

POLES APART

G. David Nordley is a retired air force officer and astronomical engineer who has become a frequent contributor to Analog in the last few years, winning that magazine's Analytical Laboratory readers' poll in 1992 for his story "Poles Apart"; he also won the same award for his story "Into the Miranda Rift" in 1993. He has also sold stories to Asimov's Science Fiction, Tomorrow, Mindsparks, and elsewhere. He lives in Sunnyvale, California.

Like Varley, Nordley is another writer who finds the solar system an exotic enough setting for adventures just as it is, as he's demonstrated with stories of exploration and conflict on a grand scale, such as "Into the Miranda Rift," "Crossing Chao Meng Fu," "Out of the Quiet Years," "Dawn Venus," "Comet Gypsies," "Alice's Asteroid," "The Day of Their Coming," "Messengers of Chaos," and others; many of these stories make effective use of the latest astronomical and space probe data, data that shows just how bizarre, complex, surprising, and mysterious a place our solar system really is, a far cry from the conception of the solar system as a dull collection of rock, ice, and cinders that was common in the seventies. He's also moved out of the solar system to the strange alien planet Trimus, a planet settled by three radically different alien races working in concert, for stories such as "Network," "Final Review," and the swashbuckling story of cultures and racial attitudes in conflict that follows, "Poles Apart," a story that owes much to the tradition of writers such as Hal Clement, James H. Schmitz, and H. Beam Piper, and yet which has been filtered through a wry, shrewd, hardheaded sensibility that's Nordley's alone.

Nordley has yet to publish a novel, although a fix-up of the "Trimus" stories shouldn't be that hard to produce. A story collection is also long overdue, although none is forthcoming. Until then, you'll just have to look for him in the magazines, where he will surely continue to deliver solid and suspenseful science fiction adventures, based in accurate science but with a strong Sense of Wonder kick, for years to come.

... to establish a single planetary society in which all three spacefaring races take equal part: to find and develop common standards of civilized behavior, which may serve as a model for galactic civilizations to come.

- Compact and Charter of the Planet Trimus, Preamble

The human ship, almost four Charter units long with a huge square cloth sail, was new to Lieutenant Drinnil'ib. What, he wondered, were primitivists doing this far north? He hailed the ship, but instead of a verbal response, his voice brought a scurrying of the small two-legged beings around its deck. Before he could repeat the hail, a sharp, explosive, report split the air and something with a singing line attached went "thwunk" into the sea beside him.

What in the name of the Compact? he thought. The line brushed over his nose and he stuck his tongue out to grab and examine it. The line came under tension, and he let it slide through his manipulators until the end came along.

Pollution! The thing was sharp. It nicked the muscular fingers on one fork of his tongue before he clamped down on the line with the other, forcing the humans to try to reel him in with it. That should slow things down a bit, he thought. He raised a front claw and wrapped the line around it to ease the

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thought. He raised a front claw and wrapped the line around it to ease the strain on his tongue. Then he held the object in front of his eyes. It was solid metal of some sort, and barbed: something that could have killed him if it had hit him in the wrong spot.

The thought and his reaction were almost simultaneous; he snapped his tail and bent his body downward. Not an eighth of a heartbeat later a tinny pop reached him through the water and another of the things zapped by. They were trying to kill him!

He let go, pulled a knife from his pouch, and slashed the line between the barbed missile and his foot. Then he swam first toward and then away from

the ship, holding the line with his foot, and felt a satisfying give in the line after it jerked taut. He had some momentary misgivings— humans were fragile and he might have hurt one. But perhaps not: the tension on the line resumed quickly. Another slash of the knife took care of that. Drinnil'ib shook the remains of the rope from his claw, dove beneath the ship, and kept pace just below its hull.

Reaching back to his pouch, he replaced the knife with his gun and contemplated the plank belly of the offending vessel. Two, he thought, could play perforation. It took ten explosive rounds to put a fair-sized hole in the hull; the layers of polluting timbers were a twelfth of a Charter unit thick. But

when he was finished, the ship was leaking so badly it would have to head for port too quickly to bother any other Do'utian.

Satisfied, he breached the surface immediately behind the ship, fired a shot in the air and roared a challenge: "I am planetary monitor Lieutenant Drinnil'ib and you have just assaulted me. What in the name of eternal repudiation do you think you are doing?"

Shouts sounded and sails rose. He grabbed the rudder of the ship with his front foot and wiggled it vigorously. Finally a face surrounded by reddish hair appeared over the railing on the rear of the boat.

"What in hell are you doing here,

Monitor?" it shouted at him. "This is primitive territory—you damn techs are supposed to leave us alone."

"Not when people start getting killed," Drinnil'ib replied in a more conversational tone. "You can play your games but you have to observe the limits."

"Don't screw around in what you techs can't understand," it yelled. "Just leave us alone!"

Drinnil'ib rocked the ship again. "You're going to sink right here if you don't acknowledge that you can't sail around shooting people wherever you are. It's against the Compact."

"All right, all right, I hear you. Shooting at you was a big mistake. But

next time, stay out of human whaling waters, Fish-man." The polluting idiot didn't seem to show a trace of remorse, however Drinnil'ib thought he might be misinterpreting their body language. Just to be sure they didn't misinterpret his, Drinnil'ib gave the harpoonists something very easy to understand: he emptied his lungs of moisture-filled air right at them, soaking the speaker and sails. Then he kicked the ship away in disgust and sounded. Ten Charter units deep Drin put the barb in an evidence wrap, exchanged his gun for his communicator, and filed his report. He'd just gotten an object lesson on how some of the killings might have happened, but he would need human help to get to the

bottom of it. A good excuse to look up an old colleague. With measured beats of his muscular tail, he headed for the northern reaches of the western continent.

As the tide-locked satellite of a superjovian infrared primary, Trimus has three symmetry axes: north-south, east-west, and inner-outer. This gives it three sets of geographic poles and three distinct climatic regions that allow for all three species to live in comfort. The arctic and antarctic match similar regions on Do'utia. The cool region surrounding the far pole matches the climate of the most populated areas of Kleth. The Earth-like near hemisphere is warmed both by Aurum and Ember, and

ranges from temperate near the east and west poles to tropical directly beneath Ember. Trimus's close orbit about Ember gives it an effective day which is about twice the day of the Kleth homeworld, one and a half times that of Earth, and three times that of Do'utia. For the last, however, what counts is the 407-day polar season cycle produced by the half-radian inclination of Trimus's orbit to the local ecliptic, and this is almost the same as on Do'utia.

— Planet Monitor's Handbook,
Introduction

The morning sun was a tiny red ball in the mists next to the great ruddy crescent of Ember, as Drinnil'ib propelled himself upstream toward the human city

with powerful tail strokes. The murders, he thought, struck at the purpose of Trimunian civilization by pitting one species against another. Trimus was supposed to be the galactic laboratory for peaceful interspecies cooperation. But Ember had circled Aurum eight-cubed times since its settlement, and only the collective memory of the Kleth and the mechanical memories of the Humans went back that far. Some, he knew, felt this purpose had faded along with the need for experiment; preempted by distances of time and space so great that the residents of Trimus no longer represented the cultures that sent them. If they ever had, he thought wryly. Beings who would leave their home worlds

forever to take part in an idealistic interstellar experiment may have had more in common with each other than with their various contemporaries.

But as far as Drin was concerned, the millennial-old civilization of Trimus had become its own reason for existence. Forget the rest of the galaxy and their occasional starships: to survive in peace with each other and their planet, its residents had to put the discipline of reason ahead of the natural inclination to group things by shape. To be a monitor was a calling, and he had no greater loyalty than to his world and its ideals, except, perhaps, to reason itself.

Headquarters said that Mary Pierce would be waiting for him at the marina

landing past the watchtower at the base of the main channel bar, wherever that was ... there! He caught the echo and eased himself to the right and into the deep cool channel. The harbor bottom was a backwater fairyland of human bubbles and Earth-life reefs, and the channel led through that like a wide black road. At its end, the cigar shapes of human submarines lay in a neat row, safe on the bottom from the winter ice. He put his legs down, released a bubble to settle himself firmly on the concrete, and with even measured strides hoisted his body into the warm air of the eastern continent. A tiny tailless being, much smaller than the arrogant, hairy-faced barbarian that had cursed him earlier,

waited for him at the end of the ramp, covered with a form-hugging cloth that Drinnil'ib knew was an even better insulator than his doci-thick blubber.

"Afternoon, Drin?" it called, the high pitch indicating it was a human female.

"Greetings," he rumbled and reached forward with one of the branches of his tongue to shake her hand. The familiar taste of the air around her put him at ease. "Mary? I'm sorry but it must be eight years since we last met. It's really good to see you again."

Now that he knew it was her, it was easy to pick out the subtle individual characteristics of her almost naked simian face and match them to his memory; the slight bend in the

cartilaginous growth that housed her nostrils, the upturned angle of the hair on the upper ridge of her eye sockets, and its yellow-white color framing her face. It was a clean face, unmarred by any unnatural growth or scar, and he knew other humans considered her beautiful. He would agree, judging from the esthetics of functionality, and also from the esthetics of the curve.

"You look pretty magnificent yourself, chum," she responded, but then shook her head. "I only wish the occasion was a happier one." He bobbed his massive head in the planetary convention of assent. "Five more dead, four Do'utian and one human."

"Butchered?"

"Neatly, intelligently, as last time, except the human. The sea left too little of him to tell. But this," he held up the barbed projectile, "may be at the bottom of it."

"Primitivist hunters?"

Drinnil'ib hooted. "Not primitive enough, it seems. This was propelled by chemical explosives."

There were always some from every species, from every generation, romantics who wanted to live in the reserved areas by their instincts without having to learn the science and culture that got their ancestors to Trimus. A disease of the character, he thought, which could not be eliminated without eliminating character itself.

"I am sorry, Drin," Mary said, "for what our children have done. They form communities, the communities evolve, get recruits, and no one seems to care. Some of those places haven't been visited in a century." Drin gave a sigh of toleration. "It is in your nature to hunt and in ours to endure the hazards of the sea. But without a trained intellect to guide, any race ..."

She shook her tiny head in negation. "Some things are wrong, and always have been. Everywhere for everyone. Killing is one. They know the Compact, that's a minimum for letting them go out there. So it's up to us to find which 'they' are responsible and take corrective action." She shrugged her shoulders and

spread her arms. "A policeman's lot is not a happy one." A quote he didn't recognize, but one that fit. Lieutenant Drin bobbed his head again.

"Oh, the duty can be interesting."

"Ha! Well, my sub's ready to go; we can leave any time," she said. "But I thought you might like to try Cragun's sushi before we head out." She bared the exquisite miniature ivory chisels of her teeth to him in a human gesture of good feeling. Was there, he wondered, some art in this reminder that both of them were occasional carnivores? He would have to ask her on the journey. Meanwhile, the sushi sounded most pleasant. He hoped they could find a cubic docu of their rice wine to go with

it. About one of their traditional

"gallons," if he recalled: "And a, um, gallon or two of, um, sake? To go with it?"

She laughed. "Just what I was thinking, Drin. Let's go." The "Charter unit" is identical to the Kleth "glide," precisely eight to the eighth times the wavelength of the strongest line of neutral sodium (also approximately the peak wavelength of Aurum's spectrum). This is about a traditional Do'utian "tail," once related to the length of the average Do'utian, or almost ten human "meters," once defined as $1/23,420$ ($1/10,000$, base 10) the distance from the equator of Earth to its north pole. The common

"doci" (from duo-octi) is 1/100 of this, about the size of the adult hand of any of the three races.

— Planet Monitor's Handbook,
Appendix C

Glensville, on the northing Graham River, was easily cool enough in winter to be a congenial tropical vacation spot. He just had to remember to move slowly to avoid building up too much body heat. Great banks of melting snow lined the road, and ice covered the dozen park lakes scattered among the stone and wood human hives. Cheerful humans sliding on long flat boards attached to their feet waved to him as he ambled down the main road with Mary. Cragun's was one of the few above-water taverns

on the eastern continent that was set up to serve Do'utians. There were two there when he arrived with Mary: the poet Shari'inadel and a large Do'utian man with fresh white scars on his flukes and a deep, raw crescent behind his blowhole. Those were unusual wounds for this area—the sort of wound that one got in a beak fight with another Do'utian. So, Drin thought, this Do'utian must be a primitivist of sorts—the kind that got his jollies on the southern beaches and came back every now and then to partake of the benefits of civilization.

The other turned its head, saw him, and hissed. Most impolite, and for what reason? Drin's lack of scars? His civilized bearing? His human

companion? But this was a human town!

"I do not know you," Drin stated formally. "I am Monitor Lieutenant Drinnil'ib and I ask respect."

"Gota'lannshk. The sea has been generous with you, pretty monitor. But don't press your luck, beachmeat." The voice was a slurring, low-pitched rumble. Drunk. Spoiling for a fight. Drin gave the other a sharp warning hiss, then turned away to ignore the reaction and cool his own rising irritation. He heard no response.

"You don't like him, do you?" Mary whispered.

"I've never met the man," Drin replied, beak shut, letting the words escape softly through the fleshy corner of

his mouth. "But what he is does not swim well in my thoughts. His companion is a poet, named Shari. I know the family—

she's their first egg in two centuries, and quite indulged. She could be just the sort of dissatisfied romantic that runs off for glandular adventures in the south, and then lives to regret it. I think she is being 'offered' a place in that ogre's harem."

"Her choice, isn't it?" Mary asked.

"Choice implies an intellectual process, but he's playing on her instincts. Look at that one, and do not judge human rustics so harshly. He appears to have engaged in mortal combat for the fun of it."

Mary coughed. "Drin, Cragen's has some giant squid fresh from the farm. I'll split it with you, 999 parts to you, 1 to me."

"Can you eat that much?" Drin rumbled. After his journey, a meal ashore would be welcome.

"Try me!"

"You're on." Drin made the order. "Someday I'd like to try this squid in its native ocean, though." A fantasy of his; when would he ever find time in his life for a round trip of ninety years?

"That's where you'd have to eat it. You're too fat to walk around on Earth." She had a point. Twice the gravity of Trimus would have disadvantages, and he had been gaining a bit lately. Well,

he'd swim that off on this trip.

"Maybe you underestimate me," he rumbled. Cragen's did not, however. The squid arrived— more than enough for even his appetite.

They talked strategy. The nearest concentration of humans who might know something lived on the islands near the warm inner pole. Whether or not these folk pinpointed the murderers, Drin made clear that he would need to talk to the Do'utian exiles near the south pole; to placate, to gather evidence, or both. Then would come the older human communities on the southern edge of the undeveloped West Continent.

"Cities of stone, ships of wood. Reports of warfare and slavery." Mary

shook her head. "At the very least, they need to be reminded of the Compact."

"That was certainly my experience," Drin agreed. A common civilization requires a common language, common measurements, and places where all three species can meet comfortably. Human English shall be the common language because it is the only language all three races can pronounce acceptably. Numbers and measurements shall be in the Kleth octal system, which is easiest to learn, is compatible with cybernetic binary systems, and is more widespread than human base ten or Do'utian base twelve. Common architecture will follow Do'utian proportions, so that Do'utians will not be

excluded from the social interaction needed for a common civilization.

— The Compact and Charter of Planet Trimus, Article 6

The journey to the inner pole archipelago left Drin fit and trim, and he enjoyed the taste of the exotic tropical fish. But to reach the island, they left the cold south-flowing bottom current and he felt like he was gliding through a hot bath. He looked forward to the south polar waters, and sent an almost joyful greeting to Mary when he caught the wake-sound of her submarine returning from her inquiries.

Nominally, the archipelago would have been reserved for Kleth primitivists, but they were very few and

needed little land, so warm-loving human refugees from technological civilization had gradually spread among the islands. Here, near the inner pole, the infrared radiation from Ember came in almost directly overhead, almost doubling the distant orange sun's modest daily contribution. The more or less permanent high-pressure system kept skies clear unless the night fog rolled in. But it was clear tonight, and the gibbous, pink-belted almost-star dominated the zenith.

"Were there any witnesses?" Drin asked as Mary came alongside. She was lounging on the deck behind the submarine's pilot house, and the last rays of setting Aurum painted her a rich gold.

She had no need for her insulating garment, and he watched muscles play under her thin epidermis as she got up to greet him. A strange shape, yet one that fit its owner as well as any in nature.

"No witnesses— not really that many people around. I found one man who heard about some whalers and got him to tell me he's seen them even in tropical waters. Says they're operating out of a city on a half-flooded volcanic island off the southern edge of the West Continent reserve. I checked the recon and there is some sort of primitive city there. Hasn't been visited by monitors for years."

"Were the people forthcoming?"

She shook her head. "There aren't many people here, and those who are

here act frightened. I had to offer, well, an incentive to the only person who admitted knowing anything."

"I'm surprised the area isn't more heavily populated. This must be close to the original human climate, you don't seem to need artificial insulation here."

"No, we don't. And it does feel good!" She shook herself and her flesh rippled in a way that reminded him of a jellyfish, but much faster. "But it's enervating. Most people's minds need more stimulation from their environment. The people who live here don't even ask to replace the occasional death—

children are too much work. They just live for pleasure." Ages ago, Drin remembered, humans had arranged their

genes to be infertile without deliberate medical intervention as a population-control measure to go along with anti-aging measures. The idea of being constantly driven to act out the reproduction process horrified him, but humans apparently enjoyed it. Of course it wasn't as messy with them.

Mary shook herself again. "Cooling off now, though. Time to kiss lotus land good-bye."

She waved and vanished down the submarine's hatch. They sounded together and slanted west toward the cold current and their joint adventure. Half a day later his dorsal ganglia were running things while he was deep in thought about just how primitive things

could get. He understood much of the attraction of the undeveloped areas. All space-faring people were descendants of those for whom the unbuilt beach and the untrod planet exerted an irresistible call. But his last trip had been eye-opening in other ways. He had little basis for comparing what he'd seen to the depth of cultural degeneration Mary said she had experienced on her hothouse island, but all the same, he shuddered to think of what she would find on the shores of the south polar continent. At least humans without machines could still construct buildings. Ancient Do'utian women had mated and calved on the open beach. Without shelter, their retrogressing descendents would have no choice but to

do the same. Despite himself, a shudder of prurient interest ran from his chest through his tail at the thought of beaches of nubile young mothers, blatantly receptive in the free air.

"Lieutenant Drin?" Daydreaming! How long had Mary been calling him?

With the flick of the tail, he glided over to the submarine and brought his right eye up to the center of the diamond hull. Its electric drive fields made him tingle as they pushed seawater toward its tail.

"Lost in thought, I'm afraid. What do you have?" Mary was back in her artificial skin and all business. "Here's the recon on that primitive city." A relief map appeared on the holoscreen next to

her. The flooded caldera surrounded a lagoon on three sides, and the forth appeared to be filled in by a simple stone dike. Large and small masonry buildings lined the shore of the lagoon.

"Mary, I think the cold current must flow by there, see the trench to the south?"

"Yes. Good eating?"

"It should be, and if so, we should find some Do'utian primitives nearby. I suggest we stay with the plan, head south first and gain what intelligence we can from the victim population before confronting this set of potential perpetrators.... Mary?"

"Yes, Drin?"

"In our early days, there were tests for

reproductive rights. Death swims and beach fights. Bloodlust beyond reason. These occasional hunting deaths seem, in a way, like some of those old tests. I fear I will not be proud of how some of the Do'utian back-to-nature crowd might be living."

"Do you fear more than embarrassment?"

Yes, he needed to say. Yes I fear my own primitive instincts. So why did he hesitate to tell her? Mary was a friend and colleague, and any infirmity on his part could affect the mission.

"Mary ... we have never needed to revise our mating instincts. In our cities, with the privacy of our rooms, there is no need. In fact, we must make an effort

to replace those of our colony who are lost by accident— an embarrassing and very private effort for both beings concerned. But with everything out in the open ... I'm not sure how I will—" Peals of musical laughter twinkled like bells from the hull of her ship, for so long that Drin became concerned for her health. Finally, she pressed herself to the transparent hull.

"Drin, my friend ... look, don't tell what I'm going to tell you to any other human, especially the other monitors, OK?"

"My word on it," Drin said, curiosity clawing at him.

"Well," she laughed, "in order to be accepted and get information I kind of

went native. I allowed— hell, Drin, I enticed— my source to perform our mating act with me. I mean I was all there, and he was all there, and it just felt like the natural thing to do. In the line of duty, I told myself." Drin swam in silence for a while thinking that to say the wrong thing would be harmful to his friend. But he soon realized that to say nothing at all could seem even worse. He reviewed what he knew of human mating. "Was this person physically suitable?"

This occasioned more laughter. "He was. Oh, yes. Exceedingly so."

"And you left this pleasure to return to your duty with me? I find this very admirable and hope, to the extent that we

can compare our temptations, that I shall be able to exhibit similar moral strength."

"Moral strength? Drin, you are a forked-tongued devil." After a moment, he realized this was a compliment. He gently pressed a shoulder to the window so that only the eighth of a doci or so of diamond hull separated their bodies. He easily felt the warmth of her flesh through this transparent, uninsulated section. This communication of friendship had no intellectual hazards.

But his mind returned to duty. "Perhaps," he rumbled after a while, "we should ask the Kleth Monitors for backup in case we find we need eyes overheard when we visit this city. I

know a certain Officer Do Tor who has a sense of humor and does not dump everything into their racial memory."

"Perhaps," Mary laughed again. "I think I met him when the last starship visited, six years ago. Gold wings, silver crest? Flighty little yellow thing under his claw?"

"The very one."

"Why not? The more the merrier."

Following planetary engineering, only the north, east, and outer poles will be intensively settled. The remainder of the planet will be reserved for biological study and kept free of large settlements or significant technological effluents. The primary objective will be to observe how the three merged

ecosystems evolve from their original design point. Low-intensity visitation, consistent with these objectives, may be tolerated by those who wish to experience life in the wild.

— The Compact and Charter of Planet Trimus, Article 12

"I have never seen such a cold, desolate wasteland of rocks in my life," Mary remarked as they approached an outrageously voluptuous antarctic beach. A fish for every taste, Drin thought.

She had parked the submarine and rode on his neck toward the shoreline, her warm thighs smooth against his sandy outer skin. The idea that she often had eggs, of a sort, waiting in a part of her body so near to him gave him

ridiculous and perverted thoughts— thoughts that unwontedly stimulated certain secretory organs below the tips of his fingers. Some, he had heard, had experimented with interspecies stimulation and considered it a form of art. Thank providence, he thought, that such thoughts on his part could remain private. But if Mary ever said that she wanted ... No, no. Consign that idea to the abyss. Too much chance of giving offense.

It didn't help at all, as they neared the beach, that he could see at least four unabashedly pregnant young Do'utian women lolling thick-necked on the smooth pebbles in the sun. The beachmaster was nowhere to be seen, a

circumstance that ran his biological thermometer well past its set point. He wondered if Mary understood how hard this would be for him?

"That beach is an indolent paradise for us, I'm afraid. I'd much rather talk to the head man than that naked harem, but he's left them unprotected. This isn't good. Uh, Mary, if they become aggressive with me, it might be best if I just let nature ..."

She patted the top of his head, firmly enough for him to notice.

"I'll never say a thing. Promise." She put her arms around his neck, as far as they would go, and pressed the soft parts of her body against the back of his head, laughing. It was not at all unpleasant.

Then, suddenly, she stopped.

"Drin," she spoke quickly, "to your left. What is that in the— DRIN!" Instantly, he rolled his eyes around and slipped his tongue into his pouch, triggering his sonar with one manipulator and grabbing his weapon with the other. Then he saw, and knew instantly that it was too late to do anything. A tall pole, perhaps half a Charter unit high, supported a white pennant at its end, snapping in the offshore breeze. The other end was firmly buried in the side of the corpse of a Do'utian man, bloated, floating in the swell. He shuddered as the wind shifted and brought the scent of death to him.

"Are you OK?" asked Mary.

"Yes. But I would prefer to approach this upwind. How are you?" She was a trained monitor, and, he hoped, not as affected due to the difference in species. Fortunately for him, the wind shifted again.

"I'm fine. Look, why don't I check out the victim and the murder weapon while you interview?"

It made sense, but he was hoping for her presence to bolster his resolve not to be swept away by instinct on the beach. He belched in self-disgust; was he not master of himself?

"Very well, Mary. I'll take you over to it, I need to get closer anyway. I suspect the victim was the beachmaster here, and if so, these women have been widowed.

I should be able to tell from his scent—he will have marked them. Widowing can be a very painful death sentence in primitive circumstances; an unbirthed egg turns poisonous in a month or so."

"So my human primitives kill five Do'utians with one harpoon?"

"Mary, they are not your primitives," he rumbled. "Don't take so much on yourself. It's not very professional." He extended his tongue behind him and placed manipulators on both her shoulders. "Besides, there are no reports of harems dying because of the other murders." The thought struck him: why not?

"We don't know the whole story," he finished. No, indeed. He felt her five

thin bony fingers cover his three thick muscular ones. She grasped tightly, and he could feel some warmth, though not taste her skin, through her water suit. He could not fathom what feelings ran through that alien mind nor what awful images from her past this fresh corpse might conjure. But he could recognize sadness in her, and try to give sympathy. His own feelings were proving harder to manage. There was a primal urge in his species to avoid their dead, and thus, the evolutionists believed, avoid whatever circumstances might have led to death. Then there was what waited for him on the beach. He shuddered.

"I can tell you'd rather not go any closer, Drin." A splash surprised him,

and Mary swam in front of his left eye. Humans, in general, were clumsy in the water. But they were fearless and some like Mary were competent, if slow.

"I'll take it from here. Looks like about as far to the corpse as to the beach. No problem; I'll just swim in when I'm done, or I'll buzz for you if I need backup. OK?"

He rumbled an assent, she bared her teeth to him, flipped and started pulling herself through the water toward the victim, climbing through the waves with steady pulls of her front limbs. The wonder, he reflected, was not that his simian friends were slow in the water, but that they could swim at all, and even appear graceful, in their own way, while

doing so.

"I'll be expecting you. Take care," he called after her. Then, with mixed feelings, he sent himself toward the beach.

The approach was not the simple landing of a human boat ramp. Jagged rocks were all over. The beachmaster had chosen well: an adult Do'utian needed care to reach the shore. Drin exhaled and settled firmly on the bottom to ignore the random swells. Legs extended, he picked his way carefully along, a Charter unit below the surface, while holding his sonar transceiver high over his head, hearing the image it received through his earphones. There! A sandy path opened through the rocks.

He followed it. It zigzagged to an open gravelly area under the breakers that seemed safe enough, but he chose to pick his way through the smooth stones along its side just in case. Carefully, he emerged onto the beach.

The women crowded together as soon as they saw him. Very well, he'd take it slowly.

First though, he traced his route with a sharp tongue tip on his comset's screen and sent the resulting image to Mary. While she could float over larger outlying rocks that would disembowel him, there seemed to be only one place where the breakers might not dash her to pieces. He also sent a brief report to Monitor Central and inquired about the

status of his request for Kleth support. Scheduled, they told him.

Chores done, he returned his attention to the widowed harem. Widowed because they had been very clearly scented by the dead beachmaster, and the deceased's neobarbarism seemed to have extended to marking them physically as well as with his scent—some of the scars were still unhealed.

A medical team would be needed. While, contrary to his initial assessment, only two of them were gravid; with the beachmaster gone they would both be needing egg relief soon. Also, all four were clearly undernourished. He filed a quick report for Do Tor on his comm unit, then walked forward to them

slowly, mouth politely open, tongue and manipulators spread to signal peaceful intent. Still, they cowered. They were young, very young, despite scars and abrasions on their hides that most of his people wouldn't acquire in eight times eight times eight years, and would probably remove if they did.

"I'm Lieutenant Drinnil'ib from the Monitors. I don't mean any harm," he said.

"I'd just like you to answer some questions." It must be the smell of the beachmaster's death that frightened them into silence. He had come close enough to carry some of it, and they probably thought he was responsible.

They keened and backed away as he

approached. But a cliff surrounded the beach, and soon they could back up no farther.

If they could smell the death, then there was no reason to try to keep it a secret. He was hoping to avoid the legendary consequences. Nonsense, he told himself. These must be at least semi-educated people, living in primitive conditions by choice.

"I'm sorry to have to bring you this news. I've come from the North Pole colony investigating the reported deaths of several people in this back-to-nature area. I'm afraid I have one more to investigate. By what I smell, the latest victim was your husband. I'm sorry. I assure you I had nothing to do with his

death before the fact." Lieutenant Drinnil'ib reached into his pouch and produced his badge, a holoprint two docis on edge—big enough for them to see easily. It gave off his scent as well. The smallest of the harem, with deep black scars on her forelimbs, finally walked forward, then lowered herself to her belly in supplication.

"No," he protested. "I don't want you to do that. Stand up! Speak to me, please."

She keened again, then opened her mouth wide. It took him a few heartbeats to register what he saw, and then a few more for the horror of it to sink in. Where the two branches of her tongue should have been, where the

manipulators that signified their species' rise from the beach should have curled, was nothing but a blackened stump, so short it would be useless for feeding or speaking.

He quickly pulled in his own tongue and lowered his belly to the gravel, to be on her level. Then he gently touched his beak to hers in sympathy. She shut her eyes and lowered her beak in sadness, and he did the same. When he looked up again, the other three had joined them. The gravid ones were looking at him expectantly. Oh-oh.

"Look," he explained, "I'm not part of your culture. I'm a Monitor. This is strictly a professional visit." Their eyes showed no comprehension, and their

bodies began to sway back and forth on their legs. They came closer, swaying and keening. The first female kept nuzzling him. He tried to back away, but froze.

From then on, he noted his body's response with what was almost detachment. Body temperature up. A tightness at the base of his tail. He wanted to keep his mouth shut to avoid tasting whatever chemicals they were putting out, but a groan worked its way out from deep inside him, his beak yawned open involuntarily as reason left his brain. The women were beside him, keening, holding him between their bodies, their beaks locked wide open, pressing his most private areas. The

need to give overwhelmed him. He let his tongue caress their tails, almost as if it were someone else's.

He never saw the eggs emerge from their throats, but rather felt the smooth bumps against his underside, an emptying feeling in the base of his tail, and a slight coolness in that area as his consciousness slowly faded back in. Afterward, of course, he remembered everything with the humiliating clarity of a terapixel hologram. Especially when he looked back at two white eggs covered with sticky yellow goo. And especially when he looked up and saw little Mary Pierce standing about eight Charter units away, mouth open in what must have been a look of horror.

Setting aside his embarrassment and disgust, he tried to remember what needed to be done. Back home, in a hospital, the eggs would be sprayed clean and anointed with all sorts of healthy fluids, wrapped in germicidal barriers, and placed in an incubator. The nearest thing to an incubator they had here was a Do'utian pouch. His was full of other things, but the women had pouches, too. It was then that he realized that since none of the women had tongues, he would have to place the eggs in their pouches himself. He shut his eyes, moaned, and buried his beak in the sand again. He couldn't do this.

"It's OK," he heard Mary say. "I'm afraid I don't remember what the

handbook says about Do'utian midwifery, but if there's anything I can do, just tell me."

He lifted his head up. "The handbook doesn't say anything. It's supposed to be too private. But ... but the eggs need to be cleaned off and placed in the women's pouches. They can't do it themselves because their former husband disabled them. I'm ... I'm afraid I'm not up to it."

"No problem, buddy. I think they accept me. Must be your scent all over me. Is it OK if I wash the eggs in the sea?"

"Yes, I think so."

She did this quickly and efficiently, taking each egg in turn, cradling and

talking to it as if it was a fresh-born human. Drin refrained from telling her that there would be nothing inside the eggs to hear her for eight-squared days. Done with the washing, Mary took the smaller egg and approached one of the formerly gravid women, who looked accusingly at Drin and backed away. Then a strange thing happened. The smaller Do'utian woman quickly moved in front of Mary and offered her own pouch.

When that member of the harem had accepted both eggs, she came over to Drin and slowly scratched the sand with her beak. It soon became clear that she was writing. When she backed away, Drin could read, fairly clearly. "I

GRI'IL."

"You can understand me?" Drin asked, wonderingly. Obviously, she could not speak.

She nodded.

"Your name is Gri'il?"

She nodded again.

"Do you want to leave?"

Gri'il did nothing, then nodded slowly, followed by a vigorous head shake. Something wrong.

"Will you follow me back to the North Pole? To civilization?" She was still a very long time. Then she began painfully scratching the gravel again. What she wrote was "DANGR HUNTRS."

Mary saw this, went up to Gri'il, wrapped herself around the Do'utian

woman's foreleg, and began her own type of keening. Soon, they had all joined in.

"I'm going to get some fish for everyone," Drin said to no one in particular, and trotted back to the shore. The mutilated Do'utian's were ill nourished and couldn't feed themselves. Besides, he needed something to do alone. Away from all women of whatever species.

Individuals who wish to visit or reside in the wild regions, alone or in small groups, may do so without interference so long as they respect the rights of others and do not significantly disturb the environment. Introduction of chemical industry is specifically

prohibited. Alternative societies are permitted so long as the individuals who join such societies are free to leave such when they wish. Do not interfere with suicide, or risk-taking that amounts to such. However, murder will be treated no differently than in the civilized areas.

— Planet Monitor's Handbook

Law In Reserved Areas

"Gri, Ohghli, Donota, Notri, do I have it right?" Mary asked. Human memories, Drin thought, were amazingly poor considering their technological prowess — on the other hand, perhaps necessity had made them superlative inventors. Drin rocked her submarine by putting a little extra into his next propulsive tail-stroke. "Your memory is either much

worse than I think or you find a certain humor in my situation. I think I would rather not have my thoughts in that current so often."

"My apologies." The comset relayed the drop of pitch in her voice that Drin associated with increasing concern. "But they're your wives now, aren't they?"

"No! I have made no commitment. There is no registration. Except for Gri'il, none of them seems to have any intellectual understanding of their lives, or that of the broader race. None of them is a suitable mate."

"I'd guess it will be hard for them to understand that," Mary suggested, more right than she could know.

"Very hard. I approached them under

circumstances that make biological bonding almost inevitable in nature. And Gri'il took the eggs...."

"She seems the responsible type, and educated somehow."

"She will have a tale to tell. I suspect she is a truant who dove into the back-to-nature business just a little deeper than her inherent depth. The others, I think, must have been born here. They seem virtually feral."

"What will happen to them?"

"I think Gri'il will return to civilization, sadder but wiser. The feral women

... I don't know. The experts will have to decide— they may be happier as they are."

"Mutilated?"

"No, we'll fix that. But, they may be unable to adapt to civilization now. I cannot know their minds, or even if they have developed what you and I would recognize as a mind."

"That's heartless," Mary accused. "They love you."

"You don't understand the biology. I think our conversation should find different currents now."

But it didn't. Mary's attempt at matchmaking left him in no mood for conversation at all. There was silence instead, a silence that should have been filled with plans as they approached the primitivist human settlement. It was shockingly big, even by his standards.

Primitivism in humans, Drin realized at the sight, didn't really mean living without technology. It meant living with a technology so primitive that it could be sustained without any meaningful education at the expense of ceaseless, boring labor; a technology of hand-hewn planks, poles, and rough-cut stones in huge piles, piles made all the larger by beings who evolved with twice the local gravity. The entrance to their harbor had been choked down to a canal by massive stone walls and guarded by massive wooden gates. The stream that issued from this was putrid. Drin turned away.

"Pollution! Mary, I think I would prefer to walk in."

"Understood. There must be two

thousand people in this place, and that's the only outlet. The air isn't a whole lot better— lots of smoke. It's a couple of degrees over freezing; cool enough for you?"

"A nice balmy day."

"Why don't you try riding on top of the sub? You'll have to keep your tail off the rear electrodes."

Drin released a bubble of humor; the idea of him riding on a human submarine was indeed bizarre. But the water stunk like rotting carrion. "If you can steer without your forward fins, I could hang onto those with my forelegs. Then my tail wouldn't reach the electrodes."

"The sub says that's no problem. Climb aboard." He swam into position,

curled his front toes around the rounded edge of the flexidiamond fins and released some buoyancy gas to hold himself down. The submarine rose under him and broke the surface. The air stank as advertised, but only when he opened his mouth.

Soon Mary climbed out of the nose hatch to join him. She'd put her monitor uniform jumpsuit on over her insulated tights and looked academy sharp. Remembering that humans relied almost exclusively on visual identification, he pulled his monitor badges out of his pouch and stuck them on his front shoulders.

In front of them across the harbor entrance lay the top of the harbor wall,

with an opening just a little wider than the submarine, the massive wooden gate was solid above water and dwarfed even Drin. It was guarded by heavysset humans in thick-belted robes around which were buckled long, heavy, cutting tools; called swords, if he remembered correctly.

"Open the gate," Mary yelled. The men did nothing. Drin tapped her on the shoulder with his tongue to warn her, and she covered her ears. He took a large breath.

"PLANET MONITORS. OPEN THE GATE!" Drin yelled, two octaves lower than Mary, pouring air from his bladder as well as his lungs. The human guardhouse resonated nicely with his

undertones and a satisfying crash emerged from its open door. Various stones and pieces of rotten mortar came clattering down the sides of the wall. One of the men extended his hands, palms out as if to plead for patience, while the other dipped into the now-steady guardhouse and emerged with a pair of colored flags. He faced the harbor and started waving them in various incomprehensible patterns.

Soon, they heard a screeching and groaning of hidden wheels and levers as the left gate swung ponderously open. From aerial holos, Drin knew the breakwater was eight squared Charter units thick, but even so, the narrow canyon revealed by the opening gate

made him shudder a bit. He slipped a branch of his tongue out the corner of his mouth into his pouch, and wrapped its fingers around his weapon. When the noises stopped, the submarine nosed through the half-opened gate. It had only a few doci's of clearance on either side, but it maintained this clearance with mathematical precision as it moved smartly into the channel.

About halfway through, a red-robed human man jumped onto the hull from a ladder just inside the gate, landing without stumbling despite the vessel's speed. He looked at Drin, then at Mary, apparently unsure of whom was in charge; the male Do'utian or the female human.

"Who are you?" Drin rumbled. The man shook and looked around, as if for somewhere to jump, and finding nowhere, finally faced Drin.

"Yohin Bretz a Landend. I'm ... I'm your harbor pilot. We've got to go to city gate. Lord Thet will talk to you there."

"Yohin Bretz a Landend," Mary said, "I'm Mary Pierce from the monitor bureau. This is Lieutenant Drinnil'ib, my colleague. This is my boat; Lieutenant Drin doesn't need one. We are here to investigate the deaths of several Do'utian primitivists in this region."

"Huh? Whalers playing games with the fish-people, I'd guess." Bretz looked down at the submarine. "What do you draw?"

"Draw?" Mary clearly didn't recognize the term. Drin did, from his readings in human nautical literature, but kept silent so as not to embarrass his partner.

"Yeah, draw. How far down is the bottom of this thing?"

"About a third of a Charter unit," she answered.

"What's that in meters?" A human chauvinist, Drin thought.

"It's a little over three of the old meters."

"Uh-huh. So the keel's about twice your height below the waterline?"

"Yes."

The pilot shook his head. "You'd displace thirty ton less without the fish-

man on board, I'd guess, and ride a meter higher. Well, no problem, the channel's deep enough, but you'll have to stay in it. You've got to go hard aport as soon as you're out of the dike canal and steer for the big stone mill you'll see on the shore. Bear a bit to the port of it to lead the current, if I were you."

Drin rumbled a bit, and Mary smiled, recognizing his laugh. The submarine could follow the channel on sonar or with blue light without any help from the pilot.

"We'll do just fine," Mary said, "thank you. Now you can call me Mary, what can I call you?"

"Yohin, or Mr. Bretz to be polite."

They emerged into the harbor, a

roughly circular body of fetid water. The air was thick with the smell of fish and dark with wood smoke. Now and then a flake of white ash would fall on them. Rough wooden human buildings lined the shore except for the far end. There, across the middling stream that struggled to flush the place, was a large stone wall, more vertical and smoothly finished than the dike across the harbor entrance.

Against this dock were tied wooden ships including several small round vessels not much longer than Drin himself, set with triangular sails, and a massive square-sailed ship—perhaps ten Charter units long. The last also had a strange, forward-projecting bow and

two rows of oars with which it could presumably maneuver without wind.

"Hey, we're in the harbor!" Yohin shouted. "Don't you have to do something to turn this boat? How the ...?" His eyes went wide as the submarine turned to the channel without Mary doing anything. Drin rumbled again.

"Tell me, Mr. Bretz," Mary laughed, "are you happy here?"

"It puts bread on the table. Feeds me and my wife, gets me some respect. Even got a couple of slaves. I've been doing it 150 years. Yeah, I'm happy. Don't need any fancy stuff."

"Slaves?" Mary asked. "You have slaves?"

"Sure," Yohin said. "Someone's got to

do the work while I'm out piloting. Be a shame if my wife had to, and I'm too tired after a day of this."

"Are the slaves happy?"

"I feed 'em well. They don't know anything else, so why shouldn't they be?" Drin hissed. This manifestation of disgust, he realized, was wasted on this human pilot. "Do your slaves want to be slaves?" he asked. Yohin turned to him in surprise.

"They were captured fair and square. They know the game. What business is it of yours, Mister, excuse me, Lieutenant fish-man?"

"The primitive lifestyle is supposed to be voluntary. No one should be compelled to live like this."

"Look, I didn't set this up. But if you come after my slaves, you got an argument with me. Maybe from them, too. What would you do with them? Send them to some machine school so they can contemplate their navels for the rest of eternity? They're better off working for me."

"Now, lady," the pilot waved his hand at the other side of the harbor, "you've got to turn this tub sharp starboard and make dead on for the flagpole on the end of the fort ... however you do it."

The submarine turned as if to the pilot's command, and he nodded judiciously.

"Never knew a woman could run a boat. But you do OK."

"I've got a lot of help," Mary said. "Yohin, I can imagine you doing this in one of those sailing ships with the wind blowing, using only your judgment and what you can see from the surface. I respect the skill you need to do that." The pilot nodded his head and bared his teeth again. Mary, Drin realized, was gaining trust.

This human, Drin thought, had found whatever Gri'il had been seeking when she left civilization for the beach. The question was whether the failures should be allowed with the successes, particularly if the failures were involuntary.

"You said something about the whalers playing games with the

Do'utians. What kind of games?"

"I heard there's a deal where the fishmen try to outfox the whalers. Them that lose are meat, but word is that's how they want it." Drin rumbled his skepticism.

"Who sets up these games?" Mary asked.

"How the hell should I know? Maybe Lord Thet does. You can ask him, we're almost there."

The submarine's hull was well below the level of the dock, due in part to Drin's massive presence. From sea level, he couldn't see the rest of the top of the dock. The angle got worse as they fetched up next to the stones. Carefully, using the wall as an additional point of

balance, he swung his tail over the side and reared up on his hind legs, hooked the rippled pads of his front toes over the edge of the stone wall, bringing his head above dock level.

The man waiting for them on the dock by the city gate was probably Lord Thet. He was a head taller than Mary, gray-robed, and had thick black hair all over his face so that only the eyes and the nostril wattle showed when his mouth was shut. His robe covered either armor or what would, for a human, be an exceptionally large body. Others of his kind, holding metal-tipped spears, stood beside him. Perhaps fifty humans carrying some sort of primitive wood and cord weapons stood well back of

the primitivist leader. Mary was able to scramble up his back and jump from his shoulder to the stone platform. Undignified, but it got the job done. There was a fair amount of wind and harbor noise, but Mary left her comset on her belt, where it could see and record everything. Drin listened through his earphone.

"Hello, I'm Mary Pierce, Planetary Monitor."

"You are not wanted here," Lord Thet stated— with aggressive impoliteness, Drin thought.

"Your name?" Mary asked.

The man remained silent, but the comset camera got a good look at him and the Monitor net quietly relayed the

information through their earphones. He'd left civilization early in life and, despite his commanding presence, was largely ignorant of things beyond what he controlled.

"You are Jacob Lebbretzky, otherwise known as 'Lord Thet' according to your voice and features. I'll be gone fairly quickly if you answer my questions," she told him.

"Don't overestimate your authority, Monitor. Your superiors are not that interested in us and your charter is open to interpretation." Wishful thinking on his part, Drin felt— while the Monitors would bend over backward not to be overbearing, there was no question about the final outcome. But only he and

Mary were here right now, things were nowhere near final, and if this egomaniac idiot had talked himself into believing he could get away with minor violence ... or if someone else had talked him into believing ... Drin spoke quickly with his beak shut so that only Mary could hear him on her earphone. "Mary, this fool could be dangerous. He's gotten so big he's forgotten what's backing us up."

She raised a hand to acknowledge him, but continued to face Lord Thet.

"Someone's killed at least four Do'utian primitivists," she told him.

"Have the fish-men accused us?"

"We found the bodies."

"Death happens. Only the untested

live forever." An ancient Do'utian philosophy, Drin thought. Why was he hearing it from an ignorant human primitivist? Do'utians did not die of old age, but reproduced slowly enough that in the natural state, mating battles, disease, and accidents of the hostile sea were enough to maintain a population balance. But humans had eliminated aging and limited fertility with genetic engineering in historic times.

"You hunt them, don't you?" Mary pressed. "Your people hunt them in ships, as if they were animals."

Lebbretzsky was silent for a heartbeat or so, then said, "The contest is more even than that. There is no opportunity for heroism on either side without the

opportunity for death. And the deaths let us raise new children uncontaminated by your machine culture."

This made Drin hiss as he thought of the stinking harbor, the human slaves, and the feral Do'utian women in his "harem." The sound got the momentary attention of the human, who probably had no idea of what it signified.

"Mr. Lebbretzsky," Mary responded, "I take your statement to mean that you know what I'm talking about. It has to stop, and the persons responsible must be reeducated. If you attempt to conceal them, then you will be a candidate for reeducation yourself."

Drin saw the man raise his arm as if to strike Mary, then put it down.

Lebbretzsky, Drin realized, might be so ignorant and so deeply into these murders that he felt he had nothing to lose in an attack on a Monitor. Drin slipped a manipulator into his pouch holster for the second time. The movement of his tongue seemed to go unnoticed, or at least uncomprehended.

"Woman. Tell your superiors that your presence is an insult. Tell them that their interference with our culture is an interference of our rights to live and die the way we want. Tell them that we have not murdered anyone, and that the next time they want questions answered, not to send women and fish to ask them."

"Pollution!" Drin sent. "The victims were stabbed and butchered! But be

careful, Mary."

The man continued: "There are no murders, woman Monitor. Now get out of here, or we will do what we can to eject you. You may have better weapons, but we are not afraid to die."

"Drin, better call that Kleth backup," Mary said aloud. Drin almost rejoined that he had done that hours ago— then realized that Mary was saying that for Lebbretzsky's benefit.

"Lebbretzsky," she continued, "I don't care what you think it is; attacking and killing Do'utians with harpoons is murder just as much as if you did it to me. The cultural group can deal with the whys later, but my job is to stop it, now. Who has been doing it? Where are

they?"

Drin tensed. Mary, in her fearless eagerness to erase what she saw as a blot on her race, was pushing a bull on its own beach. Wrong species, but in this case, Drin feared some convergent evolution. As if to confirm his thoughts, the big human drew a long knife. Mary backed quickly away from him and got her gun out. Drin put a manipulator in his pouch and keyed his comset by feel. He dumped everything they had so far into the Monitor net— just in case he and Mary didn't survive her abuse of Lord Thet's hospitality.

"All right," Mary yelled. "Lebbretzsky, drop the weapon and lie down. You are in custody. You can

arrange representation after you've been secured."

"Mary ..." Drin sent. Too late. Lebbretzsky's hand seemed to flick and the knife flew at Mary. Her gun got it on doppler, flashed, and a smart bullet locked on the thing and knocked it out of the air. The two humans stared at each other in silence for a few seconds as if in a momentary stalemate. But here and now Lebbretzsky had overwhelming numbers. He made some kind of a signal and a hundred darts flew at Mary, some at Drin. He and Mary both fired as fast as their weapons could, but Mary was hit.

"Got my leg," she said with professional calmness. "Drin, let's get

out of here."

Drin roared and with the occasional supreme effort his race could summon, pulled himself over the edge of the dock and scrambled toward Mary. The human archers paused in surprise and he flung his tongue out to his injured partner. He was just able to grab her leg with one manipulator and was pulling her to him when the primitivists started shooting again. He reeled Mary in with one manipulator while the other sent smart bullets at the legs of the crossbow archers.

Mary, a small moving target, wasn't hit again. But despite both their guns knocking dozens of darts off their trajectories, he was hit himself. The

darts irritated like the spines of the giant dagger snail, but none seemed to reach below his layer of fat, and none had hit his eyes.

Some of the men with swords charged at him. He waited until they were too close, then quickly turned and swept the polluting snailbrains over the side of the dock with his tail. Then, with Mary firmly in his beak, he leapt into the harbor after them.

"Hold your breath," he said on the way down. He landed so as to spray as much water around as possible.

Momentarily sheltered by confusion and the high wall, he had time to help Mary into the submarine hatch. Then, thinking of the large harpoon he'd seen in

the erstwhile beachmaster, Drin headed, fast and direct, for the harbor entrance. He sprinted through the harbor with a surface-racing tail-stroke, and used his legs to help him over the shallow spots. This time, he didn't even notice the dirty water.

A look back told him the human primitivists were busy with their colored flags again, and when he ducked under water he could hear the sound of the harbor gate creaking shut. Another look above water showed him that the large ship with oars was underway and pursuing them.

He reached the canal through the harbor wall well before the submarine, and sped to its end. But the massive gate

was already closed and locked. He put his beak against it and pressed as hard as he could, and the thrusts of his tail sent waves of brackish brown water back down the channel. The gates hardly noticed.

He surfaced and scouted the channel walls. They were not quite vertical, perhaps widening half a Charter unit over two Charter units of rise, and the cobbled surface provided plenty of claw holds. It would not be out of the question to attempt to climb it.

But first he tried bellowing at the watchmen to open the gate. Not to his surprise, they refused. He did, however, have the satisfaction of seeing their little guardhouse collapse from resonance.

Looking back, he saw the submarine enter the channel with the oar ship in hot pursuit.

"Mary, what's your status?" he sent.

"I got the dart out, patched the wound and patched the suit. Hurts like hell. I won't be running around for a while. I'm a little worried about that ram."

"Ram?"

"That rowboat with the solid nose that's chasing me. It's got to weigh a cube, it's moving fast, it's built to bash things, and it doesn't have any brakes. How are you doing on that gate?"

Weigh a cube? That was about eight-times-four as much as his body. Pollution!

"No luck at all," he sent. "Any chance

your submarine can ram it open?"

"I'll try the underwater grate. That has to be the weak point." Drin moved to the side of the canal and watched the humped deck of the submarine flow by him. Its wake grew, then disappeared. There was silence for a heartbeat, than a muffled boom. The gate held.

"Mary?" he asked.

"I'm OK, considering. Might have done some damage. Going to back off for another try."

She did, but that was no more successful than the first.

"Drin, if you can climb out of this, you'd better get going." The primitivist ram had entered the canal at full speed. Clearly, they were going to try to crush

both Drin and the submarine between the ram and the gate, regardless of what damage that did to the latter two. The slaves rowing the ram, he realized, probably didn't know their ship was charging at a locked gate. And its officers must believe, wrongly, that destroying Drin and Mary gave them a chance to avoid reeducation.

But there was no chance to discuss it with them now. Drin threw himself at the canal wall and his legs found claw holds on the rocks under water. Carefully, he heaved himself up the near vertical embankment. But as soon as he tried to put any weight at all on his forelegs, claws slipped on the damp mossy covering of the stones near the

waterline, and he tumbled back into the canal. He tried it once more, then saw the submarine break the surface and start accelerating backward at the ram.

"Mary!" he bellowed, forgetting the comset.

"I got us into this, I baited them. I'd rather go down fighting." Despite the brave words, her voice trembled. "Good luck, friend." He clung half in and out of the water like a paralyzed lungfish and watched the two human vessels collide. There was a tremendous thundering boom as they hit, followed by cracking and splintering sounds. In seeming slow motion, the ram rode up over the submarine and the rock walls transmitted an eerie hollow grating sound to him as

the submarine's keel scraped along the canal's stone bottom. The combined wreck grated down the channel with scarcely diminished speed like a piston toward the massive gate.

There was too little room for him to remain where he was. He released his hold, slipped back into the water, and swam for the gate. Maybe everything would grind to a halt before it got there.

Underwater, Drin heard a sudden, ear-piercing crack. Pollution! he thought, the hull of the submarine must have broken. He surfaced and looked back. Both ends of the submarine stuck out of the water. The primitivist ship rode farther up on one of the pieces and then fell off to the side, gouging its ram into

the side of the canal. Its stern hit the other side and, with a great screeching and rending, the keel of the ram snapped, leaving the broken human ship stopped sideways in the channel. Men, some of them skewered by splintered oars, tumbled from the broken vessel like fish from a torn net. The mess ground to a halt just a Charter unit from the gate.

"Mary?" he sent. There was no answer. Flames, from spilled heating fires aboard the ram, or discharging power leads on the submarine, began spreading in the above-water wreckage.

Drin threw himself into the devastation, prying blood-stained pieces of the ram away from the broken submarine hull. There was movement all

around him, and he saw that the human survivors were having no better luck than he in climbing the slippery canal sides. Hoping that the time it took would not prove critical, Drin seized the still upright mast in his beak, snapped it with a vicious twist of his body, and let it fall so that its top rested on the dike above.

"CLIMB!" he roared to anyone who would listen. Some of the astonished humans caught on and began scrambling up the mast to safety above. One was a large red-bearded man—the same one, he realized, that had mocked him from the decks of another ship only weeks ago. They stared at each other in a frozen moment of recognition, but Drin had more than an arrest on his mind.

Ignoring minor burns and lacerations, Drin clawed away the remains of a lower deck to expose the broken pressure hull of the submarine. It was filled with water. Drin stuck his tongue in and located the cockpit from feel and memory. Mary was not in the seat, but he could scent her blood. He felt around the tiny compartment, using both branches. He found her underwater gear, and, presuming success, grabbed it. A few more precious seconds, and he found Mary motionless in a small air pocket near the back of the cockpit. With both branches wrapped around her, he strained to pull her up like a hatchling, into his mouth. With her legs sticking painfully down his throat, he was just

able to close his beak over her head. Then he smashed his way out of the wreck, inhaled an hour's worth of air, and dove back into the putrid water. Over-buoyant, he swam down to the wooden grid and held on with his legs.

There was hardly room for both Mary and his tongue, so, with the skill of a contortionist, he managed to slip a loop of the tongue out the fleshy corner of his mouth, leaving the ends of the manipulator branches inside. Drin lowered his head and squeezed water from her lungs. They reinflated on their own as he forced the water from his mouth with air from his bladder. He squeezed again. She moved. Conscious? He hoped she would understand quickly

enough not to panic.

He felt her hand pat one of his fingers. It seemed a controlled, understanding, gesture. He turned his attention to his external predicament. With gloom and debris in the water, and Aurum low in the antarctic sky, he should be invisible from above. He began exploring the bottom of the gate where the submarine had smashed into it. Here and there, an outer buffer of great tree trunks had been smashed to kindling. But nothing behind had broken enough to let him through.

There was purposeful movement inside his mouth. "Drin, I've got my gills on. You can let me out now." Mary's voice in his ear was the best news he'd had since he'd come into the primitivist

cesspool. Using his tongue to keep her from bobbing to the surface, he expelled the bubble of air from his mouth, then let her float free.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Lousy. No broken bones, I think. Tired. I've still got a little fluid in my lungs." She drifted slowly over to the grate and surveyed the damaged gate. "I guess I didn't put a hole in this thing."

"It appears not."

Trapped. They were both silent.

"Uh, Drin? Can you think of any way we could make them think I did break through? If they think we're already gone maybe they'll open the gate to come after us, or to clear the floating debris."

The grate was too fine for even Mary

to squeeze through— it was probably designed with human sappers in mind. His tongue could just fit, but wasn't long enough. But maybe ...

"I could try to blow a bubble with some debris through the grate and out the other side."

"Hey, go for it!"

He did it, placing his blowhole against one of the spaces between the beams of an undamaged section and blew. Some of it escaped on their side, but not much—

some must have gone through. They waited for a subjective eternity. He was on the point of suggesting another frontal assault when they heard a hideous, hollow, creak.

They waited. Nothing.

Then another creak. Drin thought he could detect a slight shudder.

"I think they're trying to open it," he said. "You might have jammed it a bit when you rammed it. That's a case of an emotional, spur of the moment action that did exactly the opposite of—"

"Drin, your folk's eyes are built for hindsight. Why don't you stop philosophizing and just try to help them open the gate?" Of course. With a firm clawhold on the bottom stones, and not having to fight gravity, Drin could apply his full strength. He waited until a creak signified another attempt to open the gate, then pushed. Slowly it began to move. There was a crack and a grind as

something let go. Drin released his hold immediately, and the gate began to swing open on its own. Hiding on the bottom beneath flotsam from the wreck, they drifted with the current out through the opening. Then, with Mary hanging onto a leg, he swam hard for clear water until he judged they were well over Lord The's horizon. He surfaced, turned on his back and sheltered Mary between his legs as he would a hatchling, and let horizon-grazing Ember and Aurum do what they could to warm her, while he took great breaths through his mouth to rid himself of heat and to pay his oxygen debt.

Mary was quiet for a while, exhausted, Drin surmised. So it startled

him when she suddenly sat up and yelled: "Look, Drin, contrails!" Do Tor had finally arrived.

Among all races, when violence is obviously futile, reason is encouraged. For this reason, where there is the likelihood of an irrational physical confrontation, the inclusion of a large Do'utian Monitor is highly recommended. Humans excel where strength is needed in confined places. And, where overhead intelligence and logistic agility are required, the Kleth can make a major contribution— but care should be taken to avoid endangering Kleth individually.

— Planet Monitor's Handbook,
Team Composition

... their mating bond is such that individuals become physiologically dependent on each other. A Kleth seldom survives the death of a mate, nor is there any record of one wanting to do so. Efforts to sustain life in these circumstances are always futile and should not be attempted.

— Planet Monitor's Handbook,
Medical Appendix

The Kleth aircraft met them just over the horizon from Lord Thet's city, on the beach of an uninhabited island dominated by a huge granite crag that gave shelter from the circumpolar wind. After greetings, Team Leader Do Tor and his mate started unloading supplies.

Mary was exhausted, so Drin scraped

a deep pit in the sand for her, gathered wood, and lit a fire. Then, despite her exhaustion, and still limping from her wound, she insisted on washing her clothes and body in the frigid polar water, and turned an amazing shade of blue before she got back to the fire.

"D-don't worry," she told him as she shook convulsively under a blanket in front of the fire, "It's-s h-how we get our b-body heat b-back up." Do Tor and his mate stretched their wings to catch some fish for her, and jibbered with amusement as she threw away all the good parts and heated the remaining muscle almost to the point of decomposition on a flat stone she put by the fire. Drin looked forward to having a

good long feed later that night, in his own manner, on his way back to Gri'il's beach.

"Sorry late. Assumed you'd just leave Thet and wait for us," the Klethan said in a guttural, sing-song English that was actually lower pitched than Mary's, despite his being less than half her mass.

"We tried," Mary laughed. "Things got in the way. We surface dwellers have certain problems about just flying away when things turn sour."

"Don't understand why primitivists had so much technology."

"Lack of interest on our part. Ignorance of the Charter and evolutionary pressure on theirs," Drin offered. "The best fighters end up in

charge, and the best fighters are, more often than not, those with the best weapons. Also, if you can't make it clever, make it big." It would be a long while before he would forget the huge ram bearing down on him. "I doubt that Lord Thet or many of his people even understand why the Charter prohibits development in these areas; they've rebelled against anything resembling a scientific education."

"For humans, there is an inherent contradiction between 'back to nature' and

'no technology,' " Mary contributed, "because human nature is to make and use tools. So what happens is that the primitivists reinvent the wheel using

primitive technology that, per capita, pollutes unmercifully and requires gobs of labor." Mary picked up a stone and threw it out of sight. "So then you get leadership dominance games that the most ruthless win, with slave labor of one sort or another for the losers. That works well long enough for the glandular bullies to start assembling miniature empires, and then ..." She shook her head. "Allowing this Lord Thet set-up was taking noninterference too far, in my view. But that's up to the council. Anyway, we have our killers."

"Maybe," Drin demurred. "But I don't think this is a one-species issue." From a philosophical standpoint he certainly didn't want it to be human versus

Do'utian, but something more than that was bothering him. "I'm not sure we have the whole story. In defending his hunting, the human Jacob Lebrezsky seemed to include the Do'utian primitivists in his defense."

"Do'utians help get selves butchered?" Do Tor clucked. "Strange thing, I think."

"If you think in groups, yes. But that isn't the natural Do'utain way to think." Drin moved his head slightly from side to side in mild negation. "I want to ask Gri'il some questions and learn more about this murdered beachmaster and his harem. I may have made some unfair assumptions about the last victim."

"Name was Glodego'alah, by the way," Do Tor added. "Left the north

pole as a disillusioned student eight cubed great revolutions ago. Not happy as primitivist, either, but responsible. Took care of harem. Good being. We did our homework." The Kleth held its hard translucent wings out in a gesture of pride.

"Oh yes," his mate said, the first words she uttered, surprising Drin. Until now, Go Ton had been inert, folded up. One partner or the other might dominate, but they were always together. Divorce was unknown, as were widows or widowers. Go Ton's contribution was unusually forward, for a subordinate Klethan. But Monitor couples were known to be more independent.

"Did you bring the Do'utian interface

coronet?" Drin asked.

"Not so late, otherwise." Do Tor rummaged in the pile of unloaded supplies and found a glasscloth package the size of a folded human tent. "Here." Drin placed it in his pouch. Its woven-in antennae picked up and decoded motor nerve impulses— even those sent to absent peripheries. Now, not only could he ask questions of Gri'il; she would be able to answer.

There were also a tent and collapsible kayak for Mary. The tent fit nicely in the hollow he had dug, and she opened it up with its door to the fire. As it resumed its memorized shape, she turned to her fellow monitors.

"This," she said, "is camping. It's

what most of us have in mind when we think of going back to nature, or living in a primitive situation. But, as you see, it's not primitive at all. And it's not social, we usually try to get away from other people when we do this. What's happened back at Thet just hasn't really registered with my people. I—"

"Mary, why should it register with you any more than with the rest of us?" Drin interrupted. "You have no special responsibility for them just because they happen to be human. There is no need to apologize."

"Oh yes, Go Ton agrees," Do Tor's mate spoke up. "We are one civilization on this world. Whole purpose of Planet Trimus. Eight-cubed years of lives

meaningless if not. Eyes of Trimus we are. We should have noticed violations before dead bodies appear."

"Any Do'utian can smell that place in currents an eighth of the way around the planet. We ignored it," Drin said.

"Th-thanks," Mary said. "I just ..." She shook her head and made sounds of human sadness, though Drin thought it was more in relief. He flicked out his tongue and wrapped his fingers around her hand, and she rewarded the gesture by squeezing him gently back, and baring her teeth in a big smile.

"We all go to the beach tomorrow, and gain more understanding," Do Tor said.

"Now rest."

"You rest," Drin answered, reminding him that Do'utians didn't sleep in the eternal days of a polar summer. "I need to eat, feed the harem, and keep my injuries in water until they heal more. I will see you there at the beach. Take care, Mary."

She hugged his fingers to her, careless of her wrap, and his most sensitive organs were pressed into the alien heat and smell of her. He was overwhelmed for a moment, then she released him. "Yeah, you too," she said. He backed away from the fire carefully, to avoid upsetting anything. Clear, he turned. And as his body turned toward the water, his mind followed, thinking ahead to his duties. His cuts and bruises were

beginning to hurt, true. But something in the back of his mind was pushing him, something perhaps as powerful as the instinctual desire to join with the harem that chose him as their provider and their protector. It did not make sense to him that humans—

even as degenerate as Lord Thet and his gang— would or could suddenly start preying on Do'utians, even given the sort of general philosophical license primitivism in both species seemed to grant. Something less random and more evil was happening. Perhaps Gri'il could help him.

The Planetary Civilization must be permitted to evolve, and experiments must be encouraged, for only through

change is knowledge expanded.

— The Compact and Charter of Planet Trimus, Article 5

Aurum stood high above Ember when Drin returned to the harem beach with his mouth full of fish, and the star had moved a dociradian west by the time he finished the simple duty of placing the fish into throats. Once done, he unpacked the neural interface cap and approached Gri'il. Even now she hesitated, putting her nose to the beach. Despite everything that had happened, her distaste for this artificiality was evident. But then, apparently recognizing the necessity, she raised her head and came to him. He fitted the cap over her.

"It will take a while to calibrate itself.

There will be a bit of a delay to start with, but you'll get used to it. Now, just tell me your name, as if you were whole again. Repeat it until the computer in the cap gets it right." It produced an intelligible "Gri'illaboda" after about six tries, and she got used to it in a few more. Finally, she could speak through the device more or less naturally.

"OK," Drin said. "I'm going to record this, so why don't we start by having you say who you are?"

"I am Gri'illaboda, co-mate of Drinnil'ib."

Great. Just great. "I am sorry, Gri'il. I am a planetary monitor, and not a primitivist. I care for you, yes— but more as a senior family member, not as a

mate."

"You replaced our beachmaster, mated with my co-mates."

"It was not my choice. I did not seek you or them to mate." She was silent for a few heartbeats. He could hear the waves and the sea birds.

"Drinnil'ib, I was the daughter of Slora'analta and Broti'ilita. Did you know either of those?"

"The historian."

"Who told the old tales of the free seas and made a romantic out of his daughter. I was bored with school. I met a free rover. He took me here, quickened my ovaries ... then took my tongue."

"Glodego'alah?"

"Never. Glodego'alah was a tourist

who saw what had happened, fought the free rover for us, then took us here to be safe. But he paid for his charity in a way that happens all too often here."

"Then I am sorry for what I thought about Glodego'alah. We are seeking the humans who killed him, and four others who were killed. Did you know any of them? Did they have families here?"

"Glodego'alah remarked once that harems change masters easily because of such human predation. Their ships come in the channels between the islands and the ice pack where beachmasters gather fish."

Drin nodded. "I came close to being a victim myself on my way back from my initial investigation. It is easy enough for

them— I suspected nothing until they shot at me. I would think someone down here would warn the humans not to do this."

Gri'il huffed in derision. "The sea lords don't interfere. They say the humans take the weak and the race gets stronger, and that the inbred softness of civilization is thus cleansed from our blood. But Glodego'alah was not soft."

"No, I'm sure he wasn't. Who are these 'sea lords'?"

"They are the free rovers, the ones who take from both poles what they want. They live like beachmasters at the south pole, then swim north and have all the luxuries of civilization. They are ... the human word is hypocrites."

"And if they don't come back?"

"A harem doesn't stay unmastered long here. A sea lord shows up soon enough to claim a missing master's family. They seem to know, somehow, when one isn't coming back."

Her passiveness disturbed him, but perhaps it was simply adjustment. Early Do'utian history wasn't any prettier than early human history. Less so, in some respects. And the Kleth, of course, were cannibals well into their spacefaring days. Drin shuddered, wondering at his fascination with such things. But he had to ask; it might be important.

"Gri'il, how was your tongue to be taken?" Did she just submit to such an amputation?

"The sea lord who ran off my first mate, said it was traditional. He demanded this after the first mating, then he said he would not take my egg unless I submitted. Also ... I can't explain. I sometimes feel a need to surrender myself, to let the tides of providence have their way with my flesh. At any rate, I did not resist. In my state at the time, he was God." Submit to mutilation, or die. Such was her natural paradise. What polluting monster would ...

"His name?"

"Gota'lannshk." The same ruffian he encountered at Cragen's? Drin hissed in disgust.

"You know of him?"

"We met. Look, Gri'il, will you come

back to the North with me? For treatment."

"We are bound to you. I need to stay with you, to submit to you. And I have the eggs, remember? Or are you so civilized that that doesn't matter?" The eggs probably shouldn't be hatched, Drin thought. Two fathers. No tests. No family. No birth allocation.

"Gri'il, compulsions are subject to medical intervention. My duty is to try to right the wrongs done so far, if I can, and prevent others from being done. Can you get the others to come?" And how many more were there out in those islands. Should they save them all? By force if needed?

"If it is clear that we are leaving, they

will come, for whatever good it will do them."

"We'll regenerate their tongues, teach them to speak, send them to school."

"They were hatched out here. Their minds were untrained during the crucial years."

Truly feral. He feared as much. "Still, we have to try. We can find a deserted northern island for your co-mates, and arrange for them to be watched. But what about you? Now that this has happened, can't you see your way back to—"

"To what? We live with the humans and the Kleth on this planet at the expense of ceasing to live like Do'utians, at the expense of always pulling against

our own inner nature. And the stars are too far apart for it to matter. I showed my tail to all of that. Say what you want. I lived. I swam in the wild currents. I did it on the beach. You want me to go back to that northern emotional straitjacket and listen to all those proper titters and I told you so's? I'd rather die!"

And her present state was not a humiliation? But her age-old argument, Drin thought, was unanswerable. The civilization of Trimus was for those who thought it mattered.

"We don't want to tell you how to live. I'm sure your privacy would be respected, and protected."

"Like in a zoo! Drinnil'ib, you rescued us, fed us. Don't you want us? Don't you

feel the need to own and protect us? Or in the name of your Compact have you let the humans reengineer your sex?"

Drin groaned. He wanted her enough, but he did not want to want her. At least not as she was now. The whine of fans reached him before he could find a suitable way to explain that. Mary! Relief flowed through him. The aircraft settled on its fans, the hatch popped, and Drin walked over to greet his partner, leaving Gri'il with her beak in the gravel.

But Mary was nowhere in sight.

"Mary?" he called, worried.

Do Tor opened the canopy, jibbered to his machine, and the cargo door popped open. Of course, Drin realized.

There was no room in the Kleth cockpit for a human, and indeed, it took Mary a while to unfold herself from the cramped space.

"I'm here, Drin."

"It's good to see you!" He explained about the sea lords. "So I think your human hunters have Do'utian accomplices, at least in principle. But things still don't swim well in my mind."

"The strongest, fastest, or most clever survive. I can see that, I guess. You think the Sea Lords were using Lord Thet to cull their herd, so to speak?"

"That seems to fit."

"Well, Lord Thet's gang of wannabe barbarians seems to be only too happy to help. Your people are the most

challenging hunt in the ocean, they probably think."

"Brings up the question of whether we have right to interfere," Do Tor observed.

"To save lives?" Drin protested. "Of course we do." Mary sighed and gestured to the sky. "Drin, there are now many beings out there who can trace their origins to our home worlds, but who have engineered so much into themselves that they look on us as primitivists. They could make a problem like Lord Thet vanish in an instant with no loss of life— but would we want that?"

"Those who didn't get killed might appreciate it." Mary shook her head.

"The parts of our natures that lead to this mess could easily be changed, but then what would we be? Death, even random death, may have a justifiable role in society that transcends individual needs. Perhaps, to keep our identity, we need to learn to accept that."

"I think," Drin asserted, perhaps a little more loudly than necessary, "that such issues should be debated by the planetary council and that our job is to not let anyone else get killed until they do and decide ... whatever. Now, I have four physically mutilated and three of them intellectually mutilated—

Do'utian women to bring back to where they can be properly protected and cared for. Let's do that and sort the

rest out later."

"Agreed," Do Tor chuckled. Mary nodded quietly.

"Gri'il," Drin said, "is there any way the others can be told of how long a journey this will be?"

"They will follow you if I do," she said, coldly, it seemed. "But the hunters will be watching."

"And the planet will be watching them!" Drin proclaimed. "They won't dare do anything."

"I will ride with you," Mary said. "In full uniform. At least they'll know what they're playing with."

Drin didn't remind her of how persuasive her uniform and submarine were at Thet harbor.

"We'll fly cover with loud voices and guns," Do Tor said, spreading his wings.

"Aircraft can fly itself, so that makes three above."

"Oh yes," his mate chimed. So it was decided. A convoy North.

* * *

Drin led the way into the water the next morning with Mary's warm legs and arms comfortably around his neck. They'd fashioned a light glasscloth collar for him that she could grasp and so hold her position in the current of his passage. This was no irritation, but the bulge of an appliance she had constructed to protect her wounded knee was a noticeable reminder of their vulnerability in these waters— many

more monitors would be needed to handle Lord Thet and his allies without loss of life.

Gri'il came quietly after him, and as predicted, the harem followed. It was a fine gray day with favorable surface winds, and light, cooling surface squalls. A brackish current flowed north here from the ice cap on the largest southern island, overlying warmer saline water flowing from an inner pole drainage basin, and so the Do'utians had made good time without becoming overtired.

By the morning of the second day, Lord Thet's domain was well behind them, and they glided through the waves halfway into reef-crowded tropical waters. A volcanic island with wide

black beaches lay to their left, and a reef to their right, but the channel was fairly deep. Drin was just beginning to relax and enjoy the scenery when the human ships appeared.

"Don't think they're hunters," Do Tor sent. "Big Do'utian male right with them, no shooting."

"Can you describe him?" Drin asked.

"One and three-eighths Charter unit long. Big white crescent-shaped scar behind the blowhole. Do you know him?"

"If it's who I think it is, I've smelled him before. A harem-coveting sea lord with his tail across two beaches. It's time to ask that rogue a few questions."

Gri'il and her co-mates keened as if

they were being mortally wounded.

"It sounds like our refugees have smelled him before as well," he continued.

"I'd better let those humans know what we're about. Ready, Mary?"

"Gills on." He felt her arms as well as her legs encircle his neck, and her hands grasp the collar. She was secure. He dove and, slamming the ocean back and forth with his tail, headed toward the lead human ship much faster than he could manage on the surface.

About ten Charter units from the hull, he broke water again. So did his harem —

he'd forgotten to tell Gri'il to stay back. It shouldn't be necessary, but he

was uneasy.

"Mary, I'm not sure how much comfort we should take from Gota'lannshk being present."

"Why would they shoot at us and not him?"

"Why is there a sea lord always ready to inherit the harem of a victim? Why did Gota'lannshk seem to know that I'd had a close call with these hunters when we met him at Cragen's?"

"Lord Thet—"

"Mary, I don't want to insult your species, but I don't think that idiot has been running this atrocity."

"Huh? Why?"

"Later. I just hope these people have sense enough to keep out of this." Drin

inhaled and boomed as authoritatively as he could, "Human ship, we are Planet Monitors escorting citizens on an official mission. We need to ask your companion some questions. Please do not interfere. I say again, do not interfere."

Mary waved at them and smiled.

The report of the harpoon gun reached him first, then Mary's scream and the sharp, deep pain in his neck.

"Look out!" Do Tor yelled over the radio link. The taste of blood was in his throat. He dove and heard a sharp smack on the water over him. Instinct said to head for the very bottom, but Mary, if she were still alive—he could no longer feel any pressure from her legs—

wouldn't survive that. Despite the pain, he pushed water hard and got about eight-squared Charter units away from the ship before he surfaced again.

"Mary?" he called. If those polluting, suicidal, feral idiots had killed her

...

There was no answer. Oblivious of his wound, he turned back toward the ship, rage building.

"Do Tor, I can't see behind my head. What's happened to Mary?" Did the Kleth follow him?

"Drin. Long spear in your neck. Went through Mary first, through her leg. Not necessarily fatal wound, but suggest you make for nearest island. Go Ton will go with you. West, Drin, now. I've called

aircraft down. That ship will not fire again. Go!"

As if to contradict the Kleth, the harpoon gun fired again and the lance slapped the water beside him. He could hear warning blasts from the aircraft and Go Ton squawking at the top of her lungs, telling the human ship to stop shooting. In the name of eternal repudiation, the murderers would pay for this! He started swimming toward the ship.

He felt, more than saw, a Do'utian charge under him directly at the human vessel.

"GRI'IL, NO!" he bellowed hopelessly, much too late. The impact boomed out, sound reaching him

underwater before through the air. Then, beneath, he heard the creaking and cracking of wood and the screams of humans underwater.

"Drin!" Do Tor screamed. "Get to that island, now. I take care of this. I will mark them. They will not escape, not melt into primitivist population. I mark. Go, now, save yourself. Save Mary."

"Drin," a soft voice called. "I'm awake. It hurts like hell, but if you have to go back for her, I understand. I can take it."

Reason returned. "Mary. No. I'll have to trust Do Tor." There was no way Gri'il could have survived that impact. No way that he would have. And the eggs ... it was better that way. Perhaps

Gri'il had known that. But his wound had little to do with the effort it took to push himself toward the island. A whistle and some kind of explosion sounded behind him. Then another. He could hear loudspeakers. Killing for killing—perhaps they would understand that. Then, somewhere from the back of his mind, between the currents of pain and grief, a thought formed in an eddy of cold fear. Gota'lannshk had disappeared when the shooting started. To where?

The island was a long swim on the surface and he gagged on his blood by the time he got there. Go Ton was waiting at water's edge, alone, with a med kit that must have weighed as much as she did.

"Come on, just a few steps farther, above the tide line," she urged. He did that, then he was on his belly, his tail still in moist sand. Go Ton fluttered to the top of his head, out of sight. He heard the buzz of a bone saw, and the shaft of the harpoon soon tumbled to the ground. There was a yelp, quickly stifled, from Mary. Then a numbness started spreading through the wound. Soon he felt as if he didn't know what had happened to him, that all that was wrong with him was a stiff neck.

"Now, Mary," Go Ton said, "I know it looks awful, but I think it best to leave that piece in your leg alone until help arrives. Human aircraft will be here in eight-fourth beats. Might do more harm

than good if I try to remove it now."

"I understand," she said, "this sounds ridiculous, but right now I feel OK, except my leg is dead to the world. I'll be all right as long as I don't look at it. Can you help me down?"

"Not alone. Lieutenant Drin, can you lend a tongue?" His tongue still worked; the barb had not gone in that deeply, perhaps in part because Mary's leg had slowed its entry. He reached back, and between the three of them, they were able to lower Mary down to the sand.

"Where's Do Tor?" she asked.

Pollution! She'd forgotten, Drin realized, and he couldn't warn her with his tongue extended so far.

"He's with the aircraft cleaning up the

mess with the human ships," Go Ton responded, shakily. "He should have everything well in hand and be back with us soon."

"You've been too busy helping us to check!" Mary said. "I'll contact him, let him know we made it, and find out how things are."

"Please do not do that," Go Ton pleaded.

Just a little farther, Drin thought. There! Mary was safely down, and he could speak again.

"But, I know how much he means to you—" Mary started, oblivious to the danger.

"That's why, Mary," Drin interrupted, "for the sake of providence, think!" The

Kleth team had taken the ultimate risk for them, and Go Ton's position was precarious. She would live as long as she believed her mate was alive. But if everything was not fine with Do Tor, that would effectively eliminate Go Ton as well. "We need Go Ton just now."

"Oh!" Mary said. Everyone was quiet for a heartbeat. Then Mary continued, her voice with a certain forced steadiness. "Go Ton. Uh, that human garbage doesn't have any weapon that can hurt Do Tor. He'll be fine." That human garbage shouldn't, Drin thought, have had any weapon that could have hurt him or Mary. But here they were.

"Drin, I am stiff-winged on Do'utian first aid," Go Ton said, firmly changing

the subject, "but I think the spear should come out of you now. It is the sort that works its way in deeper every time you move, and without Mary's body holding it back ..."

"Do it." Before the anesthetic, Drin could sense how close the barb had worked itself toward his central nervous column. He had arteries and blood to spare, but didn't want to stop breathing just yet.

"If you could roll on your side ..." Go Ton asked. He complied, then lay silently, feeling little tugs and tears in his flesh and tried to imagine one of Go Ton's tiny thin horny arms deep in his flesh with knives, cutting a passage for the barbed spearhead.

Then the Kleth said: "Mary, need help. The strength of your arms." Using the discarded shaft of the spear as a crutch, Mary hobbled around behind him, patting him on the beak as she went by.

A little later, he heard her say "oof," felt a sharp pull, and saw Mary fall backward into his field of view again—her arms bloody up to the elbows, her hands clutching the cruel barbed spearhead. Go Ton remained behind him; little tugs and pulls continued for another eight-cubed heartbeats.

"Now that's all closed as well as I can do it," Go Ton said.

"Thank you," Drin said, and rolled slowly back onto his belly. "Did the

harem follow us here?" The thought of them reminded him of Gri'il. He shut his eyes and let the empty feeling pass.

"Yes, they're huddled together in shallows behind you," Go Ton answered. "They seem very sad, beaks in sand, but are unhurt, I think." Drin was thinking that Do Tor should have been back by now, and searching his memory for any kind of convention for handling the worst-case situation. There would come a point when, if the news were bad, Go Ton would have to be told, and nature would have to take its course. To do otherwise would be to not respect the decision her people had made to not change this part of their genetic make up. Perhaps the best thing would be to wait

until she asked herself. If ...

The challenge roar echoed off the lava cliffs and caught them all by surprise. In an instant, before he even realized what it meant, Drin's heart doubled the strength of its beats and he could feel the effects of various body chemicals, not greatly different from those that had hit him when he fertilized the feral eggs. That primordial insult deserved an equally primitive response. But he made himself stay still, and without moving his injured neck, he swiveled an eye to the direction of the noise. Far down the beach, a big, scarred male.

"Same Do'utian we saw with the human hunting ships," Go Ton said from above.

"Gota'lannshk," Drin rumbled, in no shape or mood to play primitive beachmaster games. "His beak is dripping with this. Tell that idiot to stay away from us, before I kill him!"

"Drin," Mary whispered, almost inaudibly, "he's bigger than you, and with your wound you'll kill yourself before you get to him. Try to calm down. Think. If he inherited Glodego'alah's harem, and he was connected with the human hunters—"

"Precisely, Mary. A lot easier to get Lord Thet's people to eliminate his rivals than fighting for a harem on the beach the old-fashioned way. These murders were no game of survival of the fittest, or even of macabre chance. Those

polluting idiot sea rovers carefully selected the hunting victims and no doubt led Lord Thet's ships right to them. Lord Thet probably lost a few selected men as well, just to keep things even, gain birth allocations, and reduce the number of his political rivals." Drin's anger increased. He should turn the murderer into snail meat. His breath came faster.

"So," Mary said, "the whalers get their hunt, their flesh, and think they're just playing by some tough rules. But it's all fixed ahead of time. Premeditated. Drin, stay down, please. Drin? Drin! Give me your gun." The Do'utian sea rover bellowed again and blind rage started working its way through Drin. The nerve of that cow stealer! He

heaved himself to his feet, oblivious of the wound.

"DRIN!" Mary screamed. "Give me your gun! Drin. Your gun! Now!" In some small corner of his consciousness, Mary's words got through. Somehow, as he began to rock back and forth on his legs, he sent his tongue into his pouch and retrieved the weapon for Mary, dropping it almost absentmindedly on the sand next to her. That popgun was never, he thought with a last wisp of clarity, meant to stop a charging Do'utian.

He got a whiff of the challenger, ripe with arrogance. He heard his cows keen and smelled their fright. Dimly, he remembered there were things one was

supposed to do in beak-to-beak combat, things that used the opponent's charge against him. Ways to use the tail as well as the head to put the other on the sand, but that all seemed very fuzzy and far away just now. All he wanted was to charge and bite the throat.

Hardly even aware that he was doing it, Drin lifted a clawed front leg, dug it deep into sand, and bellowed. The sun was high; it was a good time to taste blood.

The other began its charge. He stomped forward to meet it. Somewhere behind him he heard a series of sharp, high-frequency sounds begin at regular intervals. He didn't care, his body was aflame, producing heat many times faster

than he could lose it. He didn't care. It felt good. He felt the wind of his passage build up, giving him some relief. Somehow, both hind legs moved together while both front legs hit slightly apart. The beach shook beneath him. He fixed his eyes on the other's neck, looking for an opening, looking for where the cycle of its charging stride exposed the throat to Drin's beak. But its neck kept getting lower to the beach. Its charge seemed to become unbalanced and slow. His opponent screamed now in protest and its scent changed from challenge to fear and danger. It keened and shrieked and wavered from side to side.

With the danger call, a bit of

consciousness returned to Drin, and he swerved at the last heartbeat, avoiding a collision that could have ripped open his stitched-up insides and left him to bleed to death.

The sea lord collapsed into the sand in front of him, plowing a furrow two Charter units long with its gaping beak. He passed by the hulk in an instant and into an eerie silence. The bellows and the sharp sounds had ended; only the surf and the thunder of his own mad rush sounded on the beach. Burning inside, Drin exhaled gales, bent his path into the sea and let momentum carry him into the cold water, sliding forward until it covered him. A very gentle bend of his tail brought his head back to the shore.

The drama was not over. The fallen sea lord groaned and snapped at sand. Its right foreleg was covered with blood and bent at a wrong angle. Its hind legs pushed sand uselessly, trying to propel it somewhere. Then it used its tail to turn itself over, trying to roll to the cooling waters of the sea. Once, twice, it rolled. But, as Drin settled himself into the life-giving cold water, the sea rover stopped rolling. Its tail rose majestically and thudded into the sand. Once, twice.

At the last, it threw its tongue at Mary, falling far short. "Dirty human cow," Gota'lannshk screamed at her. Then ... nothing. Heat death.

Drin lay in the shallows panting. Fiery pain shot through him. He could taste his

own blood again; some of Go Ton's handiwork had come loose. He saw Mary prone, the shaft of the harpoon still projecting bloodily from her leg, her elbows in the sand, his gun in her hands, still aimed at the sea rover. She must have put a hundred bullets in his opponent's knee, but now she shook and moaned. He knew that killing a Do'utian over this was the very last thing she had wanted.

He wished to comfort her, but he was tired. Very, very tired.

* * *

His next awareness was of a hotness on his neck. He opened his right eye and looked back. Mary was there, flattened against his neck, gently calling his name.

"Mary," he managed to say, as softly as he had ever said anything, "I'm awake. I'll be OK."

She was apparently having trouble breathing, but turned to his eye and said, "Oh, Drin. Oh, Drin. It's— it's so hard to get my arms around you." Despite her appearance, he somehow knew she was happy.

Noise and smell intruded. The sky over the island beach was filled with both aircraft and Kleth. The death smell of Glodego'alah was there, among the smell of many beings, and the sound of many voices, Kleth, human, and Do'utian. He recognized Do Tor's and Go Ton's among them, and took a ragged but deep breath of satisfaction. Everyone

had come through, and, like rational, civilized beings, they were all discussing what was to be done next.