



To Choke an Ocean

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"Nice that you dropped in," the man in the detention room said. "I never expected a visit from the Consul General. It makes me feel important."

"The Confederation takes an interest in all of its citizens' welfare," Lanceford said. "You *are* important! Incidentally, how is it going?"

"Not too bad. They treat me all right. But these natives sure are tough on visitors. I've never been checked so thoroughly in all my life—and now this thirty day quarantine! Why, you'd think I was carrying the plague instead of a sample case!"

The chubby little commercial traveller probably had a right to complain, Lanceford thought. After all, a Niobian quarantine station isn't the pleasantest sort of environment. It's not meant to be comfortable, physical discomfort being as good a way as any to discourage casual visitors. The ones who have fortitude enough to stand the entry regulations can get in, but tourists seldom visit Niobe. However, the planet's expanding economy offered a fertile field for salesmen, and men of that stripe would endure far worse hardships than a port of entry in pursuit of the Almighty Credit.

Now this fellow, George Perkins, was a typical salesman. And despite his soft exterior there was a good hard core inside.

Lanceford looked him over and decided that he would last. "You came here of your own free will, didn't you?" he asked.

"If you call a company directive free will," Perkins answered. "I wouldn't come here for a vacation, if that's what you mean. But the commercial opportunities can't be ignored."

"I suppose not, but you can hardly blame the Niobians for being suspicious of strangers. Perhaps there's no harm in you. But they have a right to be sure; they've been burned before." Lanceford uncoiled his lean gray length from the chair and walked over to the broad armorglas window. He stared out at the gloomy view of Niobe's rainswept polar landscape. "You know," he continued, "you might call this Customs Service a natural consequence of uninvestigated visitors." He brooded over the grayness outside. A polar view was depressing—scrubby vegetation, dank grassland, the eternal Niobian rain. He felt sorry for Perkins. Thirty days in this place would be sheer torture.

"It must have been quite some disturbance to result in this." Perkins waved his hand at the barren room. "Sounds like you know something about it."

"I do. In a way you might say that I was responsible for it."

"Would you mind telling me?"

"I wouldn't mind at all." Lanceford looked at his watch. "If I have the time, that is. I'm due to be picked up in an hour, but Niobians have some quaint conceptions of time. So if you want to take a chance that I won't finish—"

"Go ahead."

"To start with, take a look at that insigne over the door. The whole story's right there."

Perkins eyed the emblem of the Niobian Customs Service. It was a five-pointed star surrounding a circle, superimposed over the typically Terran motto: "Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Safety." He nodded.

"How come the Terran style?" he asked.

"That's part of the story. Actually that insigne's a whole chapter of Niobe's history. But you have to know what it stands for." Lanceford sighed reminiscently. "It began during the banquet that celebrated the signing of the Agreement which made Niobe a member of the Confederation. I was the Director of the BEE's Niobe Division at that time. As a matter of fact, I'd just taken the job over from Alvord Sims. The Old Man had been ordered back to Terra, to take over a job in the Administration, and I was the next man in line.

"The banquet was a flop, of course. Like most mixed gatherings involving different races, it was a compromise affair. Nobody was satisfied. It dragged along in a spirit of suffering resignation—the Niobians quietly enduring the tasteless quality of the food, while the Confederation representatives, wearing unobtrusive nose plugs, suffered politely through the watered-down aroma and taste of the Niobian delicacies. All things being considered, it was moving along more smoothly than it had any right to, and if some moron on the kitchen staff hadn't used tabasco sauce instead of catsup, we'd probably have signed the Agreement and gone on happily ever after.

"But it didn't work out that way.

"Of course it wasn't entirely the kitchen's fault. There had to be some damn fool at the banquet who'd place the bomb where it would do some good. And of course I had to be it." Lanceford grinned. "About the only thing I have to say in my defense is that I didn't know it was loaded!"

Perkins looked at him expectantly as Lanceford paused. "Well, don't stop there," he said. "You've got me interested."

Lanceford smiled good-naturedly and went on.

We held the banquet in the central plaza of Base Alpha. It was the only roofed area on the planet large enough to hold the crowd of high brass

that had assembled for the occasion. We don't do things that way now, but fifty years ago we had a lot to learn. In those days, the admission of a humanoid planet into the Confederation was quite an event. The VIP's thought that the native population should be aware of it.

I was sitting between Kron Avar and one of the high brass from the Bureau of Interstellar Trade, a fellow named Hartmann. I had no business being in that rarefied air, since Kron was one of the two First Councilors and Hartmann ranked me by a couple of thousand files on the promotion list. But I happened to be a friend of Kron's, so protocol got stretched a bit in the name of friendship. He and I had been through a lot together when I was a junior explorer with the BEE some ten years before. We'd kept contact with each other ever since. We had both come up the ladder quite a ways, but a Planetary Director, by rights, belonged farther down the table. So there I was, the recipient of one of the places of honor and a lot of dirty looks.

Hartmann didn't think much of being bumped one seat away from the top. He wasn't used to associating with mere directors, and besides, I kept him from talking with Kron about trade relations. Kron was busy rehashing the old days when we were opening Niobe to viscayaculture. Trade didn't interest him very much, and Hartmann interested him less. Niobians are never too cordial to strangers, and he had never seen the BIT man before this meeting.

Anyway, the talk got around to the time he introduced me to vorkum, a native dish that acts as a systemic insect repellant—and tastes like one! And right then I got the bright idea that nearly wrecked Niobe.

As I said, there was both Niobian and Confederation food at the banquet, so I figured that it was a good time as any to get revenge for what my dog-headed friend did to my stomach a good decade before.

So I introduced him to Terran cooking.

Niobians assimilate it all right, but their sense of taste isn't the same as ours. Our best dishes are just mush to their palates, which are conditioned to sauces that would make the most confirmed spice lover on Earth run screaming for the water tap. They have a sense of the delicate, too, but it needs to be stimulated with something like liquid fire before they can appreciate it. For instance, Kron liked Earth peaches, but he spiced them with horseradish and red pepper.

I must admit that he was a good sport. He took the hors d'oeuvres in stride, swallowing such tasteless things as caviar, Roquefort and anchovy paste without so much as a grimace. Of course, I was taking an unfair advantage of Kron's natural courtesy, but it didn't bother me too

much. He had rubbed that vorkum episode in for years. It was nice to watch him squirm.

When I pressed him to try an oyster cocktail, I figured things had gone far enough.

He took it, of course, even though anyone who knew Niobians could see that he didn't want any part of it. There was a pleading look in his eye that I couldn't ignore. After all, Kron was a friend. I was actually about to stop him when he pulled an oyster from its red bath and popped it into his mouth. There was a 'you'll be sorry' look on his face. I gestured to a waiter to remove the cocktail as he bit into the oyster, figuring, somewhat belatedly, that I had gone too far.

The grateful look I got from him was sufficient reward. But then it happened. Kron stopped looking grateful and literally snatched the cocktail back from the startled waiter!

He looked at me with an expression of disgust. "The first decent food thus far," he said, "and you attempt to send it away!"

"Huh?" I exclaimed stupidly. "I didn't want to make you miserable."

"Miserable! Hah! This dish is wonderful! What in the name of my First Ancestor is it?" His pleased grin was enough like a snarl to make Hartmann cringe in his chair. Since Kron and I were both speaking Niobian rather than Confed, he didn't understand what was happening. I suppose he thought that Kron was about to rip my throat out. It was a natural error, of course. You've seen a dog smile, and wondered what was going on behind the teeth? Well, Kron looked something like that. A Niobian with his dog-headed humanoid body is impressive under any conditions. When he smiles he can be downright frightening.

I winked at Hartmann. "Don't worry, sir," I said. "Everything's all right."

"It certainly is," Kron said in Confed. "This dish is delicious. Incidentally, friend Lanceford, what is it? It tastes something like our Komal, but with a subtle difference of flavor that is indescribable!"

"It's called an oyster cocktail, Kron," I said.

"This is a product of your world we would enjoy!" Kron said. "Although the sauce is somewhat mild, the flavor of the meat is exquisite!" He closed his eyes, savoring the taste. "It would be somewhat better with vanka," he said musingly. "Or perhaps with Kala berries."

I shuddered. I had tried those sauces once. Once was enough! I could still feel the fire.

"I wonder if you could ship them to us," Kron continued.

Hartmann's ears pricked up at the word "ship." It looked like an opening gambit for a fast sales talk on behalf of interstellar trade, a subject dear to his heart.

But I was puzzled. I couldn't figure it out until I tried one of the oysters—after which I knew! Some fool had dished them up in straight tobasco sauce! It took some time before I could talk, what with trying to wash the fire out of my mouth, and during the conversational hiatus Hartmann picked up the ball where I dropped it. So I sat by and listened, my burned mouth being in no condition for use.

"I'm afraid that we couldn't ship them," Hartmann said. "At least not on a commercial basis. Interstellar freight costs are prohibitive where food is concerned."

Kron nodded sadly. He passed the oysters to Tovan Harl, his fellow First Councilor. Harl went through the same reaction pattern Kron had shown.

"However," Hartmann continued, "we could send you a few dozen. Perhaps you could start a small oyster farm."

"Is this a plant?" Kron asked curiously.

"No, it's a marine animal with a hard outer shell."

"Just like our Komal. We could try planting some of them in our oceans. If they grow, we will be very obliged to you Terrans for giving us a new taste sensation."

"Since my tribe is a seafaring one," Harl interjected, "they can be raised under my supervision until we find the exact methods to propagate them in our seas."

Hartmann must have been happy to get off the hook. It was a small request, one that was easy to fulfill. It was a good thing that the Niobians didn't realize what concessions they could wring from the BIT. The Confederation had sunk billions into Niobe and was prepared to sink many more if necessary. They would go to almost any lengths to keep the natives happy. If that meant star-freighter loads of oysters, then it would be star-freighter loads of oysters. The Confederation needed the gerontin that grew on Niobe.

The commercial worlds needed the anti-aging drug more and more as the exploration of space continued—not to mention the popular demand. Niobe was an ideal herbarium for growing the swampland plant from which the complex of alkaloids was extracted.

So Hartmann made a note of it, and the subject was dropped.

I didn't think anything more about it. Kron was happy, Harl was happy, and Hartmann was feeling pleased with himself. There was no reason to keep the oyster question alive.

But it didn't die there. By some sort of telepathy the Niobians scattered along the long tables found out what had been getting talked about at the upper end.

By this time I was on the ball again. When the orders went in I slipped a note to the cooks to use tabasco or vanaka on the Niobian orders. It was fortunate that there was an ample supply of oysters available, because the banquet dissolved shortly thereafter into an outright oyster feed. The Niobians dropped all pretense. They wanted oysters—with vanaka, with tabasco or with Kala berries. The more effete Earth preparations didn't rouse the slightest enthusiasm, but the bivalve found its place in the hearts and stomachs of the natives. The oysters ultimately ran out, but one thing was certain. There was a definite bond of affection between our two utterly dissimilar species.

The era of good feeling persisted for several hours. There was no more quiet undertone of polite suffering among our guests. They were enjoying themselves. The Agreement was signed with hardly an exception being taken to its clauses and wording.

Niobe became a full member of the Confederation, with sovereign planetary rights, and the viscaya concentrate began flowing aboard the ships waiting at the polar bases.

A day later I got orders to start winding up the BEE's installations on Niobe. The consular service would take over after I had finished... .

Lanceford looked at his watch. "Well, we're going to have time. It looks like they'll be late. Want to hear the rest of it?"

"Naturally," Perkins said. "I certainly wouldn't want you to stop here."

"Well," Lanceford continued, "the next four years weren't much."

We spent most of the time closing down the outpost and regional installations, but it took longer than I expected what with the difficulty in getting shipping space to move anything but viscaya concentrate off the planet. Of course, like any of the Confederation bureaus, the BEE died hard. With one thing and another, there were still a lot of our old people left. We still had the three main bases on the continental land masses in operating condition, plus a few regional experiment stations on Alpha Continent and the Marine Biology Labs on Varnel Island. I'd just closed

the last regional stations on Beta and Gamma when Heinz Bergdorf paid me an official call.

Heinz was the senior biologist on Varnel. He was a good looking lad of Teutonic ancestry, one of those big blond kids who fool you. He didn't look like a scientist, but his skull held more knowledge of Niobe's oceans than was good for a man. He would have to unlearn a lot of it before he took his next job, or so I thought at the time.

Anyway, Heinz came into my office looking like someone had stolen his favorite fishnet. The expression of Olympian gloom on his beak-nosed face would have done credit to Zeus. It didn't take any great amount of brains to see that Heinz was worried. It stuck out all over him. He draped himself limply in the chair beside my desk.

"We've got troubles, Chief," he announced.

I grinned at him. I knew perfectly well why he was here. Something had come up that was too big for him to handle. That was Heinz's only fault, a belief in the omnipotence of higher authority. If he couldn't handle it, it was a certainty that I could—even though I knew nothing of either his specialty or his problems. However, I liked the man. I did my best to give him the fatherly advice he occasionally needed, although he would have been better off half the time if he hadn't taken it.

"Well, what's the trouble now?" I asked. "From the look on your face it must be unpleasant. Or maybe you're just suffering from indigestion."

"It's not indigestion, Chief."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. Tell me so I can worry too."

I didn't like the way he looked. Of course, I'd been expecting trouble for the past year. Things had been going far too smoothly.

"Oysters!" Bergdorf said laconically.

"Oysters?"

I looked at him incredulously. Bergdorf sat straight up in his chair and faced me. There was no humor in his eyes. "For God's sake! You frightened me for a moment. You're joking, I hope."

"Far from it," Bergdorf replied. "I said oysters and I mean oysters. It's no joke! Just who was the unutterable idiot who planted them here?"

It took a minute before I remembered. "Hartmann," I said. "Of the BIT. He ordered them delivered at the request of Kron Avar and Tovan Harl. I suppose Harl planted them. I never paid very much attention to it."

"You should have. It would have been better if they had imported Bengal tigers! How long ago did this infernal insanity happen?"

"Right after the Agreement was signed, I guess. I'm sure it was no earlier than that, because Niobians met up with oysters for the first time

at that affair." I still didn't get it, but there was no doubt that Heinz was serious. I tried to remember something about oysters, but other than the fact that they were good to eat and produced pearls I could think of nothing. Yet Bergdorf looked like the end of the world was at hand. There was something here that didn't add up. "Well, get on with it," I said. "As far as marine biology is concerned I'm as innocent as a Lyrani-an virgin. Tell me—what's wrong with the oysters?"

"Nothing! That's the trouble. They're nice healthy specimens of terrestrial *Ostrea lurida*. We found a floating limb with about a dozen spat clinging to it."

"Spat?"

"Immature oysters."

"Oh. Is that bad?"

"Sure it's bad. I suppose I'd better explain," Bergdorf said. "On Earth an oyster wouldn't be anything to worry about, even though it produces somewhere between sixteen and sixty million fertile eggs every year. On Earth this tremendous fertility is necessary for survival, but here on Niobe where there are no natural enemies to speak of, it's absolutely deadly!

"Just take these dozen spat we found. Year after next, they'd be breeding size, and would produce about three hundred million larvae. If everything went right, some three years later those three hundred million would produce *nine thousand trillion* baby oysters! Can you image how much territory nine thousand trillion oysters would cover?"

I stopped listening right then, and started looking at the map of Niobe pinned on the wall. "Good Lord! They'd cover the whole eastern seaboard of Alpha from pole to pole."

Bergdorf said smugly, "Actually, you're a bit over on your guess. Considering the short free swimming stage of the larvae, the slow eastern seaboard currents, poor bottom conditions and overcrowding, I doubt if they would cover more than a thousand miles of coastline by the fourth year. Most of them would die from environmental pressures.

"But that isn't the real trouble. Niobe's oceans aren't like Earth's. They're shallow. It's a rare spot that's over forty fathoms deep. As a result, oysters can grow almost anywhere. And that's what'll happen if they aren't stopped. Inside of two decades they'll destroy this world!"

"You're being an alarmist," I said.

"Not so much as you might think. I don't suppose that the oysters will invade dry land and chase the natives from one rain puddle to another, but they'll grow without check, build oyster reefs that'll menace

navigation, change the chemical composition of Niobe's oceans, pollute the water with organic debris of their rotting bodies, and so change the ecological environment of this world that only the hardest and most adaptable life forms will be able to survive this!"

"But they'll be self-limiting," I protested.

"Sure. But by the time they limit themselves, they will eliminate about everything else."

"If you're right, then, there's only one thing to do. We'll have to let the natives know what the score is and start taking steps to get rid of them."

"Oh, I'm right. I don't think you'll find anyone who'll disagree with me. We kicked this around at the Lab for quite a spell before I came up here with it."

"Then you've undoubtedly thought of some way to get rid of them."

"Of course. That was one of the first things we did. The answer's obvious."

"Not to me."

"Sure. Starfish. They'll swamp up the extra oysters in jig time."

"But won't the starfish get too numerous?"

"No. They die off pretty fast without a source of food supply. From what we can find out about Niobe's oceans, there is virtually no acceptable food for starfish other than oysters and some microscopic animal life that wouldn't sustain an adult."

"Okay, I believe you. But you still leave me cold. I can't remember anything about a starfish that would help him break an oyster shell."

Bergdorf grinned. "I see you need a course in marine biology. Here's a thumbnail sketch. First, let's take the oyster. He has a big muscle called an adductor that closes his shell. For a while he can exert a terrific pull, but a steady tension of about nine hundred grams tires him out after an hour or so. Then the muscle relaxes and the shell gapes open. Now the starfish can exert about thirteen hundred grams of tension with his sucker-like tube feet, and since he has so many of them he doesn't have to use them all at one time. So, by shifting feet as they get tired, he can exert this pull indefinitely.

"The starfish climbs up on the oyster shell, attaches a few dozen tube feet to the outside of each valve and starts to pull. After a while the oyster gets tired, the shell opens up, and the starfish pushes its stomach out through its mouth opening, wraps the stomach around the soft parts of the oyster and digests it right in the shell!"

I shuddered.

"Gruesome, isn't it?" Bergdorf asked happily. "But it's nothing to worry about. Starfish have been eating oysters on the half shell for millions of years. In fact I'll bet that a starfish eats more oysters in its lifetime than does the most confirmed oyster-addict."

"It's not the fact that they eat them," I said feebly. "It's the way they do it. It makes me ill!"

"Why should it? After all a starfish and a human being have a lot in common. Like them, you have eaten oysters on the half shell, and they're usually alive when you gulp them down. I can't see where our digestive juices are any easier on the oyster than those of a starfish."

"Remind me never to eat another raw oyster," I said. "On second thought you won't have to. You've ruined my appetite for them forever."

Bergdorf chuckled.

"Well, now that you've disposed of one of my eating habits," I said bitterly, "let's get back to the problem. I presume that you'll have to find where the oysters are before you start in working them over with starfish."

"You've hit the reason why I'm here. That's the big problem. I want to find their source."

"Don't you know?"

"I can make a pretty good guess. You see, we picked this limb out of the Equatorial current. As you know, Varnel Island is situated right at the western termination of the current. We don't get much littoral stuff unless it comes from the Islands or West Beta. And as far as I can figure the islands are the best bet. These spat probably came from the Piralones, that island group in the middle of the current about halfway across."

I nodded. "It would be a good bet. They're uninhabited. If Harl wanted an isolated spot to conduct oyster planting experiments, I couldn't think of a better location. Nobody in his right mind would visit that place willingly. The islands support the damndest assortment of siths you ever saw."

"If that's where it is," Bergdorf said, "we can thank heaven for the natives' suspicious nature. That location may help us save this world!"

I laughed at him. "Don't be so grim, Heinz—or so godlike. We're not going to save any worlds."

"Someone has to save them."

"We don't qualify. What we'll do is chase this business down. We'll find out where the oysters come from, get an idea of how bad things are and then let the Niobians know about it. If anyone is going to save this planet it won't be a bunch of Confederation exploration specialists."

Bergdorf sighed. "You're right, of course."

I slapped him on the shoulder. "Cheer up, Heinz." I turned to my appointment calendar and checked it over. There was nothing on it that couldn't wait a few days. "Tell you what," I continued. "I need a vacation from this place. We'll take my atomic job and go oyster hunting. It ought to be fun."

Bergdorf's grin was like a sunrise on Kardon.

I brought the 'copter down slowly through the overcast, feeling my way cautiously down to the ground that radar told me was somewhere below. We were hardly a hundred and fifty meters up before it became visible through the drenching tropic rain. Unless you've seen it you can't imagine what rain is really like until you've been in the Niobian tropics. It literally swamps everything, including visibility.

It was the Piralones all right.

The last time I'd seen them was when I led the rescue party that pulled Wilson Chung and his passengers out of the Baril Ocean, but they were still the same, tiny deserted spots of land surrounded by coral reefs. We were over the biggest one of the group, a rounded hummock barely a kilometer in diameter, surrounded by a barrier reef of coral. Between the reef and the island a shallow lagoon lay in sullen grayness, its surface broken into innumerable tiny wavelets by the continual splash of rain. The land itself was a solid mass of olive-green vegetation that ended abruptly at a narrow beach.

"Well, we're here," I said. "Grim looking place, isn't it?"

"Whoever spoke of the beauties of tropical islands didn't have Niobe in mind," Bergdorf agreed. "This place looks like something left behind by a cow."

I couldn't help the chuckle. The simile was too close for comfort. I tilted the rotors and we went down to hover about ten meters off the beach. Bergdorf pointed down the beach. I headed the 'copter in that direction as Bergdorf looked out of the bubble, intently scanning the waters of the lagoon. Finally he looked up with an expression of understanding on his lean face.

"No wonder I missed them!" he murmured with awe. "There are so many that there's no floor of the lagoon to spot them against. They cover the entire bottom! You might as well set her down here; it's as good a place as any."

I throttled back and landed the whirlybird on the beach. "You had your quota of vorkum?" I asked as Bergdorf reached for the door handle.

The biologist made a wry face. "Naturally. You think I'd be fool enough to go outside without it?"

"I wouldn't know. All I'm sure of is that if you're going to get out here, you'd better be loaded." I followed after him as he opened the door and jumped down to the ground.

A small horde of siths instantly left the cover of the jungle and buzzed out to investigate. A few years ago, that would have been the signal for ray beams at fan aperture, but both Bergdorf and I ignored them, trusting in the protection of the vorkum. The beasties made a tactical pass at Heinz, thought the better of it and came wheeling over in my direction. I could almost see the disappointed look in their eyes as they caught my aura, put on the brakes and returned disappointed to their shelter under the broadleaves. Whatever vorkum did, it certainly convinced insects that we were inedible and antisocial.

One or two ventured back and buzzed hopefully around our heads before giving up in disgust.

"It beats me what they live on," Bergdorf said, gesturing at the iridescent flash of the last bloodsucker as it disappeared beneath the broadleaves.

"As long as it isn't us, I don't give a damn," I said. "Maybe they live on decaying vegetable matter until something live and bloody comes along. Anyway, they seem to get along."

Bergdorf walked the few steps to the water's edge. "I won't even have to go swimming," he said as he walked into the water a few steps, bent and came up with what looked like a handful of rocks.

"Oysters?" I asked, turning one over in my hand.

"Yep. Nice little *O. lurida*. About three years old, I'd guess, and just ripe for breeding. You know, I've never seen them growing so close to the shore. They must be stacked on top of each other out there a ways. There's probably millions of them in this lagoon alone!"

"Well, we've found where they're coming from. Now all that's left is to figure out what to do about it."

"We'd still better check Beta. They might possibly have reached there."

"Not unless someone's planted them," I said. "You're forgetting the ocean currents."

"No. I was thinking of planted areas."

"Well, think again. You may know your biology, but I know Niobians. They're too suspicious to bring untried things too close to where they live. They've been that way as long as I can remember them, and I don't

think that anything—even something as delightful as an oyster—would make them change overnight."

"I hope you're right."

"Oh, we'll check Beta, all right," I said. "But you can send a couple of your boys to do it. There's no sense in our wasting time with it."

I heard the noise behind us before Bergdorf did. We turned in time to see four Niobians emerge from the jungle and glide purposefully toward us. The tribal tattoos on their chests identified them as members of Tovan Harl's commune. I nudged Heinz and murmured, "We've got company."

The natives approached to within a few paces. They stood politely to leeward while one of their number approached. "I'm sorry," he said without the normal introduction, "but this is leased land. You will have to leave at once. And you will please return the oysters to the lagoon. It is not permitted to remove them."

"Oh, all right," I said. "We're through here anyway. We'll visit the other islands and then be off."

"The other islands are also leased property. When you leave I will radio the other guards, and you will not be permitted to land."

"This is not according to your customs," I protested.

"I realize that, Mr. Lanceford," the native said. "But I have given oath to keep all trespassers out."

I nodded. It wasn't usual. I wondered what Harl had in mind—possibly a planetary monopoly. If that was his plan, he was due for a surprise.

"That's very commendable," Bergdorf said, "but these oysters are going with me. They are needed as evidence."

"I'm sorry, sir," the native said. "The oysters stay here."

"Don't be a fool, Heinz," I interjected. "They're in the right. The oysters are their property. If you try to take them you'll be in trouble up to your ears."

"But I need those oysters, Arthur! Probably the only adult oyster tissue on Niobe is on these islands. I need a sample of it."

"Well, it's your neck." I turned to the native. "Don't be too hard on him," I said. "He's quite an important man."

The Niobian nodded and grinned. "Don't worry, sir. He won't feel a thing. But I really wish to apologize for our rudeness. If conditions were different—"

He paused and turned toward Bergdorf who was climbing into the 'copter with the oysters still in his hand.

I wasn't surprised that he didn't make it. In fact, I'd have been more surprised if he had. Heinz crumpled to the ground beside the ship. One of the natives came forward, took the oysters from his limp hand and threw them back into the lagoon.

"All right," I said to the spokesman. "You fellows clobbered him, so now you can get him into the ship."

"That is only fair," the native said. "We do not want to cause you any extra inconvenience." He gestured to his companions. Between them they got Bergdorf's limp body into the ship and strapped into one of the seats. They got out, I got in, and in a minute the two of us got out of there, going straight up through to overcast to get a celestial bearing for home.

I kept looking at Bergdorf's limp body and grinning.

It was nearly an hour later before Bergdorf woke up. "What hit me?" he asked fuzzily.

"Subsonics," I said. "They should have scared you to death."

"I fainted?"

"Sure you did. You couldn't help it. They hit like a ton of brick."

"They certainly do," he said ruefully.

"They can kill," I said. "I've seen them do it. The Niobians generate them naturally, and they can focus them fairly well. Probably this quality was one of their forms of defense against predators in their early days. It's a survival trait; and when there are enough natives present to augment the impulses they can be downright nasty."

Bergdorf nodded. "I know," he said. He stopped talking and looked out over the sun-drenched top of the overcast. "It looks like Tovan Harl wants to keep this oyster farm a private matter. In a way he's doing us a favor, but I'd still feel happier if I had one or two of those oysters."

"Why do you need them?"

"Well, I figured on getting a couple of the Navy's organic detectors and setting them for oyster protoplasm. You know how sensitive those gadgets are. There might be a small but significant change in oyster protoplasm since it has arrived here."

"Well, you don't need to worry," I said. "I put one of your pets in my pocket before the natives showed up, so you've got what you need." I pulled the oyster out and handed it to him. It didn't look any the worse for its recent rough treatment.

Bergdorf grinned. "I knew I could trust you, Chief. You're sneaky!"

I laughed at him.

We arrived back at Alpha without trouble. I shooed Bergdorf back to Varnel with the one oyster and a promise that I'd back him up in any requisitions he cared to make. After that I checked up on the BEE business I had neglected for the past couple of days and, finally, late that night took one of the Base's floaters and drove slowly down the trail to Kron's village.

While Earth-style civilization had done much to improve transport and communication on Niobe, it hadn't—and still hasn't for that matter—produced a highway that can stand up to the climate. Roads simply disappear in the bottomless mud. So whatever vehicular transport exists on Niobe is in the form of floaters, whose big sausage-shaped tires give enough flotation to stay on top of the ooze, and sufficient traction to move through the morass that is Niobe's surface. They're clumsy, slow and hard to steer. But they get you there—which is something you can't say about other vehicles.

Kron's village had changed somewhat since I first visited it. The industrial section was new. The serried ranks of low dural buildings gleamed metallically in the glare of the floater's lights, glistening with the sheets of water that ran from their roofs and sides. The power-broadcast station that stood in the center of the village hadn't been there either. But other than that everything was pretty much the same as it always had been, an open space in the jungle filled with stone-walled, thatch-roofed houses squatting gloomily in the endless rain.

The industry, such as it was, was concentrated solely upon the production of viscaya concentrate. It had made little difference in the Niobian way of life, which was exactly as the natives wanted it.

It was odd, I reflected, how little change had taken place in Niobian society despite better than two decades of exposure to Confederation technology. Actually, the Confederation could leave tomorrow, and would hardly be missed. There would be no cultural vacuum. The strangers would simply be gone. Possibly some of our artifacts would be used. The atomic power-broadcast station would possibly stay, and so would the high-powered radio. Perhaps some of the gadgetry the natives had acquired from us would be used until it was worn out, but the pattern of the old ways would stay pretty much as it had always been. For Niobian culture was primarily philosophical rather than technological, and it preferred to remain that way.

I parked my floater beside the house that had sheltered Kron as long as I had known him. I entered without announcing myself.

As an old friend I had this privilege, although I seldom used it. But if I had come formally there would have been an endless rigmarole of social convention that would have had to be satisfied before we could get down to business. I didn't want to waste the time.

Kron was seated behind a surprisingly modern desk, reading a book by the light of a Confederation glowtube. I looked at its title—*The Analects of Confucius*—and blinked. I'd heard of it. It and Machiavelli's *Prince* are classics on governmental personality and philosophy, but I had never read it. Yet here, hundreds of light years from the home world, this naked alien was reading and obviously enjoying that ancient work. It made me feel oddly ashamed of myself.

He looked up at me, nodded a greeting and laid the book down with a faint expression of regret on his doglike face. I found a chair and sat down silently. I wondered how he found time to read. My job with the BEE kept me busy every day of the 279-day year. And his, which was more important and exacting than mine, gave him time to read philosophy! I sighed. It was something I could never understand.

I waited for him to speak. As host, it was his duty to open the wall of silence which separated us.

"Greetings, friend Lanceford," Kron said. "My eyes are happy with the pleasure of beholding you." He spoke in the ancient Niobian formula of hospitality. But he made it sound as though he really meant it.

"It's a double joy to behold the face of my friend and to hear his voice," I replied in the same language. Then I switched to Confed for the business I had in mind. Their polite forms are far too clumsy and uncomfortable for business use; it takes half a day to get an idea across. "It seems as though I'm always coming to you with trouble," I began.

"What now?" Kron asked. "Every time I see you, I hope that we can relax and enjoy our friendship, but every time you are burdened. Are you Earthmen forever filled with troubles or does my world provoke them?" He smiled at me.

"A little of both, I suppose," I said.

Kron hummed—the Niobian equivalent of laughter. "I've been observing you Earthmen for the past twenty years, and I have yet to see one of you completely relaxed. You take yourselves much too seriously. After all, my friend, life is short at best. We should enjoy some of it. Now tell me your troubles, and perhaps there is no cause to worry."

"You're wrong, Kron. There is plenty of cause to worry. This can affect the well-being of everything on this world."

Kron's face sharpened into lines of interest. "Continue, friend Lanceford."

"It's those oysters the BIT sent you a few years ago. They're getting out of hand."

Kron hummed. "I was afraid that it—"

"—was something serious!" I finished. "That's what I told Heinz Bergdorf when he came to me with this story. Now sober down and listen! This *is* serious!"

"It sounds pretty grim," Kron said after I had finished. "But how is it that your people didn't foresee the danger? Something as viciously reproductive as the oyster should be common knowledge."

"Not on our world. You see, the study of sea life is a specialized science on Earth. It is one of the faults of our technological civilization that almost everyone must specialize from the time he enters secondary school. Unless one specializes in marine biology, one generally knows little or nothing about it."

"Odd. Very odd. But then, you Earthmen always were a peculiar race. Now, if I heard you right, I believe that you said there is an animal on your world which preys upon these oysters. A starfish?"

"Yes."

"Won't this animal be as destructive as the oyster?"

"Bergdorf doesn't think so, and I trust his judgment."

"Won't this animal also kill our Komal? They are like these oysters of yours in a way."

"But they burrow, and the starfish doesn't. They'll be safe enough."

Kron sighed. "I knew that association with you people would prove to be a mixed blessing." He shrugged his shoulders and turned his chair to his desk. A Niobian face appeared on the screen. "Call a Council meeting and let me know when it is ready," Kron ordered.

"Yes, Councilor," the face replied.

"Well, that's that. Now we can relax until the Council manages to get together."

"How long will that take?"

"I haven't the least idea," Kron said. "Several days—several weeks. It all depends upon how soon we can get enough Council members together to conduct business."

I said unhappily, "I'd like to have your outlook but we're fighting against time!"

"You Earthmen pick the most impossible opponents. You should learn to work with time rather than against it." He pulled at one ear reflectively. "You know, it is strange that your race could produce ethical philosophers like this one." He tapped the *Analects* with a webbed forefinger. "Such contrast of thought on a single world is almost incredible!"

"You haven't seen the half of it!" I chuckled. "But I'm inclined to agree with you. Earth is an incredible world."

Fortunately there was a battle cruiser in the Polar spaceport on a goodwill mission. We had no trouble about getting the detectors Bergdorf needed, plus a crew to run them. The Navy is co-operative about such things, and every officer knows the importance of the BEE on a planetary operation. We could have had the entire cruiser if we had wanted it.

A week later the four Marine Lab ships, each equipped with a detector, started a search of Niobe's oceans. Their atomic powerplants could drive them along at a respectable speed. Bergdorf and I expected a preliminary report within a month.

We weren't disappointed.

The results were shocking, but not unexpected. Preliminary search revealed no oysters in the other two major oceans, but the Baril Ocean was badly infested. There were groups and islands of immature oysters along the entire course of the Equatorial current and the tropical coast of Alpha. Practically every island group in the central part of the ocean showed traces of the bivalves. It was amazing how far they had spread. Even the northern shallows had a number of thriving young colonies.

Bergdorf was right. Another year and we'd have been swamped. As it was it was nothing to laugh about.

The news reached Kron just before the Council meeting, which, like most of Niobe's off-season politics, had been delayed time after time. Since a Council meeting requires an attendance of ninety per cent of the Council, it had been nearly impossible to schedule an assembly where a quorum could be present. But our news broadcasts over the BEE radio reached every corner of the planet, and the note of urgency in them finally produced results.

The Niobians held the emergency session at Base Alpha, where our radio could carry the proceedings to the entire planet. Whatever else they may be, Niobian government sessions are open to the public. Since the advent of radio, practically the entire public listens in.

Like the natives, I listened too. I wasn't surprised when Kron appeared in my office, his eyes red and swollen from lack of sleep, but with a big

grin on his face that exposed his sharp sectorial teeth. "Well, that's over, friend Lanceford. Now send us your starfish."

"That's easier said than done," I replied gloomily. "I've contacted the Confederation. They won't ship twenty pounds of starfish—let alone the twenty thousand tons Bergdorf says we'll need!"

"Why not? Are they crazy? Or do they want to destroy us?"

"Neither. This is just a sample of bureaucracy at work. You see, the starfish is classed as a pest on Earth. Confederation regulations forbid the exportation of pests to member planets."

"But we need them!"

"I realize that, but the fact hasn't penetrated to the highest brass." I laughed humorlessly. "The big boys simply can't see it. By the time we marshal enough evidence to convince them, it will be too late. Knowing how Administration operates, I'd say that it'd take at least a year for them to become convinced. And another two months for them to act."

"But we simply can't wait that long! Your man Bergdorf has convinced me. We're in deadly danger!"

"You're going to have to wait," I said grimly. "Unless you can find some way to jar them out of their rut."

Kron looked thoughtful. "I think that can be done, friend Lanceford. As I recall, your bureaus are timid things. Furthermore, we have something they want pretty bad. I think we can apply pressure."

"But won't your people object? Doesn't that deny your basic philosophy of non-interference with others?"

Kron grinned ferociously. "Not at all. Like others of your race, you have never understood the real significance of our social philosophy. What it actually boils down to is simply this—we respect the customs and desires of others but require in turn that they respect ours."

"You mean that you will use force against the rest of the Confederation? But you can't do that! You wouldn't stand a chance against the Navy."

"We will first try a method we have used with our own tribes who get out of line. I don't think anything more will be necessary." Kron's voice was flat. "It goes against the grain to do this, but we are left no choice." He turned and left the room without a farewell, which was a measure of his agitation.

I sat there behind my desk wondering what the Niobians could do. Like my ex-boss Alvord Sims, I had a healthy respect for them. It just could be that they could do plenty.

They could.

Organization! Man, you've never seen anything like what the Niobians tossed at our startled heads! We always thought the Planetary Council was a loose and ineffective sort of thing, but what happened within the next twenty hours had to be seen to be believed. I saw it. But it was days before I believed it.

Within a day the natives had whipped up an organization, agreed on a plan of action and put it into effect. By noon of the next day Niobe was a closed planet. A message was sent to the Confederation informing them that Niobe was withdrawing until the emergency was over. An embargo was placed on all movement of shipping.

And everything stopped.

No factories operated. The big starfreighters stood idle and empty at the polar bases. Not one ounce of gerontin or its concentrate precursor left Niobe. Smiling groups of Niobians, using subsonics to enforce their demands, paralyzed everything the Confederation had operated on the planet. No one was hurt. The natives were still polite and friendly. But Confederation business came to an abrupt halt, and stayed halted.

It was utterly amazing! I had never heard of a planet-wide boycott before. But Niobe was entirely within her rights. The Confederation had to accept it.

And, of course, the Confederation capitulated. If the Niobians were fools enough to want pests as a condition of resuming viscaya shipments—well, it was their affair. The Confederation needed viscaya. It was willing to do almost anything to assure its continued supply.

With the full power of the Confederation turned to giving Niobe what she wanted, it wasn't long before the oysters were under control. We established a systematic seeding procedure for the starfish that kept arriving by the freighter load. In a few months Bergdorf reported that an ecological balance had been achieved.

"But didn't the starfish create another pest problem?" Perkins asked.

"Not at all," Lanceford said. "I told you that the Niobians had an odd sense of taste. Starfish proved to be quite acceptable to the Niobian palate. They merely added another item to Niobe's food supply."

Perkins shuddered delicately. "I wouldn't eat one of those things in a million years."

"You're going to have to eat vorkum if you expect to survive on this world. Compared to vorkum, a starfish is sheer pleasure! But that wasn't

the end of it," Lanceford added with a smile. "You see, shortly after things had simmered down to normal Kron dropped into my office.

"I think, friend Lanceford,' he said, 'that we are going to have to create a permanent organization to keep unwanted visitors out. This little affair has been a needed lesson. I have been reading about your planetary organization, and I think a thing like your Customs Service is vitally needed on our world to prevent future undesirable biological importations.'

"I agree,' I replied. 'Anything that would prevent a repetition of this business would be advisable.'

"So that was how the Customs Service started. The insigne you will recognize as a starfish opening an oyster. Unfortunately the Niobians are quite literal minded. When they say any biological importation will be quarantined and examined, they mean Confederation citizens too!

"And that, of course, was the entering wedge. You'll find things quite homelike once you get out of here. The natives have developed an organization that's a virtual copy of our Administrative Branch. Customs, as you know, is a triumph of the bureaucratic system, and naturally the idea spread. Once the natives got used to a permanent government organization that was available at all times, it was only a question of time before the haphazard tribal organization became replaced by a planetary union. You could almost say that it was an inevitable consequence."

Lanceford grinned. "The Niobians didn't realize that the importation of foreign Customs was almost as bad as the importation of foreign animals!" He chuckled at the unconscious pun.

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