prevent misfortune from entering. In blocking the door, the king made himself a prisoner with his own two hands, sealed in so tightly that even air could not enter. And so, because of his extreme caution, on the appointed hour the king suffocated, and was no more."

Abdul-asiz nodded, and took a long draw on the water pipe.

"An instructive fable," Abdul-asiz said, at length. "It is fortunate, then, that your taikonauts will carry their own supplies of air with them, no?"

Yusuf smiled, nodding.

"Tell me, friend Yusuf, do you ever think about your old dreams of flying? When we first met, you used to mention those ambitions often, but you haven't for some long time."

Yusuf shook his head, ruefully. "There are things that it doesn't profit one to dwell upon, my friend."

"Does it not rankle to think that nothing but a bureaucratic requirement prevented you from taking to the skies as you'd always dreamed? Your eyes work as well as any pilots. So you've got a minor astigmatism. What of it?"

Yusuf sighed. "That is the requirement of the emperor's law, and who am I to gainsay it?" He paused, and drew a deep breath. "Even if the law is unjust."

"But doesn't the master teach us that unjust laws, by definition, are not in keeping with the commandments of the almighty?"

Yusuf took a deep pull on the hookah, and held the smoke in his lungs for a long while before answering. "What choice do we have, my friend? We either obey the laws of men, or find ourselves imprisoned. Or, I suppose, we could defect to the Mexic Dominion, but I doubt such as we would fare much better there."

Yusuf chuckled and, after a long moment, Abdul-asiz joined him with faint laughter.

* * * *

Yusuf was with Ruan, reviewing the electrics in the crew compartment. Only a few weeks remained in the year, only a few weeks until the Taikong Two would launch, and everything had to be in readiness.

Yusuf's assistant Jaiveer rushed in, all out of breath. "Master Foreman! There's been an accident. At the taikonaut training facility."

"Serious?" Yusuf asked, his heart in his throat.

"There has been a fatality, Master," Jaiveer said.

"Ruan," Yusuf said, already heading for the door, "stay at your post and continue working. We don't have any time to spare. Jaiveer—" Yusuf snapped his fingers, to catch his assistant's attention, which seemed to be drifting with thoughts of tragedy "—stay and help Ruan with whatever he needs."

At the training facility, in the large open area beyond the main building, Yusuf found Commander Qiu, near the armature used to prepare the taikonauts for the intense forces of acceleration they would feel at lift-off. The armature, a long pole designed to spin on an axis, with a chair on one end balanced by a counterweight on the other end, was lying in pieces on the ground.

“What happened?” Yusuf asked, coming to stand beside Qiu. Chieu and Ouyang stood nearby in their taikonaut training uniforms, whispering to one another in somber tones. A party of technicians was crowded around the acceleration chair, which was pinned beneath a long section of the pole, nearly a hundred meters away.

“The axle froze up when the acceleration chair was up to ten g’s,” Qiu explained, pointing to the chair, “and the chair and the counterweight both just kept going.” He pointed in the opposite direction, where the counterweight had crashed into the walls of a nearby building.

Yusuf looked from Qiu to the two taikonauts standing a short distance off, and understood immediately. “It was Chaim, then?”

Qiu nodded.

A long silence followed, filled with thoughts neither man needed to voice.

“So what will you do?” Yusuf finally said.

Qiu shook his head, looking defeated. “I’m not sure. We’ll never be able to train another pilot up in time, even if I could find a potential candidate. And I’m not even sure another candidate is out there.”

Yusuf looked at Qiu. “What about you? You know more about the Taikong rocket than anyone who didn’t help build it, and you’re the most qualified pilot I can think of.”

“No,” Qiu said sharply. “No, they wouldn’t allow it.”

Yusuf set his mouth in a line. “They don’t have a choice. If they want the launch by year’s end, it’s you or no one, I’m afraid.”

Qiu took a heavy breath, and sighed. He looked up, shielding his eyes against the bright sun. “Out to orbit and back, eh? I didn’t want it this way, I can tell you that.”

“Few of us live the life we’d have chosen for ourselves,” Yusuf said, laying a hand on the commander’s shoulder. “Wisdom lies in making the most of what we’re given.” .

* * * *

Yusuf was outside the main offices, looking through a remote-viewing mirror at the Taikong Two rocket. It had been assembled and was already out on the launch pad, the better part of a kilometer away. It was a slender spire, painted in shades of scarlet and gold, with the emblems of the eight banners picked out along the side. The crew module, for the moment visible until the fairings were craned into place, had a dragon motif, imperial yellow in honor of the emperor, with the fixtures and fittings plated in gold.

In two days time, just before sunrise, the three taikonauts, Commander Qiu in the lead, would climb into the crew module, the protective fairings would be bolted into place, and the final countdown would begin.

“Master Foreman,” came a shouted voice to him, carried on the wind. Yusuf turned to see Jaiveer running up to him. “There are men waiting in your office.”

“Who?” Yusuf shouted back, rising to his feet. “Are they dignitaries come early for the launch?”

Jaiveer skidded to a stop in front of Yusuf, and bent double, his hands on his knees. Panting, he said, “They would not identify themselves, but they were obviously high ranking figures, by their dress, and by the fact that they were able to get by the military guards at the gates unmolested.”

Yusuf handed Jaiveer the remote-viewing mirror, and took off for his office at a jog, leaving his assistant to catch his breath.

At his office, Yusuf found two men waiting for him. One was a complete stranger to him, but the other he knew very well indeed, if only by reputation.

In his childhood in Tangier, Yusuf had read and reread the popular accounts of the aces of the Imperial Navy of the Air, primarily their activities in the War Against the Mexica, which had ended when he’d been just a few years old. He had thrilled to stories about ace squadrons like the Flying Immortals and the Spirits of the Upper Air, but none commanded his

attention like the Golden Dragons. The aces of the Imperial Navy of the Air, these brave aeronauts piloted their craft in dogfights against the slow, lumbering, but still-deadly airships of the Mexic Dominion's elite Eagle Knights.

Yusuf had grown up in that brief span in which the Dragon Throne ruled the whole world. At the close of the War Against the Mexica, the forces of the Middle Kingdom were triumphant, and all of the lands of the world were brought beneath the banner of the Dragon Throne. It was not to last. Just as Yusuf was nearing thirty years of age, insurgent forces in the Mexic peninsula rose up, ousted the forces and representatives of the Middle Kingdom from their land in a bloody revolt, and established the Mexic Dominion. In the ten years since, there had been a strange, lingering hostility, a war that remained somehow cold, as the two forces chafed against one another at their borders, each trying to extend its sphere of influence. A war of tiny cuts, bombing raids and strategic hits, without all-out conflict. A conflict which had little room for warriors like the one who now sat in Yusuf's office.

Sitting in the plain, straight-backed chair facing Yusuf's desk, resplendent in his surcoat emblazoned with the golden pheasant of a civil official of the second rank, was Admiral Zhuge, formerly of the Imperial Navy of the Air, now the civilian head of the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, awarded the Most Precious Order of the Imperial Throne and presented with the Peacock Feather by the emperor himself. More significantly to Yusuf, who felt a frisson of the thrill he'd forgotten since childhood, Zhuge had been an ace during the War Against the Mexica, and had led the storied Golden Dragons.

Beside him sat a man of unremarkable features, dressed in the plain gray robes of a civilian of meager means.

"Admiral Zhuge, your excellency," Yusuf said, bowing low.

Zhugue waved his hand, dismissively.

Yusuf remained partially bowed, his eyes flicking to the admiral's plainly-clothed companion, not sure whether he merited a deeper bow or a more shallow bob of the head.

"Master Ounaminou, Zhuge said," following Yusuf's gaze, "allow me to present Agent An of the Eastern Depot."

Yusuf's eyes widened, and his mouth hung open momentarily as his

thoughts raced. *The Eastern Depot?* he thought. So this An was a member of the Embroidered Guard, the emperor's own secret police. What had Yusuf done wrong to merit their attention?

Yusuf's thoughts raced, but finally he realized that he was still frozen in position. Unsure what sort of courtesy a secret policeman's position demanded, he bowed as deeply as he had for the admiral, to be on the safe side.

"Enough kowtowing, Master Ounaminou. We've little time for polite observations."

Agent An spoke, his voice sounding restrained but deadly, like a tiger on a leash. "I'll come right to the point, Master Ounaminou." He pulled a waxed-paper envelope from within the folds of his robes, and unwrapped it, revealing a stack of grainy, grayscale photographs.

"These were brought back from the Mexic Dominion by a Middle Kingdom Bannerman stationed in Fusang, who at the instruction of my office had snuck across the border into Mexica-held territory on a reconnaissance mission."

Yusuf looked at the photographs spread before him, which depicted a squat, wide-bodied rocket ship, standing next to scaffolding. This rocket was easily three times bigger around at its base than the Taikong rocket out on the platform, though its sides climbed at a steeper angle, so that at its nose it was even slimmer than the Taikong crew module.

"Can you tell us what this is?" An asked.

"It's a rocket?" Yusuf answered.

"Of course we know it's a rocket, man," Admiral Zhuge said. "What we need to know is, will it work?"

"When were these photos taken?"

"Just last week," An said.

Yusuf studied the photos closely. The design seemed familiar, though he could not recall where he'd seen it before. "I suppose it would theoretically work. This massive first stage—" he pointed to the wide base of the rocket "—contains, what? A dozen thrusters? That would push the rocket to escape velocity only shortly after liftoff. The later stages would

add only marginally to the acceleration, and so would require much less fuel onboard. It's a terrifically inefficient design, though. In fact, in the early days of the Huixing project..."

Yusuf broke off, and his eyes widened, fractionally.

"What about the Huixing project?" Admiral Zhuge asked, leaning forward.

Yusuf looked at the photos again. He shook his head. "Oh," he said, swallowing hard. "Well, I'd briefly considered such an approach for the Huixing rocket in the early stages, but rejected it in the concept phases as inefficient. I never even brought the initial sketches and calculations to the rest of the design team."

Agent An nodded. "So, though the design is not as effective as our own, in your expert opinion this is still a launch-worthy vehicle?"

"It's hard to say without looking at their thrust-to-mass values, but from the basic architecture, it would appear to be sound."

Agent An nodded again, a short motion without any wasted energy, and carefully stacked the photos into a neat pile and wrapped them back in the waxed-paper envelope. He turned to Admiral Zhuge. "I've got everything I need."

Admiral Zhuge blinked slowly, thoughtfully, and looked at Yusuf. "Are we on track for the launch of Taikong Two, Master Ounaminou? Will we be able to get our men into orbit and back, before this week is out?"

Yusuf paused for a brief moment, his thoughts elsewhere and racing, and finally nodded. "Yes, excellency, I believe that we will."

"Your beliefs are irrelevant in this instance, Master Ounaminou, only the facts are pertinent."

"Yes," Yusuf said, more forcefully. "We will succeed in our mission."

"Good," Admiral Zhuge said, pushing to his feet.

"The reports from Fusang are that our man is back in Mexica with a radio transmitter," Agent An said, "so we'll know in short order if they make a launch. So long as we can get this rocket of yours into the air before they launch theirs, honor and the emperor will both be satisfied."

“And if it appears they may beat us to the finish line,” Admiral Zhuge said, straightening his surcoat, “perhaps your man is in a position to, shall we say, delay the Mexica’s efforts?”

Agent An smiled, which made Yusuf’s blood run cold.

“Our man is resourceful,” Agent An said, “as are all who serve the Eastern Depot.”

“Thank you for your assistance, Master Ounaminou,” Admiral Zhuge said, making for the door.

Yusuf bowed.

“I shall look for you at the launch the day after tomorrow,” Zhuge went on. “A glorious day for the empire and for all who serve the Dragon Throne.” Then he was through the corridor, and out of sight.

“Master Ounaminou,” Agent An said, sparing a brief glance at Yusuf, and then followed the admiral out into the corridor, leaving Yusuf alone with his thoughts.

* * * *

Yusuf did not go home that night, sending word to his wife that his responsibilities demand he remain at the shipyard. He stayed all night in the shadow of the scaffolding at the launch pad, hidden from view.

It will be tonight, he thought. Tomorrow night the crew will already be loading into the crew module, and the launch technicians and engineers of the ground crew will be swarming everywhere. Tonight there is only a skeletal crew on hand, making final adjustments and repairs, while everyone else is at home, getting some much needed rest before the most important day of all their lives. It will be tonight.

When the muezzin called the faithful to the evening prayers, several of the technicians on hand left their posts to pray. Yusuf had to resist the temptation to go to prayer himself. He hoped the almighty would forgive him.

There were, by now, only a handful of engineers and technicians still on hand, and those few scattered far and wide around the launch site.

Yusuf waited, his hand resting on the heavy object stuck deep in the folds of his robe.

He arrived just as the evening prayer began, precisely as Yusuf had suspected he would, when there were no other workers in view. Dressed in the uniform of a shipyard worker, in the dim light and at a distance no one would have challenged him. But Yusuf could recognize his distinctive gait at any distance.

Yusuf stepped out of the shadows, and trained Foreman Liu's pistol on the approaching figure. The pistol was older than Yusuf, but he trusted it would still fire. "Abdul-asiz," he said. "I had hoped, in the final moments, that I was wrong."

"My friend," Abdul-asiz said, his tone one of shocked surprise. "What is this about?"

Abdul-asiz stepped closer, and Yusuf tightened his grip on the pistol.

"Stay where you are!" Yusuf shouted. "And get your hands up."

Abdul-asiz smiled, slightly, but took a step backwards and raised his hands above his head.

"I showed those designs to no one but you, Abdul-asiz." Yusuf gestured with the pistol, punctuating his speech with its barrel. "Not even to Lin Shui. And if the Mexic designers hadn't followed my plans so closely, even I might not have noticed. But they copied my designs to the smallest specifications. That is *my* rocket."

Abdul-asiz shrugged.

"And it was you who disabled the fuel lines in the Taikong One, wasn't it?" Yusuf's lip curled, remembering the smell of roasted bodies which had lingered in the shipyard air for days. "What was your purpose? To delay the launch long enough that your masters in the Mexic Dominion could finish their own rocket and beat the Dragon Throne into orbit?"

"Something like that," Abdul-asiz said.

"I thought you were my friend."

"But I am your friend," Abdul-asiz objected. "Certainly, at the

beginning, you were just an assignment. I'd been placed in the Imperial House of Calculation to track the development of military technology, and when the Ministry of Celestial Excursion was formed I was ordered to befriend any highly placed individuals in the development chain. But in the years in which we've known one another, I've truly come to look upon you as a friend."

"Friends do not betray one another, Abdul-asiz. Of course, that probably isn't even your name, is it?"

"What does it matter?" Abdul-asiz said, dismissively. "Do not turn me in, my old friend. It will go badly for you, if you do. If I am to be convicted of stealing state secrets, how can you yourself escape recrimination, who confided them to me?"

Yusuf bit his lip, and his aim wavered slightly.

"The Mexica have need of minds like yours, Yusuf. If you come back to Mexica with me, I can arrange for you to be part of the Dominion's space program. You can go into orbit, Yusuf. Up among the stars, like you've always dreamed."

"What about my family?"

"I can only bring you with me now. Perhaps they might follow us at some later date, but I cannot guarantee it."

"You ask me to choose between my family and my dreams of flight?"

Abdul-asiz nodded, smiling. "I can make all your childhood dreams a reality, my friend."

"Masalama, my old friend," Yusuf said, shaking his head, and then pulled the trigger.

* * * *

Yusuf went home, after returning the pistol to the case in his office, and read to his son from the seventh voyage of Sindbad the Sailor. In the passage from which he read, the luckless sailor found himself carried into the upper reaches of the atmosphere by winged demons in the shapes of men, carried so high that he could hear the angels glorifying God in the vault of heaven.

In the story, Sindbad, who mistakes his demonic companions for angels themselves, prays out loud, saying, "Glory be to God, and His is the praise." When fire issues from heaven and almost consumes the flying demons, punishment for such debased creatures speaking the name of the almighty, Sindbad is dropped down to earth, left alone, never to mount to the heavens again.

Yusuf put his son to bed, and then went outside to his patio. He lit his hookah, and looked towards the shipyards. Abdul-asiz's body, hidden beneath the main thrusters on the launch pad, would not be found by the ground crew, and when the rockets fired, early the next morning, the body would be burned to ash by the intense heat, no trace of it to be found. And from those ashes would rise a new star, to climb briefly to the heavens, before being dragged back down to Earth.