

## NOT EVEN THE PAST

by Robert R. Chase

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The scene of the crime looked like one of the old standards—but with some very important differences.

The comfortably claustrophobic kitchen had been specially designed for cooking in a less-than-one-atmosphere environment. There were half a dozen pressure cookers of various sizes, all with transparent lids and LEDs displaying the pressures and temperatures within. I even had pressurized ovens in addition to the usual microwaves. And I had the advantage of decades of chefs who had had to cook at less than a standard atmosphere.

On the other hand, I was not sure how to adjust for the incrementally decreasing gravity. My intuition was that it should slow convection and so, to some extent, offset the lower air pressure. It made preparing multi-ethnic *haute cuisine* even more of a gamble, but that's one of the things I like about my job. I am always learning something new.

Buzzers began to sound one after the other. I moved the pans to the cart, depressurizing them slowly to keep them from blowing up on me, and removed the handles. The pans were now plates. I counted out the proper amount of nouveau art deco silverware. Almost the entire design of the *Outward Bound* was nouveau art deco, from the metal-framework pin lights on the ceiling to the exquisitely cut rugs. The one exception was the nineteenth-century Ruritania-style crew uniforms. These served no useful purpose save to inspire my current nom de guerre.

I pushed the cart into the main lounge, carefully keeping my gaze lowered as I served our very important passengers. Besides aiding my image as an obsequious servant, it kept me from staring out the glass wall at twelve thousand miles of nothing. It may seem odd that someone who has jumped out of airplanes and rappelled down from helicopters should be afraid while cosseted by cutting-edge twenty-first-century technology, but in those situations, I at least felt I was in control. In the *Outward Bound*, I was too aware that my life was hanging, almost literally, by a thread and that if it snapped, there would be absolutely nothing I could do about it.

I served nearest to farthest, so no one could make accusations of favoritism. Narayan Singh got the Kashmiri Gustaba. His neatly trimmed, graying beard was the only sign of his sixty plus years. Dark eyes beneath his turban moved quickly from one to the other of his luncheon

companions.

“Why do you insist that we are being treated poorly by the Beanstalk Corporation, Mr. Zhao?” he asked. Beanstalk was the Japanese-American joint venture that had nudged asteroid 2009 AP15 into geosynchronous orbit so that it could be used as the raw materials for the space elevator we were presently ascending.

Annie Jackson received the shrimp salad and can of Foster's. I opened the can carefully. These were said to be especially prepared cans with lower carbonation, but already one unfortunate incident had reminded Vice Captain Piper of the fountains at the Bellagio. “Thanks, Rassendyll,” Jackson said. “I have to agree with Mr. Singh. After all, Beanstalk won the rights to the asteroid fair and square. They could have frozen out all the rest of us. Instead, they have invited us in as partners in what promises to be an extremely profitable venture.”

“To open the solar system to all so that mankind may make a new start unconstrained by the mistakes of the dead past,” Captain Miyamoto said, parroting the company line. It was hard to tell if he was being ironic—inscrutable Orientals and all that. He nodded as I gave him the *sashimi* and soy sauce. Inscrutable or not, he had been feeling an increasing tension the past three days, and his appetite had suffered accordingly.

Zhao Changxing received the last plate, boiled beef with noodles, along with chopsticks to complete the regular place setting. Of all of them at the table, he was the only one not to acknowledge my existence in any way. I might as well have been invisible. Which was fine with me.

“Your principals would never choose to be represented by fools,” Zhao said. “It is insulting to me and demeaning to yourselves to pretend to be fools. Fetterman and Ishikawa, the controlling partners of Beanstalk, know that the power they have makes them targets. The beanstalk itself, from the sea-based platforms anchoring its two completed cables, all the way up to Laputa Station, is indefensible from terrorist attacks. In the old days, someone in their position might have tried to pay off prospective terrorists. Fetterman and Ishikawa prove their superiority by arranging to have prospective terrorists pay them.”

“Just a moment now,” Jackson objected. “You can't mean—”

“I mean my country would have been able to make the first legal claim to ownership of the asteroid if our spacecraft had not exploded on the

launchpad.” Zhao stared at each of the others in turn. “No investigation has ever explained the cause of that explosion in a satisfactory manner.”

Each of the junior partners had been allowed to take one aide with them. Zhao's was Zin Chondin. At the age of fifteen, she had charmed the world while winning an Olympic gold medal in gymnastics. Four years later, she was back in competition, but the little girl was gone, replaced by an emotionless perfectionist the press dubbed the Ice Goddess. Now she was in a whole new game. She sat on a sofa behind her boss, ready to go for anything he might need. As I passed by, I handed her a mug of buttered tea. “Sorry it can't be as hot as you would like it, given our air pressure.”

“No need to apologize, Rudy,” she said. “I grew up on lukewarm tea.”

I took my seat behind her. It was situated so that I had a view of everyone in the room, ostensibly so that at the lift of a finger I could jump to my feet and pour coffee or take an order back to the kitchen. It had the additional benefit of putting the glass wall behind me. I could at least pretend that I was in a building firmly rooted to terra firma.

And I could muse on Zin without being obvious about it. She moved with an athlete's unself-conscious grace. Her features suggested a mixture of something other than Chinese, though I could not put my finger on it.

My thoughts were cut short by raised voices at the main table. “And don't think that I miss the message sent by the seating arrangements,” Zhao said.

“What do you mean?” Singh asked.

“India to my right, then Australia to my left, and finally Japan,” Zhao said. “Just like on a map. And the Americans, who set this noose around a country they are right to fear, hiding in the background, pulling the strings.”

“Oh, come now,” Jackson objected.

“It is not surprising that members of the so-called Anglosphere would ally against us,” Zhao said. “But your people, Miyamoto.” Zhao stood, towering over them. At well over two meters, he was much the tallest person in the room. “They should never have allowed themselves to become lackeys. Is there no flicker of pride, of *bushido*, left in you?”

Miyamoto got to his feet. As did I, judging how quickly I could get between them. Beating up honored VIPs was not part of my job

description, but it would be better to do that, if necessary, and be dismissed in disgrace, than to allow an all-out brawl to occur.

“I think it would be advisable for you to leave the table,” Miyamoto said. “Now.”

Zhao stared down at him for a moment. “I have lost my appetite in any event.” He turned and strode from the room. Zin followed dutifully after him. A few minutes later, Singh and Jackson made their excuses.

Miyamoto was still clenching his fists as I came over to clear the table.

“Only one more day,” I said.

“Not soon enough,” he growled.

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Plates and tableware went into the dishwasher and thirty minutes later were ready for storage. One of the things about working in a variable gee environment is that you can never just put something in a cupboard and rely on gravity to keep it from wandering. Every plate slides into a slot and then a door locks shut, securing everything in place. Each fork and spoon snaps into its assigned position in the drawer. One of the advantages of this system is that it becomes immediately evident when anything is missing.

Like a knife.

I went back out into the dining area and examined table and chairs to see if I had missed anything. Not so much as an embroidered napkin. The table had been set with four knives. Only three had come back.

I raised my tracy to punch the digit that would put me in immediate contact with the captain. Before I had the chance, Miyamoto's panicked voice came from the speaker.

“Rassendyll. Come up to cabin 103 immediately. Mr. Zhao has been stabbed.”

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I learned later that Miyamoto had been in the control room with Vice Captain Piper when an emergency call came in from Zhao's cabin. Zhao

was screaming incoherently in Chinese. Miyamoto did not need a translation to know that Zhao was in serious trouble. He was down the companionway and in front of Zhao's door in ten seconds.

The door was locked. This was no ordinary stateroom door. More than anything else, the cabin doors on the *Outward Bound* resembled submarine bulkhead doors. The idea was that in event of hull breach, each cabin would be able to maintain its own air pressure until repairs could be made. It would take an industrial laser a good fifteen minutes to cut through the lock.

Miyamoto smashed the emergency glass at the side of the door and inserted a key that he kept clipped to his belt. The bolts disengaged. Even then, the door did not open. A chair had been placed beneath the surprisingly ordinary interior doorknob. Miyamoto had to throw himself against the door three times to knock the chair out of the way.

Zhao lay on the floor of his cabin. The only light in the cabin spilled in from the corridor. Although the *Outward Bound* had been designed for luxury, the constraints of a car climbing the Beanstalk meant that space was limited. The most that one could say for Zhao's cabin was that, though it was eight feet high, it was basically the size of a large walk-in closet. On the left, a bed which could fold down from the wall. On the right, a fold-down desk and a door to a very small bathroom. The far wall was transparent, like the wall in the dining room.

I could not have been more than a minute behind Miyamoto. By now, the motion sensors had brought up the room lights. Miyamoto was kneeling on the right side of Zhao, administering first aid. Zin was on Zhao's left, sobbing.

Miyamoto had covered Zhao's throat with clotting foam from the kit he had had the presence of mind to grab. Judging by the pool of blood surrounding him, this was likely a futile effort. My missing knife was on the carpet two feet away.

I knelt next to Miyamoto, wondering how I could help. "I don't think he's breathing."

Miyamoto gave a quick nod. "Get the defibrillator out of the kit."

Modern gadgets are wonderful. Once you have set the paddles on the patient's chest and pressed the on button, the defibrillator delivers timed shocks while monitoring the patient's condition.

It also determines when to end the effort. "Resuscitation not possible." The calm, alto voice seemed to issue from Zhao's chest. "Procedure being terminated."

Zin's sobbing became a wail.

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"This is the sort of thing you were hired to prevent, Angelo," Sphinx said. He was wearing a deep voice today, maybe late Sydney Greenstreet. Someday, my curiosity might be satisfied and I would learn if Sphinx was man, woman, or machine. On the other hand, it was probably safer not to know.

"Yeah," I agreed. I paced my cabin, talking into my headset. It had all the latest security features. Not only did it encrypt everything I said, it also generated an innocuous conversation for any prospective eavesdroppers.

"What else?"

"I gave the room a thorough examination before I left, top to bottom. There was nowhere for anyone to hide, including that minuscule bathroom."

"So Mr. Zhao was murdered in a locked room. Quite curious. Do you have a suspect?"

I shrugged. "Everyone on board. Zhao had a talent for making himself disliked."

"If I had to guess..." Sphinx began.

I waited, not wanting to be pulled into Sphinx's mind games.

"I would choose you, Angelo. You have the skills necessary to the task. And your antipathy to the Chinese is well documented."

"Untrue," I said. "I have dozens of Chinese friends, from Taipei to Singapore."

"I stand corrected. It is your dislike of the current mainland government that is well known."

"And we both know," I said, "that if I were to do anything so

unprofessional as to kill someone I had been paid to protect, we would now be lamenting Mr. Zhao's death from natural causes.”

“Ye-e-es.” Sphinx sounded pleased in spite of himself. “Around you, only natural causes and accidents. One of the reasons your services are so highly valued.

“Well, how do you propose to proceed?”

“I think it's time I drop my cover and start asking questions. We are still a day from Laputa, and I have no idea what the legal situation is when we arrive.”

“Nobody does,” Sphinx said, with the suggestion of a throaty chuckle.

“I'll do what I can to preserve the evidence. The passengers should find it reassuring that some sort of investigation has started.”

“And our client will be pleased with the indication that it is finally getting something for its money.”

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Miyamoto called a general meeting and made a short announcement of Zhao's murder. The he reintroduced me as his security officer and informed the passengers that I would be taking statements from all of them. They were to give me their full cooperation in order to bring the murderer to justice as well as for their own protection.

“But who is going to feed us?” one of the aides asked.

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I got Miyamoto's statement in the kitchen's walk-in freezer. Zhao's corpse was being preserved as best we could among the steaks and chops. While I examined the body, Miyamoto recounted getting Zhao's call, running to Zhao's cabin, opening the door, and finding Zhao on the floor with one of my steak knives sticking out of his neck.

“Was he conscious when you arrived?” I asked. “Did he say anything?”

The cold had dried the foam Miyamoto used to seal the wound. It flaked off cleanly under the blade of my butter knife.

“He was trying to say something,” Miyamoto said. “He must have known I could not understand him, because he switched to English. I caught the words ‘in the’ clearly. Then he paused, maybe for breath, but I thought he was searching for a word. Then he said ‘stars.’ He was on his back, but he was able to raise his arm part way. I looked through the window. I could see the stars, but there was nothing unusual about them.”

“Then what?”

“I knelt down beside him. That's when I saw the knife. I got the sealant foam out of the first aid kit before doing anything about it. Even though there was a fair amount of blood already, I feared there would be a gusher when I removed the knife. So I pulled the knife with one hand and sprayed with the other.”

“When did Zin show up?”

“Just about the time I pulled the knife, I think. I felt a tremor and heard a gasp. Then Zin rushed in and threw her arms around Zhao. I had to push her away so I could work. When she saw the blood on her hands, she became almost hysterical.”

I looked up from my examination of Zhao's neck. “How many people on board would you say are left handed?”

Miyamoto did not answer immediately, surprised by the apparent change of topic. “I am. I can't recall noticing anybody else. Why?”

“Take a look at the back of Zhao's neck. I am not a crime scene technician by any means, but it looks like this starts as a puncture wound, the knife jabbing pretty much straight in. Then it slices to the left.

“Now it is certainly possible to hold one of these knives with the sharpened edge pointing to the left and, having made the stab, to push it further in that direction. However, it would be awkward. The more natural action for a right-hander is to hold it with the edge facing right and then, after stabbing, to pull it in that direction.”

I did not say it, but I had also noticed that the wound seemed to be directed down toward the chest. If Zhao had been standing at the time, the knife would have started above him. But there was no one even as tall as Zhao on board.



Miyamoto listened to this with increasingly wide eyes. "Why would I do such a thing?" he asked.

"I haven't said you did. But, to answer your question, for the same reason anyone else on the *Outward Bound* would have. Zhao was a master of irritation and provocation. His snit in the dining area was only the most recent example. For all I know, you all drew straws as soon as I left the room and you were the lucky guy chosen to do the deed."

"I tried to save his life," Miyamoto said heatedly.

"Zhao's room was locked," I said. "The only person who could get into that room is the person who did indeed get in: you. You had at least a minute before Zin came in behind you. Plenty of time to stab someone in the back. Taking along the first aid kit was inspired. Knifing someone can be messy. Attempting first aid, at least giving the appearance of doing so, would give you the perfect excuse to have blood on your hands and your fingerprints on the murder weapon."

Miyamoto was starting to sweat. I felt a bit sorry for him, especially since I did not really believe what I was saying.

"I was in the Control Room with Vice Captain Piper when we received Zhao's call," Miyamoto said. "Piper was with me at the very moment Zhao was being murdered."

"We don't really know what Zhao said. You described him as 'screaming incoherently.' Maybe he was just upset that his bed had not been made up the way he liked."

I led Miyamoto out of the refrigerator to the circular third level corridor. Miyamoto stared at the floor.

"I'm not saying I would arrest you even if I had the authority," I said. "But if these thoughts occur to me, they will certainly occur to the official investigators. You will want to have something convincing to say to them."

I decided to interview everyone else in his own cabin, on the off chance that I might pick up a clue, if not to method then perhaps to motivation. Zin's room, located right next to Zhao's, gave absolutely no clue to her personality. We had been on board for almost two days, yet no pictures or books had been placed on the small writing table. If she had family, a boyfriend, any sort of personal life, there was no indication of it. It also seemed at least five degrees cooler than any place else on the

## *Outward Bound.*

She sat on the fold-down cot, seemingly immersed in her own thoughts, as I entered. Then she saw what I was carrying on my hip.

“What is that?” she asked in surprise.

“What it looks like,” I said. “It's a .32-caliber semiautomatic pistol.”

“You would use that in here?” she asked incredulously. She gave a quick glance to her shuttered window. “You could kill us all.”

I shook my head. “It's loaded with safety slugs. Thin-walled jackets filled with number twelve shot. They fragment on impact so as not to go through walls or people. ‘Stopping power maximized by complete dispersal of bullet energy into the intended target with immediate shock and trauma,’” I said, quoting the ad copy. “Air marshals have used them for forty years.”

Zin turned her head away. “I think there has been enough shock and trauma—and blood. Do you really believe you need that protection?”

“There are two schools of thought about that,” I said. “One is that the murderer is a member of one of the nut cults that never wanted the Beanstalk built, that it's an affront to Mother Gaia or will be used to pollute the rest of the solar system or whatever. If so, we may all be at risk.

“On the other hand, it may be that the murderer had a personal reason to kill Mr. Zhao. In that case, I may be the only one in danger simply because I am asking questions. My hope is that packing a .32 will make me an unattractive target.”

I gave her the self-deprecating smile that had been so charming when I was chef and waiter. No reaction. Her head was still turned away. Time to take charge of the conversation.

“Where did you go after lunch?”

“I came right back here. I had papers that still had to be prepared and checked before the Laputa signing ceremony.”

“Did you hear anything unusual?”

“No, not at first. I was concentrating on my work. Then, there was a sort of thumping coming from his room. I thought he must have been

throwing something at a wall.” She looked at me apologetically. “Mr. Zhao was under a great deal of stress. He would kick or throw things sometimes. He meant nothing by it.”

“Then what?” I prompted.

“There was a scream.” Zin drew a deep breath and shuddered. “I could not make out any words, but I could hear the fear and pain. I ran out to the corridor. Mr. Miyamoto was just opening the door. I looked in and saw on the floor...” She put her fist to her mouth, blinking away tears.

“Can it be true?” she asked.

“Can what be true?”

“The rumors. The stories you see on obscure telezines about creatures living in the upper reaches of the atmosphere, or even in space itself. There are pictures taken by satellites from a distance. Sometimes they look like flying saucers. Other times, more like huge, celestial jellyfish.

“Some say they aren't material at all, that they are energy beings. Walls and doors would mean nothing to them. They would be able come through just like light.”

Her voice was getting higher, her breathing faster. She would work herself into hysteria if I did not do something quickly.

“I don't know anything about space-dwelling creatures,” I said. “However, I am reasonably certain that if they exist, even if they were hostile, they would not choose my steak knives as the means to show their displeasure.”

This time, I did get the smile. “Forgive me, I'm babbling. That was an absurd suggestion. The strain, you understand, has made me behave as if I have altitude sickness.”

“Given how high we are, a little altitude sickness is forgivable. Just let me know if you remember any more details, no matter how insignificant.”

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Vice Captain Norm Piper seemed distracted during our interview. He kept his face pointed in my direction, and he would nod encouragingly from time to time, but his almost colorless eyes never really focused on me.

Blond crew cut and overly regular features made him look almost like a store mannequin.

“Captain Miyamoto says you were with him in the control room when Zhao's call came in.”

“Yeah. That's right.”

“What time did Miyamoto come into the room?”

Piper frowned, as if it took extra effort to pull his mind away from wherever it was to attend to my questions. “About 12:50. Earlier than I expected. He was in a bad mood. Zhao had been even more irritating than usual at lunch.”

“He stayed in the control room with you until Zhao's call came in?”

“Yeah.”

“There is some question about what Zhao said. Miyamoto doesn't understand Chinese—”

“I do,” Piper interrupted. “He said that he had been stabbed and he needed help.”

I must have looked surprised. “Mr. Fetterman wants every one of his executive staff fluent in either Japanese or Chinese.” For the first time, his eyes met mine. “So you're a security operative, huh? Internal or contract?”

“I can't really go into that.”

“Right. But you're the one responsible for keeping things like this from happening.”

“People tell me that.”

Piper smiled and seemed to relax. “That's what I thought. I was telling Miyamoto not to worry.”

It might be a murder to most of us, but to Piper it was a potential blot on his resume, one that might impede his advancement in Fetterman Associates. It was a great relief to him to discover that I was the designated fall guy.

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Narayan Singh's room was almost the opposite of Zin's. Overly warm where hers was cold, littered with personal touches where hers was almost sterile. He offered me tea, which I declined, as I sat down to begin the interview.

"Can you tell me where you were in the half hour between the end of lunch and Miyamoto's discovery of Mr. Zhao's body."

"I was in this room, reading Faulkner. Primitive societies fascinate me. Then I took a nap. As I am sure you remember, Mr. Zhao had been quite tiresome."

"Was your assistant, Bachi, with you any part of this time?"

"No. I understand he was with Jackson's assistant, being defeated in a game of ping-pong. So you see, I have absolutely no alibi."

"What do you think of Zhao's murder?"

"Really, Mr. Rassendyll, if that absurd name is truly yours, this is a time when I can be especially grateful that I am businessman instead of a diplomat. You saw how the man behaved, so it should not surprise you to hear me say that with Zhao's death the air is sweeter, the Sun shines more brightly, and children everywhere play more happily."

The old man was having entirely too much fun with this. He was throwing my questions back in my face and making me like it.

"Mr. Zhao was a tall man and appeared to be fairly strong," I said. "I imagine it would have taken someone nearly as strong to kill him."

"You note my excellent physical condition despite my advanced age. It is true. Until three years ago, I played polo. Last year, I bowled for the cricket team that won the Punjabi Cup."

"A suspicious man would note that you are the only one of our passengers who is always armed," I said.

He pulled the dagger from its sheath on his belt. "My *kirpan*. As a Sikh I wear this always as a matter of religious obligation." He brushed his thumb lightly across the edge. "I keep it sharp as a matter of personal preference."

“More importantly, this is the knife with which Zhao was *not* killed. That was a kitchen knife purportedly under your control.”

I had been scanning the room as he talked. My eye was caught by a particularly ugly figurine of a four-armed woman with a necklace of skulls. She seemed to be sticking her tongue out at me.

“The goddess Kali,” Singh said, following my gaze. “Not venerated by Sikhs, of course. A peace offering from my daughter after an argument during which we were both overly vehement.”

“She looks rather bloodthirsty,” I commented.

“Occidentals tend to think so. ‘Kill for the love of killing! Kill for the love of Kali! Kill! Kill! Kill!’ Most Westerners know of her only through two overly flamboyant films, the first far better than the second.”

“Undoubtedly a misunderstanding caused by a paternalistic colonialism,” I suggested.

“Not at all,” Singh said. “The Thuggee were a murderous sect who had to be put down. You should read George Bruce's book; old, but it strikes the balance between research and readability.” He leaned closer. “If you do, you will learn that their weapon of choice was not a knife, but a yellow scarf which they used to throttle their victims.”

I considered for a moment. “Mr. Singh, I understand your lack of regret at Zhao's death. But being a son of a bitch does not excuse murder. If it did, which of us would be safe? In fact, none of us is safe until the murderer is caught. That is why I am sure you will tell me if you remember anything further that might shed light on his identity.”

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“Horrible,” Annie Jackson said. “Just horrible. I mean, I didn't like him any more than anyone else, but the worst he deserved was a slap in the face. Or maybe a punch in the nose.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Do any of us really know anything about Zhao?” The question, far

from being rhetorical, was born of my own frustration. Sphinx could access some of the best intelligence sources on the planet, but had been able to provide me with precious little about Zhao. “We have the officially tailored biography released to the press, and if we Google his name, we can see how that biography has been retroactively adjusted as he has climbed in the hierarchy. What we don't know is whether a single word of it has ever been true. China is the one country that has been able to completely control the internet.”

“Hmm,” Jackson said doubtfully. “I suppose that is right, but he never impressed me as a man hiding great secrets. Just a bureaucrat trying to make everyone acknowledge that he was actually as important as he wished to be.”

“Did you see him at any time between the end of lunch and the time he died?”

She shook her head. “I was in the game room for fifteen, maybe twenty, minutes watching my aide, Elaine Evans, playing ping-pong with Bachi Bedi, Singh's aide. Nether of them was very good. The ball kept bouncing into high slanted arcs. Whenever Elaine aced him, Bachi lamented as if it were grand opera. They both got to laughing so hard they could hardly stand.”

She was quiet for a moment. “It is almost as if those were our last few minutes of innocence. Then, to add to the horror of the murder itself, the fact that it seems to be an impossible crime.”

I said, “You were chosen to sign the articles of agreement because of your position in Great Southern Dynamics.”

Jackson sat up a little straighter. “Absolutely. We are the largest aerospace and defense contractor in the southern hemisphere. It only makes sense that we should be one of the signatories.”

“Your stock value went up twenty points six weeks ago on the rumor that you had perfected an invisibility cloak.”

Nervous laughter showed that she immediately saw where I was going. “Much exaggerated rumors, I assure you. Of course, we have been working on such a device, but we have quite a ways to go. I can't let you have classified details, but the truth is that for now it works on only the lower part of the spectrum.”

“According to *Jane's Defence On Line*, the Australian Government issued a classified contract to your company for twenty million dollars right around the time of the stock increase. The interesting thing is that it was funded with procurement rather than research funds.”

“Well, that could be anything.”

“Of course.”

“Look, Rassendyll, I know you have to find the killer, and I can understand why you might grasp at an invisibility cloak, if one actually existed. But if you have followed developments as closely as you appear to have, you know that there are serious difficulties with your theory. Wearing the cloak is like walking inside a small tent. The operator is nearly blind. Any holes for vision make the operator's eyes visible.”

“Infrared,” I said.

“And then you need special lenses sewn into the fabric. You carry a power pack for both the cloak and the IR goggles. As efficient as you make it, it gives off heat. You install a fan to pump the heat out. The fan cannot be completely silent, and the heat coming out of the cloak looks like a fire to anyone with his own IR gear.

“You are thinking that the killer knocked on Zhao's door and was admitted, knifed Zhao, then slipped out when Miyamoto broke in. Look around this room! It's the same size as Zhao's. You have to step out to the corridor to change your mind. Do you really think someone in a cloak could step around Miyamoto and Zin without brushing up against them, without someone hearing the fan or feeling the heat?”

“Not impossible,” I said.

“Just bloody damned unlikely,” Jackson replied.

“Would you object if I searched your room?”

“I most certainly would! But go ahead. You find nothing and will then be able to put this silly idea out of your mind.”

It took less than fifteen minutes to prove her right.

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Elaine Evans and Bachi Bedi were the only two people on board who had complete alibis for the time in question. By the logic of fiction, that should make them the guilty parties. The logic of reality pointed in the opposite direction. Elaine gave the impression of being tightly focused on mission, in some ways like Piper but with a personality. She might destroy me on the tennis court, and I could well imagine that the man who laid an unwelcome hand on her would find himself with a broken wrist, but there would be nothing covert about her motives or actions.

Bachi was an equally unlikely suspect, if for different reasons. Jokes and humorous asides did little to conceal a deep uneasiness about personal safety with a murderer on board, about whether there would be a signing on Laputa with one of the representatives dead. He could hardly keep his eyes off the holster of my .32. From his vegetarian eating habits (with which I had become intimately acquainted while acting as chef) and his conversation, he seemed to be at base a very serious Hindu. I had a feeling he had a crisis of conscience every time he used disinfectant on a cut.

“You don't believe in the Celestials,” he said, almost reproachfully. It was toward the end of the interview.

“The what?” I asked.

“Celestials. Creatures of the upper reaches. They travel on magnetic lines of force and feed upon the radiation of the Van Allen belts. In their larval stages, they may appear from a distance to be spacecraft, but in mature form, they have been mistaken for aurora.”

It took me a moment to realize that this was a more poetic version of what Zin had been talking about earlier. “You're right. I don't. If they did exist, why would they care about us?”

“Because we have invaded their space,” Bachi said. He was painfully earnest. “Not temporarily with our spacecraft, but with a permanent structure that leeches away their power.”

“What sort of relationship did you have with Zhao?” It was a question I asked both of them. Their answers were the same: no relationship. They were mere assistants. This tracked with my experience as chef. As far we could tell, he had never known any of our names.

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Back in my cabin, I had my recorder print out a transcript of all the interviews. A quick scan confirmed my initial impression. I had nothing. Nobody liked Zhao, but nobody had a convincing motive for murder. If I were able to find one, I would still be faced with an impossible crime. Miyamoto would have been my choice, except that Piper said they were together when Zhao called in that he was being attacked. Singh was a suspect based on his general bloody-mindedness. Had he been trying to draw attention to himself? If so, why?

An odd thought occurred to me. I detached my chair from its anchors and placed it against the door. The top of the backrest fit snugly against the bottom of the doorknob. From Miyamoto's description, I had assumed that the murderer had leaned the chair against the door to wedge it shut. I saw now that it had not been leaning at all. Did that make a difference? Maybe it had not been intended to block the door. But if that was so, what was it doing there?

I realized suddenly that I was very, very tired. If I kept chasing my thoughts in circles, I would end up like Bachi, believing in energy life-forms that flew on magnetic fields and ate radiation.

Tomorrow we would reach Laputa. The authorities there could grill everyone to their hearts' content. Sphinx would be unhappy that I had not found the murderer. The hell with him. Let him fire me. Maybe it was time I got an honest job.

\* \* \* \*

Something brought me out of a sound sleep. I stared into the darkness, wondering what had disturbed me. It took a moment to realize that it was the absence of something too low to hear, a vibration that had been present since the *Outward Bound* began its four-hundred-mile-per-hour climb up the Beanstalk.

The engines that powered the climbing wheels were off line.

I sat up quickly, nearly throwing myself off the bed. The lights, sensing my movement, came on and slowly increased in brilliance.

"Control room! This is Rassendyll. What's going on?"

"We are stopped." Miyamoto sounded disgusted. "I have been given orders to hold position until our legal status is clarified. I told them we don't have that much air."

I was still fuzzy with sleep. “But we can't just block the Beanstalk. What about the other cargo shipments?”

“There are two completed cables,” Miyamoto reminded me with exaggerated patience. “The only other shipment behind us is on the other cable.”

Right. I knew that. “What do we have for air?”

“It could last indefinitely, as long as we can draw power from the cable. Food and water are another matter. You probably have a better idea of that than I do.”

I thought a moment. The kitchen had been locked since the murder. I had set up a sandwich bar with plastic utensils for the passengers to serve themselves. “Uh, three days. Six if we really stretch it.”

There was a click as he cut the connection. I stumbled back to my bed. I could imagine the confusion on Laputa. Fetterman and Ishikawa had placed their ground stations in international waters in order to be free of interference from nations who might seek to tax, control, or nationalize their creation. They might be regretting that decision now.

The room took note of my lack of movement. The latticed pin lights dimmed and guttered out like—

This time I jumped up so violently that I landed a yard from the bed. “Miyamoto. I know who killed Zhao.”

For the second time, I was just a few minutes too late.

\* \* \* \*

Miyamoto helped zip me into the remaining spacesuit. “She must have realized something was up when I called her to the control room. She climbed out the top hatch and jammed open the outer door of the air lock. The bottom hatch is the only other way out.

“How did you know Zin was the one? For that matter, how could she kill Zhao? She entered the room after I did, when Zhao was already dying.”

I sealed the helmet. Air rushed in behind my head as I turned on the radio. “That is what she wanted you to think. She was in the room as you

entered. She was betting on the sight of Zhao's body and the fact that we are conditioned to think in two dimensions. She was in the lights above your head.”

“That’s—” Miyamoto cut off his own outburst as he thought through what I had been saying.

I pressed a button on my left wrist. The suit shrank in and became skintight as it conformed itself to my body contours.

“You can't just hang lights in an environment that varies between one gravity and free fall. They have to be fixed in place. That is why they are placed on decorative metal tubing, tubing which forms a surprisingly strong metal framework. Not strong enough to support a hundred pound girl, you would say. I would agree. But plenty strong enough to support a fifty-pound girl for a few minutes, if she spread her weight carefully among the supports. As we have climbed the Beanstalk, our weight has been decreasing due to the combination of gravitational attenuation caused by distance and the centrifugal force from the Earth's rotation.

“She stabbed Zhao, then placed the chair against the door. Not to block the door, as we both assumed, but to give her the extra height she needed to jump to the lights and pull herself into position before you forced your way in. As soon as you did, she dropped to the floor, making that thump you heard.”

“Then running to Zhao was just to make a pretense of caring for him?” Miyamoto asked.

“More likely, it was to have an excuse for having his blood on her clothing.”

“Why? Why did she kill him?”

“I have no idea.”

We did the final safety checks of the suit. I kept waiting for Miyamoto to stop me and say something like “I can't let an untrained civilian go outside under these conditions. You will just get yourself killed. It's my responsibility.” We would argue back and forth, but finally he would beat me down with his insistence that he had the special training necessary to operate in the vacuum outside the *Outward Bound*.

Instead, he clipped the tether reel to my belt. “Snap this onto the

eyebolt just inside the outer hatch. And we don't want to forget this.” He handed me my gun belt. We had to expand it to its fullest extent to make it fit around the spacesuit.

I stepped into the air lock. Miyamoto sealed the door behind me. Rungs slanted down about eight feet to the outer hatch. I found the eyebolt and fastened the tether. Then I pressed the button to open the outer hatch.

\* \* \* \*

*Blackness, complete and unrelieved. I could pretend I was back in high school, working no more than twenty feet above the stage, where the worst that could happen would be to fall and break a leg. All my friends would sign my cast when they visited and my big brother would joke that I should have played it safe by going out for football with him.*

\* \* \* \*

Grasping the tether tightly, I let my body swing down until my head was outside the hatch. The soles of my boots braced against the bottom of a rung. Then the Earth swam into view beneath me, so small, so far away, and I felt how high up I was. Vertigo reached out for me and tried to loosen my grip on the tether, to pull me into the unending void.

What I had to do now was let go of the tether with one hand and reach around the outside of the hull to find the exterior rungs. Forcing my right hand to release the tether was extremely difficult. My body weight may have been reduced to seventy pounds, but the suit had to bring the total up to one fifty. I did not want to support all that weight with one arm.

I relaxed my right hand. My feet slipped free of the rung with the decreased pressure. My whole body pivoted around my left hand, which was still grasping the tether. I flailed with my right hand. Fingers hit a protrusion, grasped, held, as my legs swung into space. I pulled myself up, got my left hand next to my right, then reached for the next rung. I was at the fifth outside rung before my boots found purchase on the first one. I paused for a few seconds, panting. Sweat stung both eyes. Then I resumed my climb up the hull.

Near the top, the hull began to curve in from the vertical. I wondered what sort of welcome I would receive. I considered drawing my gun but decided against it. I wanted to keep both hands on the rungs for as long as possible.

Two more steps and I was jerked to a halt. I could not believe I had run out of line. Somehow the spool must have jammed. Briefly, I considered backing down the rungs and either unjamming the spool or getting an extension. Instead, I detached the spool and let it fall slowly away. I was even more afraid of what Zin was doing atop the *Outward Bound* than I was of falling.

Six more steps and I could see the Beanstalk rising up over the hull's horizon and vanishing into star strewn blackness. One of those dots, a day's travel above, was Laputa.

Two more steps and I could see Zin wrapping something like a plastic raincoat around the cable. My radio had been off so she would not be aware of my approach. Now I thumbed it on.

“Mind telling me what you're trying to do, Zin?”

She did not bother to look around. “I am about to cut the Beanstalk and send the *Outward Bound* hurtling to the Earth.”

Another step and I felt secure enough to unholster the pistol. “It's tougher than it looks. I'm pretty sure you don't have the sort of explosives that could make a dent in it.” I had gone through everything that came on board with the most advanced explosives sniffers before we launched.

Her laugh was half a sob. “This serves as my oxygen tent. I don't intend to explode anything. The Beanstalk is made of buckytubes. Carbon molecules. Like diamond. Like coal. I'm going to burn it.”

“Why?” I was not sure of the chemistry, but that sounded horribly plausible. An extra oxygen canister was visible. I crawled up another step and lined up the sights with her center of mass.

“For justice. To protest the rape of my country, Tibet, by the Chinese. To protest what Zhao ... did to me. Rape was not enough. When I was pregnant with his child, with *his child*, he forced me to have an abortion. So I could compete again.”

The image sprang into my mind of Zhao grabbing Zin in an embrace, drawing her face up to his, unaware of the knife in her right hand that she would bury in the back of his neck. “Is that any reason to kill the rest of us?”

“It's not just Zhao. It's his whole country, the whole society. He dies, but China still becomes a partner in this glorious future of Laputa even if it has to sign by video. None of you care about justice, about the boots that stamp us down day after day after day.”

I sighed. I sympathized with all my heart, but not enough to let myself and all the rest of the passengers and crew be killed. Time to end this.

That is when I discovered that my gloved index finger could not fit inside the .32's small trigger guard.

\* \* \* \*

Here is what I think. Zin never intended to die, never seriously intended to kill all the rest of us. She'd had half an hour to work on the cable before I climbed up to her. She did nothing further while I talked to her. With Zhao's death, her main goal had been accomplished. I think she was waiting for me to come up and disarm her. That way she could live and become a *cause célèbre* at her trial. Her fans would rally to her cause, sympathizers would hear with horror about the security goon who had brutally prevented her martyrdom.

\* \* \* \*

Neither one of us had remembered about the other cable. Even though less than fifty yards away, it was effectively invisible.

*Far Horizon*, the car climbing it at four hundred miles an hour, was not invisible. There was no vibration in our cable, no buffeting wind as it flashed by. Just an image that in an instant appeared, seemed on a collision course, and disappeared above us.

In that same second, a million years of evolution took hold. Zin let go of the cable and flinched. She began to fall slowly down the upper surface of the car.

She might have been able to grab on to something. She was a trained athlete with excellent reflexes.

Miyamoto had been listening to our conversation. Despite his orders, he started the climbing engines. As the car began to move, it hit Zin and bounced her sideways, out into space.

She had no tether. In a little more than a minute, she was lost to sight.

Long afterwards, though, I could still hear her.

\* \* \* \*

The world was upside down. Looking up through the transparent ceiling of Laputa Station's great hall, I could see the Earth, a blazing sickle carving the night. Laputa's minuscule gravity, even combined with the small amount of centrifugal force that came with being just beyond geosynchronous orbit, barely kept my feet on the polished rock floor. Fetterman's and Ishakawa's people were laughing and congratulating themselves: Ishikawa's people wearing the long, loose suit coats thought to resemble samurai robes, Fetterman's with the string ties, silver and turquoise favored by their boss.

I pulled myself along the guide ropes to my room. Then I called Sphinx to make a full report.

"Our clients are pleased with the way you disposed of the issue. A trial would have been inconvenient and embarrassing for all. Even a nonclient has communicated his government's gratitude. Not only is their representative avenged, but they have a recording almost ninety minutes long with sobbing, then gasping as the air begins to run out, and finally screams as friction incinerates the murderer. They have sent it all over the internet, *pour encourager les autres*. Well done, Angelo."

"Except," I said carefully, "that I did nothing. Zin's fall was accidental."

"Of course, Angelo." Sphinx was almost purring. "I did not mean to impugn your professionalism. Around you, only accidents."

I stepped back into the hallway. At an elevated table at the far end of the hall, the signing ceremony had been completed. As Zin had foreseen, China had signed by video from Beijing. Now the various dignitaries, basking in the attention of reporters' cameras, were making their speeches. The words bounced off the stone walls.

"...a new age," the speaker said, "starting with a blank slate, free from the shadows of a dead past..."

Singh was suddenly beside me. "You knew," I said.

"I suspected. When they were leaving the dining area, his hand dropped to the base of her back and then slid lower. She stiffened, almost flinched away, but then pressed closer to his side. That told me all I



needed to know about the relationship. When I heard how he was murdered, I was almost sure she had done it. Even as my own daughter would have, were I not there to protect her.”

Applause echoed through the hall as the speaker finished. “Always the future,” Singh said. “Always the promise of a completely fresh start, as if we do not carry our sins with us. Faulkner knew better. The past is not dead. It is not even the past.”