

The Tang Dynasty Underwater Pyramid

by Walter Jon Williams

What we might call the Tang Dynasty Underwater Pyramid Situation began in the Staré Město on a windy spring day. We were clumped beneath the statue of Jan Hus and in the midst of our medley of South American Tunes Made Famous by North American Pop Singers. The segue from "Cielito Lindo" to "El Condor Pasa" required some complicated fingering, and when I glanced up from my *guitarra* I saw our contact standing in the crowd, smoking a cigarette and making a bad show of pretending he had nothing better to do but stand in Prague's Old Town and listen to a family of nine Aymara Indians deconstruct Simon and Garfunkel.

My uncle Iago had described the man who was planning to hire us, and this man matched the description: a youngish Taiwanese with a fashionable razor cut, stylish shades, a Burberry worn over a cashmere suit made by Pakistani tailors in Hong Kong, a silk tie, and glossy handmade Italian shoes.

He just didn't look like a folk music fan to me.

After the medley was over, I called for a break, and my cousin Rosalinda passed the derby among the old hippies hanging around the statue while my other cousin, Jorge, tried to interest the crowd in buying our CDs. I ambled up to our contact and bummed a smoke and a light.

"You're Ernesto?" he asked in Oxford-accented English.

"Ernesto, that's me," I said.

"Your uncle Iago suggested I contact you," he said. "You can call me Jesse."

His name wasn't Jesse any more than mine was really Ernesto, this being the moniker the priest gave me when the family finally got around to having me baptized. I'd been born on an artificial reed island drifting around Lake Titicaca, a place where opportunities for mainstream religious ceremony were few.

My real name is Cari, just in case you wondered.

"Can we go somewhere a little more private?" Jesse asked.

"Yeah, sure. This way."

He ground out his cigarette beneath one of his wingtips and followed me into the Church of St. Nicholas while I wondered if there was any chance that we were really under surveillance, or whether Jesse was just being unreasonably paranoid.

Either way, I thought, it would affect my price.

The baroque glories of the church burst onto my retinas as I entered—marble statues and bravura frescos and improbable amounts of gold leaf. Strangely enough, the church belonged to the Hussites, who you don't normally associate with that sort of thing.

Booms and bleats echoed through the church. The organist was tuning for his concert later in the day, useful interference in the event anyone was actually pointing an audio pickup at us.

Jesse didn't spare a glance for the extravagant ornamentation that blazed all around him, just removed his shades as he glanced left and right to see if anyone was within listening distance.

"Did Iago tell you anything about me?" Jesse asked.

"Just that he'd worked for you before, and that you paid."

Iago and his branch of the family were in Sofia doing surveillance on an ex-Montenegrin secret policeman who was involved in selling Russian air-to-surface ATASM missiles from Transnistria through the Bosphorus to the John the Baptist Liberation Army, Iraqi Mandaean separatists who operated out of Cyprus. Lord alone knew what the Mandaeans were going to do with the missiles, as they didn't have any aircraft to fire them *from*—or at least we can only hope they don't. Probably they were just middlemen for the party who really wanted the missiles.

I'd been holding my group ready to fly to Cyprus if needed, but otherwise the Iraqi Mandaeans were none of my concern. Reflecting on this, I wondered if the world had always been this complicated, or if this was some kind of twenty-first-century thing.

"We need you to do a retrieval," Jesse said.

"What are we retrieving?"

His mouth gave an impatient twitch. "You don't need to know that."

He was beginning to irritate me. "Is it bigger than a breadbox?" I asked. "I need to know if I'll need a crane or truck or ..."

"A boat," Jesse said. "And diving gear."

The organist played a snatch of Bach—the D Minor, I thought, and too fast.

If you hang out in European churches, you hear the D Minor a lot. Over the years I had become a connoisseur in these matters.

"Diving gear," I said cautiously. "That's interesting."

"Three days ago," Jesse said, "the five-thousand-ton freighter *Goldfish Fairy* sank in a storm in the Pearl River Delta off Hong Kong. Our cargo was in the hold. After the Admiralty Court holds its investigation, salvage rights will go on offer. We need you to retrieve our cargo before salvage companies get to the scene."

I thought about this while organ pipes bleated above my head. "Five thousand tons," I said, "that's a little coaster, not a real ship at all. How do you know it didn't break up when it went down?"

"When the pumps stopped working, the *Goldfish Fairy* filled and sank. The crew got away to the boats and saw it sink on an even keel."

"Do you know where?"

"The captain got a satellite fix."

"How deep did it sink?"

"Sixty meters."

I let out a slow breath. A depth of sixty meters required technical diving skills I didn't possess.

"The Pearl River Delta is one of the busiest sea lanes in the world," I said. "How are we going to conduct an unauthorized salvage operation without being noticed?"

There was a moment's hesitation, and then Jesse said, "That's your department."

I contemplated this bleak picture for a moment, then said, "How big is your cargo again?"

"We were shipping several crates—mainly research equipment. But only one crate matters, and it's about two meters long by eighty centimeters wide. The captain said they were stored on top of the hold, so all you have to do is open the hold and raise the box. "

That seemed to simplify matters. "Right," I said. "We'll take the job."

"For how much?"

I let the organist blat a few times while I considered, and then I named a sum. Jesse turned stern.

"That's a lot of money," he said.

"Firstly," I said, "I'm going to have to bribe some people to get hernias, and that's never fun. Then I've got to subcontract part of the job, and the ones I have in mind are notoriously difficult."

He gave me a look. "Why don't I hire the subcontractors myself, then?"

"You can try. But they won't know who needs to get hernias, and besides, they can't do the *other* things my group can do. We can give you *worldwide coverage*, man!"

He brooded a bit behind his eyelids, then nodded. "Very well," he said.

I knew that he would concede in the end. If he was moving important cargo in a little Chinese coaster instead of by Federal Express, then that meant he was moving it illegally—smuggling, to use the term that would be employed by the Admiralty Court were Jesse ever caught. He had to get his job done quickly and discreetly, and for speed and discretion he had to pay.

I told him which bank account to wire the money to, and he wrote it down with a gold-plated pen. I began to wonder if I had undercharged him.

We left the church and made our way back to the square, where Jan Hus stood bleakly amid a sea of iron-gray martyrs to his cause. The band had begun playing without me—our Latin-Flavored Beatle Medley. "You'll want to check this out," I told Jesse. "My brother Sancho does an *amaazing* solo on 'Twist and Shout' with his *malta*—that's the medium-sized panpipe."

"Is pop tunes all you do?" Jesse asked, his expression petulant. "I thought you were an authentic folk band."

I must admit that Jesse's comment got under my skin. Just because he'd bought our services didn't mean we'd *sold out*.

Besides, "El Condor Pasa" *was* an authentic folk tune.

"We play what the public will pay for," I said. "And there are relatively few Latin folk fans in Prague, believe it or not." I took off my fedora and held it out to him. "But I didn't realize you were an *aficianado*. If it's authentic folk music you want, then it's what you'll get."

Jesse gave an amused little grin, reached into his Burberry, and produced a wad of notes that he dropped into my hat.

"*Gracias*," I said, and put the hat on my head. I didn't realize till later that he'd stuck me with Bulgarian currency.

I returned to my chair and took my *guitarra* in hand. Jesse hung around on the fringes of the crowd and talked on his cell phone. When the medley was over, I led the band into "Llaqui Runa," which is about as authentic folk music as you can get.

Jesse put away his cell phone, put on his shades, and sauntered away.

But that wasn't what put me in a bad mood.

What had me in bad temper was the fact that I'd have to deal with the water ballet guys.

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Three beautifully manicured pairs of hands rose from the water, the fingers undulating in wavelike motions. The hands rose further, revealing arms, each pair arced to form an *O*. Blue and scarlet smoke billowed behind them. The owners of these arms then appeared above the wavetops and were revealed to be mermaids, scales glinting green and gold, each smiling with cupid's-bow lips.

The mermaids began to rotate as they rose, free of the water now, water streaming from their emerald hair, each supported by a pair of powerful male hands. As the figures continued to rise, the male hands were revealed to belong to three tanned, muscular Apollos with sun-bleached hair and brilliant white smiles.

The figures continued to rotate, and then the brilliant clouds behind billowed and parted as three more figures dived through the smoke, arrowing through the circles of the mermaids' arms to part the water with barely a splash.

The Apollos leaned mightily to one side, allowing the mermaids to slip from their embrace and fall into the water. Then the Apollos themselves poised their arms over their heads and leaned back to drop beneath the waves.

For a moment the water was empty save for the curls of red and blue smoke that licked the tops of the waves, and then all nine figures rose as one, inverted, arms moving in unison, after which they lay on their sides, linked themselves with legs and arms, and formed an unmistakable Leaping Dolphin.

The Leaping Dolphin was followed by Triton in His Chariot, the Anemone, the Tiger Shark, the Water Sprite, the Sea Serpent, and a Salute to the Beach Boys, which featured the California Girl, the Deuce Coupe, and climaxed with Good Vibrations. The finale featured more smoke, each of the mermaids rising from the water wearing a crown of sparklers while the six men held aloft billowing, colorful flares.

"Magnificent!" I applauded. "I've never seen anything like it! You've outdone yourselves!"

One of the Apollos swam to the edge of the pool and looked up at me, his brow furrowed with a modesty that was charming, boyish, and completely specious.

"You don't think the Deuce Coupe was a little murky?" he said.

"Not at all. I've never seen a Deuce Coupe in my life, and I recognized it at once!"

I was in California, while the rest of my band was on their way to Hong Kong, where they could expedite their visas to the mainland. I myself was traveling on a U.S. visa belonging to my cousin Pedrito, who was in Sofia and not using it, and who looked enough like me—at least to a U.S. Customs agent—for me to pass.

Laszlo deVign—of Laszlo deVign's Outrageous Water Ballet of Malibu—vaulted gracefully from the pool and reached for a towel, making sure as he did so that I had a chance to appreciate the definition of his lats and the extension of arm and body. "So, you have some kind of job for us?" he said.

"Recovery of a coffin-sized box from the hold of a sunken ship lying on an even keel in sixty meters of water."

He straightened, sucked in his tummy just a little to better define the floating ribs, and narrowed his blue eyes. "Sixty meters? What's that in feet?"

I ran an algorithm through my head. "Just under two hundred, I think."

"Oh." He shrugged. "That should be easy enough."

I explained how the whole operation had to be conducted on the q.t., with no one finding out.

He paused and looked thoughtful again.

"How do you plan to do that?"

I explained. Laszlo nodded. "Ingenious," he said.

"You've got to get over to Hong Kong right away," I said. "And bring your gear and cylinders of whatever exotic gasses you're going to need to stay at depth. The ship will give you air or Nitrox fills, but they're not going to have helium or whatever else you're going to need."

"Wait a minute," Laszlo said. He struck a pose of belligerence, and in so doing made certain I got a clear view of his profile. "We haven't talked about money."

"Here's what I'm offering," I said, and told him the terms.

He argued, but I held firm. I happened to know he'd blown his last gig in Vegas because of an argument with the stage manager over sound cues, and I knew he needed the cash.

"Plus," I pointed out, "they'll love you over there. They'll never have seen anything like what you do. You're going to hit popular taste smack between the eyes."

He looked firm. "There's one thing I'm going to insist on, though."

I sighed. We'd reached the moment I'd been dreading for the last two days.

"What's that?" I asked, knowing the answer..

He brandished a finger in the air, and his blue eyes glowed with an inner flame "I must," he said, "I absolutely *must* have *total artistic control!*"

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Six days later we found ourselves in Shanghai, boarding the *Tang Dynasty*. It had taken that long for me to bribe two key members of the Acrobat Troupe of Xi'an into having hernias, thus leaving the Long Peace Lounge without an opening act for the Bloodthirsty Hopping Vampire Show. Fortunately I'd been in a position to contact the ship's entertainment director—who was underpaid, as was most of the ship's crew—and I was able to solve both his problems, the absence of an opening act and his lack of a decent salary. That he could have a genuine California water ballet, complete with Deuce Coupe, for a token sum was just a fraction of the good luck I bestowed upon him.

The *Tang Dynasty* was a themed cruise ship that did the Shanghai–Hong Kong–Macau route twice a week. The bulbous hull was more or less hull-like, though it was entwined with fiberglass dragons; but the superstructure looked like a series of palaces from the Forbidden City, each with the upturned eaves common in China and with the ridgepoles ornamented with the "fish tail" standard in Tang Dynasty architecture—a protection against fire, I was told, as in the event of a blaze the tail was supposed to slap the water and drown the conflagration. The buildings were covered with ornament, slathered with gold and vermilion, crowned with phoenixes, twined with dragons, fronted with lions.

To say nothing of the audioanimatronic unicorns.

The interior carried on the theme. The staterooms, swathed with silks and embroidery, gave every impression of being rooms of state in a thousand-year-old palace. At any time of the day, passengers could dine at the Peaches of Heaven Buffet, have a reading from any one of four fortune-tellers (Taoist, Buddhist, Animist, and an alcoholic Gypsy imported from Romania), get a pedicure at the Empress Wu Pavilion of Beauty, light incense at the Temple of Tin Hau, Goddess of the Sea, or defy the odds in the Lucky Boy Casino (international waters and Macau SAR only).

The crew were dressed in Tang Dynasty costumes, with the captain garbed as the Emperor, in yellow robes covered with the five-toed dragons reserved for the Son of Heaven. Those of us who played in the lounges were not required to dress as Chinese entertainers, except of course unless they *were* Chinese entertainers.

The water ballet guys favored Speedos whether they were in the water or not, and spent a lot of time in the ship's gym, pumping iron and admiring themselves in the mirrors. The troupe's three women kept to themselves except when they went for a smoke on the fantail. I and my band, when performing, abandoned the contemporary look we'd adopted in Europe and did so in our traditional alpaca-wool ponchos.

Our first performance, as the *Tang Dynasty* sped south through the night toward Hong Kong, was received fairly well, especially considering that we performed in a language that no one else on the ship actually spoke, and that the audience had come to see the Hopping Vampires anyway.

All but one. Right in the front row, where I could scarcely miss him, was a man in a red poncho and a derby hat. He spent the entire concert grinning from ear to ear and bobbing his head in time with my nephew Esteban's electric bass. I could have understood this behavior if the head under the derby had been from the Andean highlands, but the face that grinned at me so blindingly was plump and bespectacled and Asian.

The man in the poncho gave us a standing ovation and generated enough enthusiasm in the audience to

enable us to perform a second encore. Afterwards, he approached.

"Mucho fantastico!" he said, in what was probably supposed to be Spanish. "Muy bien!"

"Thanks," I said.

"I'm a huge fan," he said, dropping into something like English. "That was a terrific rendition of 'Urupampa,' by the way."

"I noticed you were singing along."

I soon understood that he was a Japanese businessman named Tobe Oharu, and that he belonged to a club devoted to Andean folk music. He and a group of fellow enthusiasts met weekly at a bar dressed in ponchos and derbies, listened to recordings, and studied Spanish from books.

He was so enthusiastic that I never had the heart to tell him that in our culture it's the women who wear the derby hats, whereas the men wear knit caps, or in my case a fedora.

"I had no idea you were performing here till I looked on the *Tang Dynasty* website the night before I left!" he said. "My friends are going to be so jealous!"

I tried this story on for size and decided that the odds were that it was too bizarre not to be true. Besides, I knew that Japanese hobbyists were very particular about wearing the right uniform, dressing up for instance as cowboys while listening to Country and Western.

"How did you happen to become a fan of Andean music?" I asked.

"Pure accident. I was on a business trip to Brussels, and I heard a group playing at the central station. I fell in love with the music at once! How could I help it, when it was Fernando Catacachi I heard on the *kena*."

Since Fernando happened to be my uncle, I agreed at once that he was the best, though personally I've always had a soft spot for the playing of another uncle of mine, Arturo.

Oharu's eyes glittered behind his spectacles. "And of course," he said, "Fidel Perugachi is supreme on the *secus*."

There I had to disagree. "His playing is full of showy moves and cheap, audience-pleasing tricks," I said. "Compared to my brother Sancho, Perugachi is an alpaca herder."

Oharu seemed a little taken aback. "Do you think so?"

"Absolutely. It's a pity we're playing only traditional music, and you can't hear Sancho on 'Twist and Shout.'"

Oharu considered this. "Perhaps this could be an encore tune tomorrow night?"

I had to credit Oharu for being a man of sound ideas. "Good plan," I said.

He offered to stand us all a round of drinks, but I begged off, pleading jet lag. I had to meet with Jesse and with the water ballet guys between the first and second show and get involved in some serious plotting.

I did stick around for the opening of the Bloodthirsty Hopping Vampire Show, however. The title was irresistible, after all. I'd tried to chat with the performers during the interlude, but with no success.

Apparently the actors all spoke a Chinese dialect shared by no one else on the ship: they were just told the time they had to show up, and went on from there.

The massed vampires, with their slow, synchronous hops, achieved a genuine eerie quality, and the young hero and his girlfriend were clearly in jeopardy, and were rapidly depleting their considerable store of flashy kung fu moves when I had to drag myself away for the meeting with Laszlo.

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Next morning, after breakfast, *Tang Dynasty's* tourists swarmed from the ship for their encounters with the boutiques of Tsim Sha Tsui and the bustle of Stanley Market. From the other side of the ship, unobserved by the majority of the passengers, I and the entire Water Ballet of Malibu motored off on one of the ship's launches for our top-secret rendezvous with the *Goldfish Fairy*.

Laszlo had told everyone we were going, and he'd told everyone about the top-secret part too—except he'd made out it was a top-secret rehearsal of new water ballet moves, moves that he wished to conceal from the eyes of jealous rivals. His supercilious character and his obsession with artistic control helped to make this story more plausible, but even so I'm not sure we would have been given a boat if we hadn't greased a few palms among the crew.

It hadn't taken me long to work out that there was no way to conceal the fact of our presence in the Pearl River Delta, and secret water ballet rehearsals was the best cover story I could work out on short notice. It was bizarre, I knew, but it was bizarre enough to be true, and Laszlo and his crew were going to make it truer by conducting some genuine training.

The day was warm and humid, with shifting mists at dawn that had burned off by midmorning. We roared south out of Hong Kong's harbor, with bronzed Apollos striking poses on the gunwales like figureheads on the U.S.S. *Muscle Beach*. The posing wasn't entirely affected, as with all the diving gear stowed in the boat there was scant room for people; and the women of the troupe, with cigarettes in their sunscreen-slathered lips, draped themselves disdainfully on the bags that held the towels and the softer bits of scuba gear, and declined to speak to anyone.

About an hour after leaving port, our satellite locators told us we had reached our destination, and we sent our anchor down, shortly followed by Laszlo, one of the Apollos, and my own highly reluctant person.

I had decided that, as the person in charge, I should inspect the *Goldfish Fairy* myself. Though I had acquired diving skills for a task that involved retrieving documents from the cabin of a Tupolev aircraft that had made the mistake of crashing into the Black Sea, the Tupolev had been at a mere twenty-five meters, and the *Goldfish Fairy* was at sixty, well below the depth at which it was safe for sport divers such as myself to venture. But Laszlo and his crew—who by the way all had names like Deszmond and Szimon—had instructed me in the various skills required in staying alive at two hundred feet, and they would be on hand to look after me if I had a misadventure. I decided that the risk was worth taking.

I was carrying a ton of weight as I went over the side, not only the two cylinders on my back but another pair that would be clipped onto the anchor line at certain depths so that they could aid our decompression stops. Out of deference to me, I suspect, we were all breathing air, instead of the nitrogen-oxygen-helium mixture usually employed at depth—I had no experience with "Trimix," as it's known, and Laszlo had decided to save the exotic mixtures for when the water ballet guys actually had to

stay down for a while and work. This would be a fast reconnaissance, it was thought. Fast down, and slowly but surely up again. There was no need to worry.

It was nevertheless one highly nervous Injun that flopped backward off the side of the boat into the Pearl River Delta and descended with the others into the murky water in search of Jesse's lost cargo.

In any event, I needn't have been so worried. From the forty-meter mark, I spent the entire dive in a state of complete hilarity.

I chortled. I laughed. I giggled. I found the fish in my vicinity a source of mirth and tried to point out the more amusing aspects of their anatomy to my fellow divers. Eventually I became so helpless with laughter that Laszlo, wearing an expression of even greater disgust than was normal for him, grabbed me by one of the shoulder straps of my buoyancy compensator, or B.C., and simply hauled me around like a package.

I had become prey to nitrogen narcosis, more colorfully known as "rapture of the deep."

When we got within sight of the muddy bottom, it was clear that the *Goldfish Fairy* was not to be seen. The captain appeared to be a little off on his calculations. So, still a good fifteen or so meters off the bottom, Laszlo checked his compass and we began searching the bottom, so many kicks in one direction followed by a ninety-degree turn and so many kicks in the next, the whole creating a kind of squarish, outwardly expanding spiral.

We found the *Goldfish Fairy* within moments, the bow section looming suddenly out of the murk like that of the *Titanic* in, well, the film *Titanic*. Bibbling with laughter, I tried to point out this similarity to Laszlo, who simply jerked me in the direction of the sunken ship and yanked me over the bows to begin his inspection of the vessel.

The bow section was a little crumpled, having struck first, but the rest of the little ship was more or less intact. The hatches were still secure. These would present very little trouble, but the fly in the ointment was the ship's mast, which had fallen over both hatches and which presented a nasty snarl of wire designed as if on purpose to entangle divers.

Laszlo grimly dragged me around the ship as he made his survey, and I spat my air supply from my mouth and tried to explain to a school of nearby fish the finer points of playing the *charango*, which is the little ten-string guitar with its body made from the shell of an armadillo. Eventually Laszlo had to look at me *very* severely and wrote a message on the underwater slate he kept clipped to his B.C.

I think you should breathe now, I read, and I flashed him the okay sign and returned the regulator to my mouth.

Our survey complete, Laszlo tied a buoy to the stern rail of the ship so that we could find it again, inflated the buoy from his air supply, and then led us in stages to the surface, breathing during our decompression stops from the cylinders we'd attached to the anchor line. As soon as we passed the forty-meter mark, I became cold sober. The transition was instantaneous, and I wanted to dive down a bit and see if I could trigger the narcosis once more—just as an experiment—but Laszlo wasn't about to permit this, so we continued to rise until we saw from below the remaining members of the water ballet practicing their moves. The women were wearing their mermaid tails, the better to convince any prying eyes that their reasons for being here had nothing to do with any hypothetical wrecks lying on the bottom sixty meters below, while the men swam in formation and flexed their muscles in synchrony.

"Just sit in the boat and *don't do anything*," Laszlo hissed to me after we were back in the launch and had got our gear off. "And don't *say* anything either," he added as he saw me about to speak, even

though I had only opened my mouth to apologize.

A pair of Apollos went down next, breathing the gas mixtures that would enable them to stay longer at depth. They were to enter the hold through one of the crew passages that led down through the deck, and in order to find their way back, carried a reel with a long line on it, one end of which they attached to the launch and the rest of which, like Theseus in the Labyrinth, they payed out behind them as they swam.

"That approach won't work, I'm afraid," Laszlo explained to Jesse later. "When the ship hit the bottom, it threw everything in the hold forward against the bulkhead. We can't shift it from down there, so we'll have to open the hold and go in that way.

"It should be an easy enough job." We were sipping drinks in Jesse's palatial *Tang Dynasty* lodgings. He had, of course, acquired a suite, complete with a little Taoist shrine all in scarlet and gold. The Taoist god, with pendulous earlobes the size of fists, gazed at us with a benign smile from his niche as we plotted our retrieval.

"Clearing the wire is going to be the most dangerous part of it," Laszlo continued. "Afterward we'll have to use jacks to get the mast off the cargo hatch. Actually opening the hatch and retrieving the target will be the easiest part of all."

"Do you have all the gear you need?" Jesse asked.

"We'll have it flown to Macau to meet us," Laszlo said. "It's just a matter of your giving us your credit card number."

"There isn't a cheaper or quicker way to do this?" Jesse asked.

"Total. Artistic. Control," said Laszlo, which settled it as far as he was concerned.

As for myself, I planted some sandalwood incense in Jesse's shrine and set it alight along with a prayer for success and safety. It seemed only sensible to try to get the local *numina* on my side.

Happy with a drink in my hand and my feet up on a cushion, I was inclined to loiter in Jesse's sumptuous suite as long as I could. The passengers lived in a Forbidden City of pleasures and delights, but the crew and entertainers were stuck in little bare cabins below the water line, with no natural light, precious little ventilation, and with adjacent compressors, generators, and maneuvering thrusters screaming out in the small hours of the night.

Eventually, though, Jesse grew weary of our company, and I wandered out to the Peaches of Heaven Buffet for a snack. I got some dumplings and a bottle of beer, and who should I encounter but folk music fan Tobe Oharu, fresh from bargain-hunting at the Stanley Market, who plunked down opposite me with some ox-tendon soup and a bottle of beer.

"I got some pashmina shawls for my mother," he said with great enthusiasm, "and some silk scarves and ties for presents, and some more ties and some cashmere sweaters for myself."

"Very nice," I said.

"How did you spend your day?"

"I went out for a swim," I said, "but I didn't have a good time." I was still embarrassed that I had so completely flaked out at the forty-meter mark.

"That's a shame," Oharu said. "Was the beach too crowded?"

"The company *did* leave something to be desired," I said, after which he opened what proved to be a highly informed discussion of Andean music.

The audiences for our shows that night were modest, because most of the passengers were still enjoying the fleshpots of Hong Kong, but Oharu was there, right in front as before, wearing his poncho and derby and leading the audience in applause. We tried "Twist and Shout" as an encore number, and it was a hit, getting us a second encore, which meant that the band took Oharu to the bar for several rounds of thank-you drinks.

After the second show, I stuck around for the entire Hopping Vampire Show and had a splendid time watching Chinese demons chomp ingenues while combating a Taoist magician, who repelled them with glutinous rice, which enabled him to dodge attack long enough to control the vampires with yellow-paper magic, in which a sutra or spell was written on yellow paper with vermilion ink, then stuck on the vampire's forehead like a spiritual Post-It note.

I made a note to remember this trick in case I ever encountered a Hopping Vampire myself.

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After the second show, the *Tang Dynasty* got under way for its short run to Macau, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to sleep with the maneuvering thrusters shrieking and the anchor chain clattering inboard, so I took a turn on deck. The ship lay in a pool of mist, an even cloud lightened only slightly by the distant moon. The ship was picking up speed as it swung onto a new heading ... and then suddenly the air was full of the scent of sandalwood. It was as if we were no longer in fog, but in the smoke produced by an entire sandalwood grove going up in flames.

I had scant time to marvel at this when I heard, magnified by the fog, the sound of a *toyó*, the largest of the Andean panpipes. The sound was loud and flamboyant and showy, featuring triple-stopping and double-tonguing slick as the pomade on Elvis's hair, and it was followed by a roar of applause.

"Damn it!" I shouted into the mist. "It's *Fidel Perugachi!*"

And then I ran for the nearest companionway.

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While I was banging on Jesse's cabin door—and simultaneously trying to reach him on his cell phone—I was interrupted by my cousin Jorge and my brother Sancho, who were strolling down the corridor with their fan Oharu, who carried an umbrella drink in one hand, had an inebriated smile on his face, and was still wearing his poncho and derby.

"What's up, bro?" Jorge asked.

I replied in Aymara. "The Ayancas have turned up. Get rid of our friend here as soon as you can and get

back here." When I spoke to Oharu, I switched back to English. "I'm trying to collect some gambling winnings."

"Ah," he nodded. "Good luck." He raised a pudgy fist. "You want me to bash him on the head?"

"Ah," I said, "I don't think that will be necessary."

Jesse opened the door and answered his cell phone simultaneously, blinking in the corridor light. "What's happening?"

"We need to talk," I said, and shoved my way into his room.

"The Ayancas are here!" I said while Jesse put on a dressing gown. "They're out in the fog, taunting us with flute music! We've got to *do* something!"

"Like what?" Jesse, still not exactly *compos*, groped on the lacquered side table for a cigarette.

"Get some machine guns! Mortars! Rocket launchers! Those guys are *evil!*"

Jesse lit his coffin nail and inhaled. "Perhaps you had better tell me who these Ayancas are, exactly."

It was difficult to condense the last thousand years of Andean history into a few minutes, but I did my best. It was only the last forty years that mattered anyway, because that's when my uncle Iago, returning from a trip to Europe (to buy a shipment of derby hats, believe it or not), saw his first James Bond movie and decided to form his own private intelligence service, and subsequently sent his young relatives (like me) to an elite Swiss prep school, while the rest formed into bands of street musicians who could wander the streets, not unobtrusive but at least unsuspected as they went about their secret work.

"Fidel Perugachi is a traitor and a copycat cheat!" I said. "He formed his own outfit and went into competition with us." I shook a fist. "Perugachi's nothing but llama spit!"

"So there are competing secret organizations of Andean street musicians?" Jesse said, slow apparently to wrap his mind around this concept.

"All the musicians belong to one group or the other," I said. "But the Ayancas lack our heritage. They're sort-of cousins to the Urinsaya moiety, but *we're* the Hanansaya moiety! *Our* ancestors were the Alasaa, and were buried in stone towers!"

Jesse blinked. "Good for them," he said. "But do you really think the Ayancas are here for the *Goldfish Fairy?*"

"Why else would they be in Hong Kong at this moment?" I demanded. "You were *right* in Prague when you worried that you were being shadowed. Your opposition found out you were hiring us, so they countered by hiring the Ayancas. Why else would Fidel Perugachi be off playing his *toyó* in the fog and the clouds of sandalwood smoke?"

"Sandalwood?" he said, puzzled.

"Like your incense," I said, and pointed to his little shrine. "There were great gusts of sandalwood smoke coming over the rail along with Perugachi's music."

Jesse puffed on his cigarette while considering this, and then he slammed his hand on the arm of his chair. "*Thunderbolt Sow!*" he said.

I looked at him. "Beg pardon?"

"The Thunderbolt Sow is a holy figure in Buddhism. But *Thunderbolt Sow* is also the name of another cruise ship—Buddhist-themed, with a huge temple to Buddha on the stern, and several very well-regarded vegetarian restaurants. I bet that temple pours out a lot of sandalwood incense."

"At this time of night?"

"Do you know about the smoke towers? Those coils of incense that hang from the roofs of the temples? They burn twenty-four hours per day—some of them are big enough to burn for weeks."

"So Perugachi wasn't taunting us," I said. "He got a job like ours, on a cruise ship, and he was finishing his second show as the ship came into harbor." I thought about this and snarled. "Copycat! What did I tell you!"

"The question is," Jesse said, "what kind of menace is this, and what are we going to do?"

So we had an early-morning conference, with the water ballet guys and Jesse and the members of my band. Jesse connected with the Internet through the cellular modem on his notebook, and we found that *Thunderbolt Sow* belonged to the same cruise line as *Tang Dynasty*, and followed the same schedule, only a day later.

"We'll be anchoring in Macau in an hour or so," Laszlo said from beneath the avocado green beauty mask he hadn't bothered to wash off. "But we won't be able to get our salvage gear till midmorning at the earliest." He considered. "We'll spend tomorrow clearing off that tangle of cable, and maybe get a start on shifting the mast. The day following, *Tang Dynasty* discharges most of its passengers, takes on a new ones, and heads for Shanghai to start the circuit all over again, so we won't be able to dive."

"But the Ayancas *can*," I pointed out. "They can take advantage of all the preparatory work you've done and lift the package while we're on our way to Shanghai and back."

"In that case," Jesse said, "don't do anything tomorrow. Just sit on the site to keep the Ayancas from pillaging it, and let *them* deal with the cable and the mast."

"We can spend the day rehearsing!" Laszlo said brightly, and the members of his troupe rolled their eyes.

I rubbed my chin and gave this some thought. Jesse's idea was good enough, but it lacked savor somehow. I felt it was insufficient in terms of dealing with the Ayancas. With Fidel Perugachi and his clique, I prefer instead to employ the more decisive element of diabolical vengeance.

"Instead," I suggested calmly, "why don't we mislead the Ayancas and drive them mad?"

Jesse seemed a little taken aback by this suggestion.

"How?" he asked.

"Let's give them the *Goldfish Fairy*, but give them a *Goldfish Fairy* that will drive them insane!"

"You mean sabotage the ship?" Jesse blinked. "So that they dive down there and get killed?"

"It's not that murdering the Ayancas wouldn't be satisfying," I said, "but practically speaking it would only motivate them toward reprisal. No, I mean simply give them a day of complete frustration, preferably one that will cause them in the end to realize that *we* were the cause of their difficulties."

I turned to Laszlo. "For example," I said, "this morning you attached a buoy to the *Goldfish Fairy* that would make it easier to find. Suppose that tomorrow you move that buoy about five hundred meters into

deeper water. They'll waste at least one dive, possibly more, finding the ship again."

Laszlo grinned, his white teeth a frightening contrast to his green mask.

"You can only dive that deep a certain number of times each day," Laszlo explained to Jesse. "If we waste their dives, we use up their available bottom time."

"And," I added, "suppose you clear the wire only from the *front* half of the ship. You use the jacks to move the mast partly off the fore hatch. This will suggest to them that their target is in the forward hold, not in the after hold."

Laszlo's grin broadened. He looked like a bloodthirsty idol contemplating an upcoming sacrifice.

"They'll spend all day getting into the forward hold and find *nothing!*" he said. "Brilliant!" He nodded at me and gave his highest accolade.

"Ernesto," he said, "you're an *artist!*"

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I spent the next day on the launch at the dive site, but I didn't so much as put a foot into the water. Instead I watched the horizon for signs of the Ayancas—and there *was* a boat that seemed to be lurking between us and Hong Kong—while the mermaids and the off-duty Apollos swam about the boat and practiced their moves. The mermaids were even more listless, if possible, than the day before, and Laszlo felt obliged to offer them several sharp reproofs.

When Laszlo and a colleague made their second dive to the wreck, the others happily called a lunch break. Someone turned a radio to a station filled with bouncy Cantonese pop music. The Apollos sat in the stern slathering on sun oil, performing dynamic-tension exercises, and quaffing drinks into which, to aid in building muscle, vast arrays of steaks and potatoes seemed to have been scientifically crammed. Since no one else seemed inclined to pay attention to the ladies, I perched on the forward gunwales with the mermaids and helped them devour some excellent dim sum that we'd filched from the kitchens of the Grand Dynasty Restaurant that morning.

"So, how do you find the water ballet business?" I asked one of the mermaids, a nymph from Colorado named Leila.

She took her time about lighting up a cigarette. "After Felicia and I came in sixth in the Olympics, we turned pro," she said. "I'm not sure what I expected, but it certainly wasn't this. *You* try cramming your lower half into one of those rubber fish tails for an hour a day."

"Yet here you are in the Pacific, on a beautiful sunny day, on a grand adventure and with the whole of Asia before you."

She flicked cigarette ash in the direction of the Apollos. "*That's* not what I'd call the whole of Asia."

"You're not fond of your co-workers?" I asked. For it was obvious that the mermaids kept very much to themselves, and I'd wondered why.

"Let's just say that they and I have a different idea of what constitutes an object of desire."

"Surely they can't *all* be gay," I said, misunderstanding.

"They aren't," Leila said. "But they *are* all narcissists. When I cuddle on a couch with a guy, I want him to be looking at *me*, not at his own reflection in a mirror."

"I take your point. Perhaps you ought to confine yourself to homely men."

She looked at me. "*You're* homely," she pointed out.

"As homely as they come," I agreed, and shifted a bit closer to her on the gunwale.

These pleasantries continued until Laszlo finished his dive and demanded more rehearsals. Since he had Total Artistic Control, there was little I could say on the matter.

By the time the water ballet guys had finished all the dives safety procedures would allow, they'd prepared *Goldfish Fairy* to a fare-thee-well. The wire tangle had been shifted aft and, according to Laszlo, looked awful but would be relatively easy to clear when the time came. The mast had been partially shifted off the forward hatch, with the marks of the jacks plain to see, but the jacks themselves had been removed—if the Ayancas didn't bring their own, they were out of luck.

In a final bit of mischief, we shifted the buoy half a kilometer, then raced back to the *Tang Dynasty* just in time for our first show. Leila and I made plans to meet after the second show. Among other things, I wanted to hear her memories of the Olympics—I'd actually been to an Olympics once, but I'd been too busy dodging homicidal Gamsakhurdians to pay much attention to the games.

We'd barely got into the general wretchedness of the judging at synchronized swimming events when my cell played a bit of Mozart, and I answered to hear the strained tones of the ship's entertainment director.

"I thought you should know that there's a problem," he said, "a problem with your friend, the one in Emperor Class."

"What sort of problem?" I asked as my heart foundered. The tone of his voice was answer enough to my question.

"I'm afraid he's been killed."

"Where?"

"In his room."

"I'll meet you there."

I told Leila to go to Laszlo's room, and after she yelped in protest I told her that she had to contact everyone in the troupe and insist that no one was to be alone for the rest of the trip. Apparently my words burned with conviction, because her eyes grew wide and she left the room fast.

I sprinted to Jesse's room and called Jorge, who was our forensics guy, and Sancho, who was the strongest, just in case we needed to rearrange something.

The entertainment director stood in front of Jesse's door, literally wringing his hands.

"The cabin steward brought him a bottle of cognac he'd ordered," he said, "and found him, ah ..." His voice trailed away, along with his sanguinary complexion.

"I'll have to call the police soon," he said faintly. "Not to mention the captain. It's lucky I was on watch, and not someone else."

I was so utterly glad that I'd bribed the man. There's nothing you can trust like corruption and dishonesty, and I made a mental note to slip the entertainment director a few extra hundred at the end of the voyage.

"Where's the steward?"

"I told him to stay in my office."

Sancho and Jorge arrived—Jorge with a box of medical gloves that he shared with us—and our confidant opened the cabin door with his passkey.

"I won't go in again, if you don't mind," he said, swallowing hard, and stepped well away.

I put on gloves and pushed the door open. We entered and closed the door behind us.

"Well," Jorge said, "I can tell you right away that it's not a subtle Oriental poison."

Nor was it. Jesse lay on his back in the center of his suite, his throat laid open, his arms thrown out wide, and an expression of undiluted horror on his face. There was a huge splash of blood on the wall hangings and more under the body.

"Don't step in it," I said.

Jorge gingerly knelt by the body and examined the wound. "You're not going to like this," he said.

"I *already* don't like it," I said.

"You're going to like it less when I tell you that his throat appears to have been torn open by the fangs of an enormous beast."

There was a moment of silence.

"Maybe we should talk to the Hopping Vampires," Sancho said.

"Nobody *can* talk to them," I said. "They don't speak anybody's language."

"So they claim," Sancho said darkly.

"Never mind that now," I decided. "Search the room."

I found Jesse's wallet and card case, from which I learned that his name was actually Jiu Lu, and that he was the head of the microbiology department at Pacific Century Corporation.

Well. Who knew?

I also found his cell phone, with all the numbers he'd set on speed dial.

"Where's his notebook computer?" I asked.

We couldn't find it, or the briefcase he'd carried it in, or any notes that may have been in the briefcase.

"Let's hope he kept everything on that machine encrypted," Jorge said.

We left the wallet where we found it, but took the cell phone and one of Jesse's business cards. When

we slipped out of the room, the entertainment director almost fainted with relief.

"Go ahead and call the cops," I told him.

"Macanese police." His eyes were hollow with tragedy. "You have no idea."

With Sancho guarding my back, I went on the fantail and called every number that Jesse had set on his speed dial. For the most part I got answering machines of one sort or another, and any actual human beings answered in an irate brand of Mandarin that discouraged communication from the start. I tried to inquire about "Jiu Lu," but I must not have got any of the tones right, because no one understood me.

In the morning I would call again, with the entertainment director as interpreter.

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Most of the ship's passengers disembarked that morning, all those who weren't making the round trip to Shanghai and who preferred to remain in the languid, mildly debauched atmosphere of Macau, or who were heading by hydrofoil ferry back to the hustle of Hong Kong.

Whatever the Macanese police were doing by way of investigation, they weren't interfering with the wheels of commerce as represented by the cruise ship company.

"There goes Jesse's killer," Jorge said glumly as, from the rail, we watched the boats fill with cheerful, sunburned tourists.

Rosalinda, who gloomed at my other elbow, flicked her cigar ash into the breeze. "This afternoon the boats will come back with his replacement."

"Unless the killer is a Hopping Vampire who's sleeping in his coffin at this very moment," Sancho added from over my shoulder.

Most of those who came aboard that afternoon were people who had come to Macau on *Tang Dynasty*'s previous journey and were returning home by way of Shanghai. Only two actually made Macau their point of initial departure, and when we got ahold of a passenger manifest we made these the objects of particular scrutiny. One of them was an elderly man who trailed an oxygen bottle behind him on a cart. He went straight to the casino and began to bet heavily on roulette while lighting up one cigarette after another, which certainly explained the oxygen bottle. The other was his nurse.

Given that I hailed from a family of Aymara street musicians who also formed a private intelligence-gathering agency, at the moment operating in tandem with a water ballet company aboard a passenger ship disguised as a Tang Dynasty palace, I was not about to discount the less unlikely possibility that the old gambler and his nurse were a pair of assassins, so I slipped the entertainment director a few hundred Hong Kong dollars for the key to the old man's room and gave it a most professional going-over.

No throat-ripping gear was discovered, or anything the least bit suspicious.

Sancho and a couple of cousins also tossed the Hopping Vampires' cabin, and they found throat-ripping gear aplenty, but nothing that couldn't be explained with reference to their profession.

The entertainment director had got through to the people on Jesse's speed dial who he believed were Jesse's employers, but he was Cantonese and his Mandarin was very shaky, and he wasn't certain.

Because of the smallish crowd on board, and consequent low demand, we were scheduled for only one show that night, and I confess that it wasn't one of our best. The band as a whole lacked spirit. Our dejection transmitted itself to our music. Even the presence of our mascot Oharu in his poncho and derby hat failed to put heart into us.

After the show, Jorge and Sancho carried Oharu off to the Western Paradise Bar while I visited the entertainment director and again borrowed his passkey.

I found a yellow Post-It note and wrote a single word on it with a crimson pen.

And when Oharu stepped into his cabin with Jorge and Sancho behind him, I lunged from concealment and slapped the note on his forehead, just as the Taoist Sorcerer slapped his yellow paper magic on the foreheads of the Bloodthirsty Hopping Vampires in their stage show.

Oharu looked at me in dazed surprise.

"What's this about?" he asked.

"Read it," I said.

He peeled the note off his forehead and read the single scarlet word, "Confess."

"You should have got off at Macau," I told him. "You would have got clean away." I held up the bloodstained ninja gear I'd found in his room, the leather palm with the lethal steel hooks that could tear open a throat with a single slap.

At that point Oharu fought, of course, but his responses were disorganized by the alcohol that Sancho and Jorge had been pouring down his throat for the last hour, and of course Sancho was a burly slab of solid muscle and started the fight by socking Oharu in the kidney with a fist as hard as hickory. It wasn't very long before we had Oharu stretched out on his bed with his arms and legs duct-taped together and I was booting up Jesse's computer, which I had found in Oharu's desk drawer.

"Our next stop," I told Oharu, "is Shanghai, and Shanghai's in the People's Republic, not a Special Administrative Region like Hong Kong or Macau. If we turn you in, you get shot in the back of the head and your family gets a bill for the bullet."

Oharu spat out a blood clot and spoke through mashed lips. "I'll tell them all about *you*."

I shrugged. "So? Nothing *we're* doing is illegal. All we're doing is recovering an item on behalf of its legitimate owners."

"That's debatable. I could still make trouble for you."

I considered this. "If that's the case," I said, "maybe we ought not to keep you around long enough to say *anything* to the authorities."

He glowered. "You wouldn't dare kill me."

Again I shrugged. "*We* won't kill you. It'll be the *ocean* that'll do that."

Sancho slapped a hand over Oharu's mouth just as he inhaled to scream. In short order we taped his mouth shut, hoisted him up, and thrust him through his cabin porthole. There he dangled, with Sancho

hanging onto one ankle and Jorge the other.

I took off his right shoe and sock.

"Clench your toes three times," I said, "when you want to talk. But make it quick, because you're overweight and Jorge is getting tired."

Jorge deliberately slackened his grip and let Oharu drop a few centimeters. There was a muffled yelp and a thrash of feet.

The toe-clenching came a few seconds later. We hauled Oharu in and dropped him onto his chair.

"So tell us," I began, "who hired you."

A Mr. Lau, Oharu said, of Shining Spectrum Industries in the Guangzhong Economic Region. He went on to explain that Dr. Jiu Lu, or Jesse as we'd known him, had worked for Shining Spectrum before jumping suddenly to Pacific Century. Magnum had suspected Jesse of taking Shining Spectrum assets with him, in the form of a project he was developing, and made an effort to get it back.

"This got Jiu scared," Oharu said, "so he tried to smuggle the project out of Guangzhou to Taiwan, but his ship went down in a storm. You know everything else."

"Not quite," I said. "What *is* the project?"

"I wasn't told that," Oharu said. "All I know is that it's biotechnology and that it's illegal, otherwise Jui wouldn't have had to smuggle it out."

A warning hummed in my nerves. "Some kind of weapon?"

Oharu hesitated. "I don't think so," he said. "This operation doesn't have that kind of vibe."

I took that under advisement while I paged through the directory on Jesse's computer. Everything was in Chinese, and I didn't have a clue. I tried opening some of the files, but the computer demanded a password.

"Where did you send the data?" I asked.

"I never sent it anywhere," Oharu said. "I was just going to turn it over to Mr. Lau when I got off the boat tomorrow."

"You have a meeting set?" I asked.

A wary look entered his eyes. "He was going to call."

"Uh-huh." I grinned. "Too bad for Mr. Lau that you didn't get off in Macau and fly to Shanghai to meet him."

He looked disconsolate. "I really *am* an Andean folk music fan," he said. "That part I didn't make up. I wanted to catch your last show."

Somehow I failed to be touched.

I shut down the computer and looked through the papers that Oharu had got out of Jesse's briefcase. They were also in Chinese, and likewise incomprehensible. I put them aside and considered Oharu's situation.

He had murdered my employer, and besides that cut into my action with Leila, and I wasn't inclined to be merciful. On the other hand, I wasn't an assassin, and cold-bloodedly shoving him out the porthole wasn't my style.

On the third hand, I could see that he was turned over to the authorities once the ship reached Shanghai and let justice take its course. Getting shot in the neck by Chinese prison guards was too good for him.

But on the fourth hand, he *could* make trouble for us. The knowledge that there was illegal biotechnology being shipped to Taiwan was enough to make the Chinese authorities sit up and take notice.

"Right," I said, "this is what's going to happen." I pointed to the ninja gear I'd laid out on the bed. "In the morning, the cabin steward is going to find your murder implements laid out, and it will be obvious that you killed our employer."

He glared at me. "I'll tell the police all about you," he said. "They're not going to appreciate Western spies in their country."

"You're not going to get a chance to talk to the police," I said. "Because by then you'll have gone out the porthole."

He filled his lungs to scream again, but Sancho stifled him with a pillow.

"*However*," I said, raising my voice a little to make sure he was paying attention as he flopped around on the bed, "we'll wait till we make Shanghai before you go into the drink, and we'll untie you first."

Oharu calmed somewhat. Once I had his attention, I continued. "You won't go to your Mr. Lau for help, because once your employers realize you're a wanted man, they'll cut your throat themselves."

He glared at me from over the top of the pillow. I signaled Sancho to lift the pillow off his face.

"Where does that leave me?" he asked. "Stuck in Shanghai in the early morning, having swum ashore soaking wet?"

"You're the ninja," I said. "Deal with it."

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The plan went off without complications, which did my morale some good. *Tang Dynasty* made Shanghai about four in the morning and pulled into its pier. Oharu's porthole faced away from the pier, and out into the drink he went.

I suppose he made it to shore, though I won't mourn if it turned out otherwise. All I know is that I never saw him again.

The cabin steward went into the room about seven o'clock with Oharu's breakfast tea and was horrified to discover the murder gear lying in plain sight. The alarm was raised. I was asleep in my cabin by then, with Jesse's computer under my pillow.

Tang Dynasty discharged its passengers, then the crew spent the day scrubbing the ship from top to bottom. The entertainment had the day off, and the band took advantage to see a few of the sights of Shanghai, although we went in pairs, just in case enemy ninjas were lurking somewhere in the crowds.

We wore our everyday clothes, not our traditional ponchos, and the locals probably thought we were Uighurs or something.

Laszlo and the guys went off to refill their helium cylinders. I don't think Leila and the mermaids left their cabin. I tried to tell her through the door that she was the least likely of any of us to be murdered, but I don't think I succeeded in reassuring her.

In the course of the night, *Thunderbolt Sow* pulled into the next berth in a cloud of sandalwood incense. I kept an eye on the ship, and an ear too, but I neither saw nor heard the evil-eyed Perugachi or his minions.

That day Jesse's replacements turned up, a white-haired Dr. Pan and his assistant, a round-faced, bespectacled Dr. Chun, who radiated enough anxiety for both of them. Each of them had bodyguards, slablike Westerners with identical ponytails—I won't swear to it, but I believe the language they used among themselves was Albanian.

"Another three dives," Laszlo said, "maybe four. The first to clear the wire away and get started on moving the mast. The second to finish with the mast, then another to open the hatch. If cargo's shifted on top of your box, we might need another dive to clear that away. But we should be finished tomorrow."

Dr. Pan gave a smooth smile and said that was good, then lit one of his little cigars. Dr. Chun didn't look any less anxious than he had at the start of the meeting.

That night our shows went off as per normal, if you consider scoping the audience for potential assassins to be normal, which for us it all too often was. We'd been over the passenger manifest, and the only last-minute additions had been Dr. Pan and his party, so I thought we were reasonably safe.

When we awakened next morning we were anchored off Hong Kong Island, and I joined the water ballet guys in their launch with a box of dim sum I'd nicked from the kitchens. To my disappointment, I found that the mermaids were not going along.

"It's so *unprofessional*," Laszlo complained. "They think someone's going to come along and rip their throats out."

"You could offer them hazardous duty pay," I suggested hopefully.

"But it's not hazardous!" he said. "Diving to seven atmospheres breathing exotic gasses is *hazardous*—but do I hold *you* up for extra money?"

I shrugged—he'd *tried*, after all—and resigned myself to a heavy lunch of dim sum.

In short order we were bobbing in the swell over the wreck, and Laszlo and one of the guys went down on the first dive of the day. As the dive plan called for Laszlo to stay under the water for over two hours, I was surprised to see him break the surface ninety minutes early.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I helped him over the gunwale.

His face was grim. "You've got to go down and look at it yourself."

"What is it? Did Perugachi get the cargo?"

"Maybe the cargo got *him*," he said, and he turned to one of the Apollos. "Sztephen," he said, "take Ernesto down to the wreck, show him around, and make sure he doesn't die."

Sztephen gave me a dubious look while he struck a pose that emphasized his triceps development. I gave him what was meant to be a reassuring grin and reached for my wet suit.

Because I'd been so thoroughly narked on my last trip, Laszlo insisted that I make this one on Trimix, which involved two extra-heavy cylinders on my back and a mixture that was fifty percent helium, fifteen percent oxygen, and the rest nitrogen. We also carried stage cylinders on our chests, for use in decompression, which we were to rig to our descent line as we went down.

It was all unfamiliar enough to have my nerves in a jangle by the time I splashed into the briney lamenting the fact that while I breathed Trimix instead of air the consolations of nitrogen narcosis were beyond my reach. Still, the descent went well enough, and the great stillness and silence and darkness helped to calm my throbbing heart.

Which was a pity, because my heart slammed into overdrive again once I saw *Goldfish Fairy*. The wreck lay with a black cavern just behind the bows, where the covers to the fore hatch had been thrown off. Much of the cargo had also been lifted from the hold and thrown over the side, where it lay in piles. Such of the cargo as I saw seemed to consist of T-shirts with the Pokari Sweat logo on them.

But Pokari Sweat was not long in my thoughts, because I observed something pale and geometric protruding from the after hatch, and when I kicked toward the object, I discovered that it was a brilliant white pyramid.

No, I corrected on further inspection, not a pyramid—a tetrahedron, a four-sided figure with each side making an equilateral triangle. It had broken out of the hatch, and its colorless tip had shoved aside the mast and was reaching for the surface, sixty meters above. The brilliant whiteness of the tetrahedron was so striking that it looked like a belated iceberg turned up too late for the sinking.

So fascinated was I by this object that I let myself drift toward it, only to be checked by Sztephen, who seized my arm and drew me back. There was an expression of horror on his face.

I decided that Sztephen had a point. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't in our dive plan, and it might be in some way hostile.

It occurred to me to wonder whether it was a surprise that Fidel Perugachi had left for us.

I made a careful circuit of the after hatch to judge the object's size—a proper estimate was difficult, as the tetrahedron's base was in the darkness of the hold, but it seemed about eight or nine meters per side. Then my heart lurched as I saw another, tiny tetrahedron—about the size of my palm—on the deck near the rail. I drifted downward to get a look at it, and this time saw a number of even smaller pyramids on the ship's hull, leading down to a cluster of them on the muddy bottom, none of them larger than my fingernail.

I began to have a feeling that all of them would be Giza-sized, given time.

I made a circuit of *Goldfish Fairy* in order to see how far the pyramid plague had spread and found a smaller number of the four-sided items on the other side of the barge. I checked the forward hold, and there I saw the cause of it all. Fidel Perugachi's crew, when they realized that the forehold didn't have what they were looking for, and that they didn't have time to open the rear hold, had tried to break into the after hold through a hatch high in the bulkhead. But the hatch hadn't opened because the cargo in the aft hold had been thrown forward when the *Goldfish Fairy* hit the bottom, and Perugachi's raiders had tried to force it open with the jacks they'd brought to shift the fallen mast.

They'd ended up opening more than the hatch, I thought. Their attempt to shove the hatch open had

broken whatever contained Jesse's biotech.

It wasn't Fidel Perugachi who had created these objects. These pyramids now growing silently beneath the sea were what we'd been hired to *prevent*.

I reckoned I'd seen enough, so I signaled to Sztephen that it was time to head for the surface, and he agreed with wide-eyed relief.

It took some time to rise, as we had to pause every three meters or so for a decompression stop, and at certain intervals we had to shift to a different gas mixture, first to Nitrox 36 and then to O₂, making use of the cylinders we'd tethered to our line. Sztephen assisted with the unfamiliar procedures, and I managed them without trouble.

We were at a depth of twenty meters, hovering at our decompression stop while juggling a formidable number of depleted cylinders, when we heard the rumble of a boat approaching and looked up to see the twin hulls of a catamaran cutting the water toward our launch.

My overtaxed nerves gave a sustained quaver as the jet-powered catamaran cut its impellers and drifted up to the launch. I could only imagine what was happening on the surface—Pearl River pirates slitting the throats of everyone aboard; water police from the People's Republic putting everyone under arrest for disturbing the wreck; Fidel Perugachi sneering as he brandished automatic weapons at the hapless Apollos of the water ballet; ninjas feathering everyone aboard with blowgun darts ...

Whatever was happening, I wasn't going to be a part of it. I probably wouldn't actually *die* if I bolted to the surface from a depth of twenty meters, but ere long I'd be damned sick with a case of the bends, and hardly in a condition to aid my cause.

So Sztephen and I sat in the heavy silence, both our imaginations and our nerves running amok, while we made our regulation number of decompression stops, the last being at ten meters. A myriad of schemes whirled through my mind, all of them useless until I actually knew what was going on above our heads.

The last seconds of our decompression stop ticked away. While Sztephen watched with puzzled interest, I reached for one of the Nitrox cylinders and removed the first-stage regulator, the device through which a diver actually breathes the contents of the cylinder. I then turned the valve to crack open the cylinder slightly and produced a satisfying stream of bubbles that rose unbroken to the surface. Then I did the same to another cylinder.

Anyone on the surface, looking for divers, would be able to track us simply by observing our exhaust bubbles rising. I had now given them a false bubble trail to watch.

Gesturing for Sztephen to follow, I kicked off from our line, positioned myself beneath the catamaran, and at slow, deliberate speed rose to the surface, my head breaking water between the twin hulls. Once there, I dropped my weight belt to the ocean bottom, then climbed out of my scuba gear, leaving myself just the mask, flippers, and snorkel.

And my dive knife, which was strapped to my leg. Many divers—usually the beginners—buy knives the length of their forearm, formidable enough to fight the U.S. Marines singlehanded.

Unfortunately for my current dilemma, I had developed a more realistic appraisal of the circumstances under which I might need a knife underwater, and my own blade was about the length of my little finger. It was unlikely to stop a sufficiently determined Pekingese, let alone the U.S. Marines. I whispered a query to Sztephen, and like a true professional he produced one no larger than my own.

I sighed inwardly and explained my plan, such as it was. Sztephen, who liked my plan no more than I did but couldn't think of a better, likewise climbed out of his gear. We then inflated the B.C.s just enough to float and tied them together with B.C. straps. It was unlikely we'd need the gear again, but it didn't seem right to sink it.

I listened carefully all the while, but all I heard was the rumble of the idling engines and the surge and slap of waves against the white fiberglass hull—no screams, no shots, no maniacal cackling from a sadistic enemy.

It was time to do it, whatever it was. Those bubbles rising from the decoy cylinders wouldn't last forever.

The catamaran's port hull was moored to our launch, so I swam to the starboard hull, took a breath, and swam beneath the hull to surface cautiously on the other side. No one seemed to be looking for me, and by this point I was hearing nothing but the throbbing of my own heart. The ocean chop lifted me most of the way up the hull, and with a strong kick with my flippers I managed to get a hand around a chrome stanchion used to support the double safety line that ran around the fore part of the boat. The stanchion was strong enough to support my weight, and I pulled myself up, crawled under the safety line, and lay on the deck for a moment gathering my wits and my breath.

I was lying against the pilothouse of what clearly was a dedicated dive boat. The wide platform between the two hulls was ideal for moving gear around, and divers could simply jump off the back when they wanted to enter the sea. Cylinders were set in racks aft of me, and when I blinked up against the bright sun, I could see the silhouette of a crane intended to raise salvage from the depths.

I pulled my mask down around my neck and worked my flippers off my feet. At this point Sztephan's sun-bleached head appeared above the deck, looking at me wide eyed: I'd told him to wait a moment or two before following me, and wait to hear if there was gunfire. Apparently this warning had made an impression on him.

I helped him aboard, hoping he wouldn't make too much noise, and he was about as silent as the situation permitted. While he stripped off his flippers, I rose to a crouch and chanced a look through the open door into the boat's pilothouse. No one was visible, so I crept inside, and then froze.

Two figures were visible, and though I hadn't met either one I recognized them from photographs that my uncle Iago had made me memorize. They were both members of Fidel Perugachi's band, the bass player and the *bombo* player to be exact. It appeared that Perugachi had brought his whole rhythm section. One crouched in a wet suit on the after deck, working with some cylinders and a B.C., readying the outfit for a dive. Every few seconds he'd glance aft, to make certain that bubbles were still rising from our decoy cylinder. The other Ayanca, in shorts, baseball cap, and a Pokari Sweat T-shirt he must have stolen from the wreck, stood forward of the pilothouse by the port rail, watching whatever was going on in the launch.

A pistol was stuck casually into his shorts at the small of his back, and I recognized the distinctive toggle of a German Luger. The century-old Luger had been the standard sidearm of the P.R.C. police until recently, and when it was replaced by another weapon, the thrifty Chinese had sold tens of thousands of Lugers all at once. Perugachi must have picked up this one in the Hong Kong or Macau black market.

At least Fidel Perugachi hadn't been able to bring his own weaponry into China with him, and this gave me hope that his resources were fairly limited.

If I attacked the man with the Luger, it would be in full view of everyone on the launch; whereas the *bombo* player in the stern was crouched down out of sight. I gestured for Sztephan to be quiet, then

slipped further into the cabin in search of a weapon. I suppose I could have slit the drummer's throat with my little knife, but that seemed drastic, and I hated to set that kind of precedent unless I needed to.

I was considering one of the five-pound lead divers' weights when I noticed that the drummer had his tool box open. Two crouching steps took me to the box, where I found a large wrench laid out neatly in its own compartment. Another two steps took me to the *bombo* player, who I promptly whanged behind the ear.

I probably hit him much harder than I intended to, as he only began to wake a couple hours later. Blame an excess of adrenaline if you will.

After checking my victim to see if he was still alive, I slipped to the rear corner of the boat, where a line had been tied holding the catamaran to the launch. I slipped the line off the cleat, then moved forward again, back to the pilothouse, where I had a quick whispered conversation with Sztephen about whether he felt he could steer the boat. He gave a quick scan of the instrument board and said that he could. The engines were idling, and all he had to do was put them in gear and shove the throttles forward.

As we hadn't heard any shouts or complaints that we were drifting away from the launch, I surmised that there was another mooring line, and that this one was forward and under the supervision of the bass player.

I told Sztephen to shove the throttles forward when I yelled, then slipped out of the pilothouse on the port side, the side away from the launch. I intended to use the pilothouse for cover on the approach, come up behind the bass player, then pull his own pistol and stick it in his back. If Perugachi's crew saw me at that point it wouldn't matter, as I'd have a ready-made hostage.

It didn't work out that way. I crept around the pilothouse and approached my target, using as cover a big galvanized storage compartment. I looked around the corner of the compartment and saw the bass player a few paces away. His back was to me, and he was chatting in Aymara with a man in the launch.

My heart gave a sudden thud against my ribs as I realized that this second man was Fidel Perugachi himself, and then another great knock as I saw Perugachi's heavy-lidded demonic eyes drop from his bass player to look straight at me. I suddenly realized how hot it was inside my wet suit, and how odd that was considering it was still full of seawater.

Before the loathsome offspring of the Ayanca moiety could cry a warning, I crossed the deck in three strides and kicked the bass player with both feet in the small of the back. This catapulted him over the safety line and—the most satisfying part—on top of Perugachi himself. Then, yelling demented abuse at the Ayancas in our native language, I sprawled forward on the deck to reach for the remaining mooring line.

"*Allu!*" I yelled. "*Umata urqu!*"

Taking my invective as his cue, Sztephen threw the catamaran into gear and shoved the throttles forward. Impellers screamed, jets boiled, and the craft lunged into the next wave, taking the launch with it.

This was fortunate, as it turns out, because the Ayancas were in the process of organizing a response just as the sudden acceleration jerked them off their feet. I untied the mooring line and let it fly through the chrome-plated cleat and off the boat.

Luger bullets flew wild as the launch, checked by its anchor, came to an abrupt halt astern, and everyone on the boat took another tumble.

I rose and shook a fist. "*Jallpiña chinqi, you lunthata llujchi!*" I shouted.

It was only then that I noticed the dive boat had another passenger. Leila was crouched in the shadow of the pilothouse, where I hadn't been able to see her, and was looking in alarm at the Ayancas, all of whose arms were suddenly waving weapons.

I got to my feet and ran to the pilothouse, where Sztephen was crouched down in cover, steering the boat with a wild expression on his face.

"Good work," I said and took the controls.

Fidel Perugachi still had the launch, which had a powerful motor and could quite possibly outspeed the heavily laden catamaran once they got the anchor up.

I swung the boat into a wide circle, aimed straight at the launch, and let the boat build speed. There was a fusillade of shots from the Ayancas—I had to wonder what possible good they thought it would do—and then the white splashes of five bronzed Apollos making perfect entries into the water. The Ayancas stared at the twin-hulled doom approaching at flank speed, and then most of them followed the Apollos.

Fidel Perugachi was made of sterner stuff. He stood on the boat's thwart, arms folded in an attitude of defiance, glaring at me with his ferocious eyes until the catamaran thundered right over him.

Showy, flamboyant, and self-dramatizing. What did I tell you? Just like his flute-playing.

I didn't want to cut the launch in half, so I struck it a glancing blow with the left hull, which was strong enough to roll the craft under. It came bobbing up astern—it was a tough boat, stuffed with foam to make it unsinkable and suitable for use as a lifeboat—but we lost most of our diving gear.

I slowed and began to circle. That provided me an opportunity to step out of the pilothouse and glare at Leila, who was still crouched against the pilothouse, paralyzed with shock at the bullets her erstwhile allies had been volleying in her direction. She seemed otherwise unharmed.

"Young lady," I said, shaking a finger, "I'm *very* disappointed in you."

She looked up at me. "Fidel met my price," she said. "We needed money to start the Fabulous Femmes Water Ballet of Zuma."

My indignation at her being on a first-name basis with Perugachi only heightened my disapproval. "You'll get nowhere through this kind of imitation," I said. "Look at where it got the Ayancas."

We picked up the Apollos first, and they sat wet and bedraggled on the stern deck—I believe it was the only time in our acquaintance when at least some of them weren't posing—and then we brought aboard the Ayancas, one by one. They hadn't hung onto their weapons, but we patted them down just in case and tied them on the afterdeck and put them under guard of the Apollos, who soon regained their swagger.

Fidel Perugachi came aboard last, having survived the collision intact save for a dramatic and bloody cut on his forehead. He glared at me as we tied him and dropped him like a sack on the deck, and I flashed him a grim smile.

"Serves you right for killing my employer," I said.

"That wasn't my idea," he said, "and I didn't do it. I advised against it, in fact. I knew it would only piss

you off."

"So who's idea *was* it?" I asked. I didn't expect him to reply, and he didn't.

We took the waterlogged launch in tow and headed for the People's Republic, where we dropped the Ayancas on a deserted rocky shore after making them bail out the launch. We also took their clothing.

Stranding them naked in a deserted corner of China, with no papers for crossing back into Hong Kong and no way of communicating with their employers, seemed likely to keep the Ayancas out of our hair for a while.

We also stranded the Fabulous Femme of Zuma, though we left her a towel for modesty's sake.

Leila was sullen and tried to bum a cigarette, but Perugachi did not take it well. He waded into the sea after us and shook his fist, filling the air with colorful Aymara oaths.

"*Allu!*" he called. "*Jama!*"

"Don't mess with the Hanansaya moiety!" I shouted back at him. "Our ancestors were *kings!*"

Which in our democratic age may seem a bit of aristocratic pretension, but quite frankly I thought it was time that Fidel Perugachi was put in his place.

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"A pyramid," murmured Dr. Pan. "A white pyramid."

"Tetrahedron," I corrected helpfully.

His assistant Chun ignored me and gave Pan a desperate, hollow-eyed look. "The culture wasn't supposed to be able to survive in nature," he said.

"Didn't test it in the nutrient-rich effluent of the Pearl River, now, did you?" I asked.

Again Chun ignored me. "I can't understand the part about the pyramids. That's not supposed to happen at all."

"Tetrahedrons," I said again, "and *what* culture?" I focused on him a glower that would do Fidel Perugachi proud. "I was exposed to it, after all. If I'm about to turn into a four-sided polygon, I have the right to know."

We were in Pan's luxurious suite aboard *Tang Dynasty*, all silk hangings and rich furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and air thick with tobacco smoke from Chun's pipe and Pan's disgusting little cigars. Those of us who had returned from the *Goldfish Fairy*—minus Deszmond, who had been assigned to run the catamaran hard around in Aberdeen harbor and then take the bus back—had decided it was time to confront Dr. Pan and find out just what our little mission was all about.

Pan caved in without resistance. "Our colleague, Dr. Jiu," he said, referring to Jesse, "was working with a type of diatom. These are small one-celled algae that live in colonies and create crystalline structures."

"Divers know about diatoms," Laszlo said.

Pan nodded. "What Dr. Jiu managed to create was a diatom modified to excrete polycarbon plastic instead of a silicate. Since our current lines of plastics are created from fossil fuels, our company was quick to see the economic advantages of a far cheaper plastic that was created from, well, nothing, and we acquired both Dr. Jiu and his, ah, creation."

"And now the sea's got it," I said.

"The plastic structure is itself organic," Chun said added hopefully. "Sooner or later, other microorganisms will eat it. And in the meantime it's a very nice sink for carbon dioxide."

I looked at them. "Is that before or after the white tetrahedron breaks surface in the shipping lanes?"

Sometimes it is necessary to be blunt in order to shock some of these more cerebral types back to reality. Both Pan and Chun winced.

Pan combed his distinguished white hair with his fingers and looked at Laszlo. "What is normally done to stop an underwater contamination?"

Laszlo stared at his right biceps while absentmindedly flexing it "Well," he said, "in cases of seaweed, like that *caulerpa taxifolia* that can infest whole ecosystems, you cover the infected area with plastic, then pump in something that will kill it, like chlorine. You have to keep coming back at regular intervals to make certain it hasn't come back." He shrugged. "But how you deal with a *diatom*, I don't know. Wouldn't the little critters be carried off by the current? Shouldn't it be all over the South China Sea by now?"

Sometimes it's possible to be *too* blunt: Chun looked as if he were about to cry, and Pan seemed profoundly cast down and gave a deep sigh.

"We are dealing with a specific diatom," Pan said, "a bilaterally symmetrical organism that reproduces sexually through the fusion of protoplasts. It won't survive long on its own, but will do well in its colony." He looked at Chun for reassurance. "We don't think the organism will spread far."

"How much plastic sheeting can you get on short notice?" Laszlo asked them.

They looked dubious.

"Oh come on," he urged. "You're in the plastic *business*."

"That would involve contacting another division of the company," Pan murmured in a subdued voice.

"It would involve *explanation*," Chun murmured back.

Pan gave another profound sigh. "So very awkward," he said.

"Awkward," Chun agreed.

I began to suspect that huge sheets of plastic were not in our future.

Which was how, two days later, I found myself the skipper of the ten-thousand-ton freighter *Twice-Locked Mountain*, a rusting hulk that had been thumping around the bywaters of Asia for the better part of the last century, so ancient and decrepit that it could only have been kept from the breakers' yards in the hope it might successfully be involved in some kind of insurance fraud.

I swung the wheel, steadied onto my new course, took dead aim at the anchored freighter *Green Snake*, and rang Jorge in the engine room for more turns.

The old reciprocating engines thumped and banged, the propeller flailed water, and a shudder ran along the old ship, shaking off a few hundred pounds of rust flakes. I hoped she would hold together just a few more minutes. It would be embarrassing to sink her prematurely.

"Hurry up," came Laszlo's voice on the radio. "We've got to be in Shanghai by tomorrow night."

"I'm doing the best I can," I said, and reached for the controls of the ship's siren to signal *brace for collision*.

We were probably doing all of ten knots when we hit *Green Snake* dead abeam in a crash of tormented iron, venting steam, and gurgling water. Since *Green Snake* was at least as old a ship as *Twice-Locked Mountain*, and in even worse condition, I half expected us to slice our target in two, but instead we stayed locked together, which wasn't in the plan, either.

"Get everyone on deck," I told Laszlo. "You're about to go down fast."

I reached for the engine room telegraph and rang for *full astern*, which is exactly what you're not supposed to do when your ship has just collided with another. *Twice-Locked Mountain* backed out of the hole it had torn in *Green Snake* with another shriek of dying metal, and the sea flooded in. In mere moments the *Green Snake* was listing, and the water ballet guys, pausing every so often to flex, began piling into their lifeboat.

Our bow had been caved in, but I wasn't sure how much water was coming in through the bulkhead that we had so carefully punched full of holes, and I called Rosalinda on her cell to find out. The intake seemed insufficient, so I ordered the sea cocks opened, and then we began to settle fast. I managed some last maneuvering with the aid of my satnav, then signaled Sancho on the foredeck to trip the anchor, which ran out with a roar and clatter and a splash.

I blew the siren that ordered everyone to assemble amidships, and we watched in some fascination as *Green Snake* rolled over, then plunged to the bottom amid a roil of water and the thunder of collapsing bulkheads. We transferred to our own boats in some haste, as we wanted to get out of the area before the sea turned to poison.

In our own lifeboat we followed the Outrageous Water Ballet of Malibu toward Hong Kong, while I got busy on the radio and, in the voice of one Captain Nicholas Turgachev of the *Green Snake*, called in an SOS and issued the first of several environmental warnings, the second followed by the equally fictional Captain Bellerophos Kallikanzaros of the *Twice-Locked Mountain*.

The environmental warning was the only genuine part, as both ships had been loaded with sacks of arsenic originally intended to poison China's substantial population of rats. We had carefully anchored the wrecks so that they would bracket *Goldfish Fairy* when they went down. The arsenic would kill anything: man, woman, fish, plant, or mutated diatom, and the heavy metal would be leaking out of the wrecks and drifting over the site for weeks.

In the normal course of events, this would be considered an environmental catastrophe. In fact, it *was* an environmental catastrophe.

What I hoped was that it would be preferable to white tetrahedrons growing on the ocean floor from here to Panama, a bleak eerie forest like the setting of some early work by J.G. Ballard.

Soon Sancho, impersonating yet another fictional captain (this one a Filipino named Suarez), got on the radio to inform the authorities that he'd taken the survivors aboard the freighter *Ode to Constancy*, heading for Taipei, where they would be made available for questioning as soon as the ship docked. Of

course the ship would never dock there, and the crews would never be found, and neither would the owners of all the vessels involved. Over the years the Chinese had become very good at obscuring ship registries, and I was inclined to trust them.

Questions rattled over the radio, but Turgachev and Kallikanzaros and Suarez managed not to find a language in common with the authorities, just scattered words here and there. An emergency helicopter scrambled from Hong Kong got to the wreck site just in time to see *Twice-Locked Mountain* make its final dive.

I, my band, and the water ballet were on our way to Hong Kong, where we'd get a Dragon Air flight to Shanghai to rejoin *Tang Dynasty*.

It was the only gig we had left, after all. Doctors Pan and Chun would soon be on their way back to Taiwan, where they would attempt to reconstruct Jesse's work from his notes. Even without their female contingent, the water ballet guys had found a new audience here, one that might keep them in Asia for quite some time. Every so often, suitably armored against the arsenic, they might make a dive down to the wreck to make certain that the diatoms weren't making a comeback.

We Hanansayas had become redundant. We were reduced to playing our music and flogging our CDs till the next emergency rose.

Or until the tetrahedrons rose from the sea. One way or the other.

The End