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In order to make Izaak Walton's sport complete, there must be an angler, a fish, and some bait. All three existed on Arz but there was a question as to which was which.

The Anglers of Arz

By Roger Dee

Illustrated by BOB MARTIN

THE THIRD night of the *Marco Four's* landfall on the moonless Altarian planet was a repetition of the two before it, a nine-hour intermission of drowsy, pastoral peace. Navigator Arthur Farrell—it was his turn to stand watch—was sitting at an open-side port with a magnoscanner ready; but in spite of his vigilance he had not exposed a film when the inevitable pre-dawn rainbow began to shimmer over the eastern ocean.

Sunrise brought him alert with a jerk, frowning at sight of two pinkish, bipedal Arzian fishermen posted on the tiny coral islet a quarter-mile offshore, their blank triangular faces turned stolidly toward the beach.

"They're at it again," Farrell called, and dropped to the mossy turf outside. "Roll out on the double! I'm going to magnofilm this!"

Stryker and Gibson came out of

their sleeping cubicles reluctantly, belting on the loose shorts which all three wore in the balmy Arzian climate. Stryker blinked and yawned as he let himself through the port, his fringe of white hair tousled and his naked paunch sweating. He looked, Farrell thought for the thousandth time, more like a retired cook than like the veteran commander of a Ter-ran Colonies expedition.

Gibson followed, stretching his powerfully-muscled body like a wrestler to throw off the effects of sleep. Gibson was linguist-ethnologist of the crew, a blocky man in his early thirties with thick black hair and heavy brows that shaded a square, humorless face.

"Any sign of the squids yet?" he asked.

"They won't show up until the dragons come," Farrell said. He adjusted the light filter of the mag-

noscanner and scowled at Stryker. "Lee, I wish you'd let me break up the show this time with a dis-beam. This butchery gets on my nerves."

Stryker shielded his eyes with his hands against the glare of sun on water. "You know I can't do that, Arthur. These Arzians may turn out to be Fifth Order beings or higher, and under Terran Regulations our tampering with what may be a basic culture-pattern would amount to armed invasion. We'll have to crack that cackle-and-grunt language of theirs and learn something of their mores before we can interfere."

Farrell turned an irritable stare on the incurious group of Arzians gathering, nets and fishing spears in hand, at the edge of the sheltering bramble forest.

"What stumps me is their motivation," he said. "Why do the fools go out to that islet every night, when they must know damned well what will happen next morning?"

Gibson answered him with an older problem, his square face puzzled. "For that matter, what became of the city I saw when we came in through the stratosphere? It must be a tremendous thing, yet we've searched the entire globe in the scouter and found nothing but water and a scattering of little islands like this one, all covered with bramble. It wasn't a city these pink fishers could have built, either. The architecture was beyond them by a million years."

STRYKER and Farrell traded baffled looks. The city had become something of a fixation with

Gibson, and his dogged insistence—coupled with an irritating habit of being right—had worn their patience thin.

"There never was a city here, Gib," Stryker said. "You dozed off while we were making planetfall, that's all."

Gibson stiffened resentfully, but Farrell's voice cut his protest short. "Get set! Here they come!"

Out of the morning rainbow dropped a swarm of winged lizards, twenty feet in length and a glistening chlorophyll green in the early light. They stooped like hawks upon the islet offshore, burying the two Arzian fishers instantly under their snapping, threshing bodies. Then around the outcrop the sea boiled whitely, churned to foam by a sudden uprushing of black, octopoid shapes.

"The squids," Stryker grunted. "Right on schedule. Two seconds too late, as usual, to stop the slaughter."

A barrage of barbed tentacles lashed out of the foam and drove into the melee of winged lizards. The lizards took the air at once, leaving behind three of their number who disappeared under the surface like harpooned seals. No trace remained of the two Arzian natives.

"A neat example of dog eat dog," Farrell said, snapping off the magnoscanner. "Do any of those beauties look like city-builders, Gib?"

Chattering pink natives straggled past from the shelter of the thorn forest, ignoring the Earthmen, and lined the casting ledges along the beach to begin their day's fishing.

"Nothing we've seen yet could



There were two pinkish, bipedal fishermen on the tiny islet.

have built that city," Gibson said stubbornly. "But it's here somewhere, and I'm going to find it. Will either of you be using the scouter today?"

Stryker threw up his hands. "I've a mountain of data to collate, and Arthur is off duty after standing watch last night. Help yourself, but you won't find anything."

The scouter was a speeding dot on the horizon when Farrell crawled into his sleeping cubicle a short time later, leaving Stryker to mutter over his litter of notes. Sleep did not come to him at once; a vague sense of something overlooked prodded irritatingly at the back of his consciousness, but it was not until drowsiness had finally overtaken him that the discrepancy assumed definite form.

He recalled then that on the first day of the *Marco's* planetfall one of the pink fishers had fallen from a casting ledge into the water, and had all but drowned before his fellows pulled him out with extended spear-shafts. Which meant that the fishers could not swim, else some would surely have gone in after him.

And the *Marco's* crew had explored Arz exhaustively without finding any slightest trace of boats or of boat landings. The train of association completed itself with automatic logic, almost rousing Farrell out of his doze.

"I'll be damned," he muttered. "No boats, and they don't swim. *Then how the devil do they get out to that islet?*"

He fell asleep with the paradox unresolved.

STRYKER was still humped over his records when Farrell came out of his cubicle and broke a packaged meal from the food locker. The visicom over the control board hummed softly, its screen blank on open channel.

"Gibson found his lost city yet?" Farrell asked, and grinned when Stryker snorted.

"He's scouring the daylight side now," Stryker said. "Arthur, I'm going to ground Gib tomorrow, much as I dislike giving him a direct order. He's got that phantom city on the brain, and he lacks the imagination to understand how dangerous to our assignment an obsession of that sort can be."

Farrell shrugged. "I'd agree with you offhand if it weren't for Gib's bullheaded habit of being right. I hope he finds it soon, if it's here. I'll probably be standing his watch until he's satisfied."

Stryker looked relieved. "Would you mind taking it tonight? I'm completely bushed after today's logging."

Farrell waved a hand and took up his magnoscanner. It was dark outside already, the close, soft night of a moonless tropical world whose moist atmosphere absorbed even starlight. He dragged a chair to the open port and packed his pipe, settling himself comfortably while Stryker mixed a nightcap before turning in.

Later he remembered that Stryker dissolved a tablet in his glass, but at the moment it meant nothing. In a matter of minutes the older man's snoring drifted to him, a sound faintly irritating against the velvety hush outside.

Farrell lit his pipe and turned to the inconsistencies he had uncovered. The Arzians did not swim, and without boats . . .

It occurred to him then that there had been two of the pink fishers on the islet each morning, and the coincidence made him sit up suddenly, startled. Why two? Why not three or four, or only one?

He stepped out through the open lock and paced restlessly up and down on the springy turf, feeling the ocean breeze soft on his face. Three days of dull routine logwork had built up a need for physical action that chafed his temper; he was intrigued and at the same time annoyed by the enigmatic relation that linked the Arzian fishers to the dragons and squids, and his desire to understand that relation was aggravated by the knowledge that Arz could be a perfect world for Terran colonization. That is, he thought wryly, if Terran colonists could stomach the weird custom pursued by its natives of committing suicide in pairs.

He went over again the improbable drama of the past three mornings, and found it not too unnatural until he came to the motivation and the means of transportation that placed the Arzians in pairs on the islet, when his whole fabric of speculation fell into a tangled snarl of inconsistencies. He gave it up finally; how could any Earthman rationalize the outlandish compulsions that actuated so alien a race?

He went inside again, and the sound of Stryker's muffled snoring fanned his restlessness. He made his decision abruptly, laying aside the magnoscanner for a hand-flash and

a pocket-sized audicom unit which he clipped to the belt of his shorts.

He did not choose a weapon because he saw no need for one. The torch would show him how the natives reached the outcrop, and if he should need help the audicom would summon Stryker. Investigating without Stryker's sanction was, strictly speaking, a breach of Terran Regulations, but—

"Damn Terran Regulations," he muttered. "I've got to *know*."

Farrell snapped on the torch at the edge of the thorn forest and entered briskly, eager for action now that he had begun. Just inside the edge of the bramble he came upon a pair of Arzians curled up together on the mossy ground, sleeping soundly, their triangular faces wholly blank and unrevealing.

He worked deeper into the underbrush and found other sleeping couples, but nothing else. There were no humming insects, no twittering night-birds or scurrying rodents. He had worked his way close to the center of the island without further discovery and was on the point of turning back, disgusted, when something bulky and powerful seized him from behind.

A sharp sting burned his shoulder, wasp-like, and a sudden overwhelming lassitude swept him into a darkness deeper than the Arzian night. His last conscious thought was not of his own danger, but of Stryker—asleep and unprotected behind the *Marco's* open port. . . .

HE WAS standing erect when he woke, his back to the open sea and a prismatic glimmer of

early dawn rainbow shining on the water before him. For a moment he was totally disoriented; then from the corner of an eye he caught the pinkish blur of an Arzian fisher standing beside him, and cried out hoarsely in sudden panic when he tried to turn his head and could not.

He was on the coral outcropping offshore, and except for the involuntary muscles of balance and respiration his body was paralyzed.

The first red glow of sunrise blurred the reflected rainbow at his feet, but for some seconds his shuttling mind was too busy to consider the danger of predicament. *Whatever brought me here anesthetized me first*, he thought. *That sting in my shoulder was like a hypo needle.*

Panic seized him again when he remembered the green flying-lizards; more seconds passed before he gained control of himself, sweating with the effort. He had to get help. If he could switch on the audicom at his belt and call Stryker . . .

He bent every ounce of his will toward raising his right hand, and failed.

His arm was like a limb of lead, its inertia too great to budge. He relaxed the effort with a groan, sweating again when he saw a fiery half-disk of sun on the water, edges blurred and distorted by tiny surface ripples.

On shore he could see the *Marco Four* resting between thorn forest and beach, its silvered sides glistening with dew. The port was still open, and the empty carrier rack in the bow told him that Gibson had not yet returned with the scouter.

He grew aware then that sensation was returning to him slowly, that the cold surface of the audicom unit at his hip—unfelt before—was pressing against the inner curve of his elbow. He bent his will again toward motion; this time the arm tensed a little, enough to send hope flaring through him. If he could put pressure enough against the stud . . .

The tiny click of its engaging sent him faint with relief.

"Stryker!" he yelled. "Lee, roll out—*Stryker!*"

The audicom hummed gently, without answer.

He gathered himself for another shout, and recalled with a chill of horror the tablet Stryker had mixed into his nightcap the night before. Worn out by his work, Stryker had made certain that he would not be easily disturbed.

The flattened sun-disk on the water brightened and grew rounder. Above its reflected glare he caught a flicker of movement, a restless suggestion of flapping wings.

HE TRIED again. "Stryker, help me! I'm on the islet!"

The audicom crackled. The voice that answered was not Stryker's, but Gibson's.

"Farrell! What the devil are you doing on that butcher's block?"

Farrell fought down an insane desire to laugh. "Never mind that—get here fast, Gib! The flying-lizards—"

He broke off, seeing for the first time the octopods that ringed the outcrop just under the surface of the water, waiting with barbed ten-

tacles spread and yellow eyes studying him glassily. He heard the unmistakable flapping of wings behind and above him then, and thought with shock-born lucidity: *I wanted a backstage look at this show, and now I'm one of the cast.*

The scouter roared in from the west across the thorn forest, flashing so close above his head that he felt the wind of its passage. Almost instantly he heard the shrilling blast of its emergency bow jets as Gibson met the lizard swarm head on.

Gibson's voice came tinnily from the audicom. "Scattered them for the moment, Arthur—blinded the whole crew with the exhaust, I think. Stand fast, now. I'm going to pick you up."

The scouter settled on the outcrop beside Farrell, so close that the hot wash of its exhaust gases scorched his bare legs. Gibson put out thick brown arms and hauled him inside like a straw man, ignoring the native. The scouter darted for shore with Farrell lying across Gibson's knees in the cockpit, his head hanging half overside.

Farrell had a last dizzy glimpse of the islet against the rush of green water below, and felt his shaky laugh of relief stick in his throat. Two of the octopods were swimming strongly for shore, holding the rigid Arzian native carefully above water between them.

"Gib," Farrell croaked. "Gib, can you risk a look back? I think I've gone mad."

The scouter swerved briefly as Gibson looked back. "You're all right, Arthur. Just hang on tight. I'll explain everything when we get you safe in the *Marco*."

Farrell forced himself to relax, more relieved than alarmed by the painful pricking of returning sensation. "I might have known it, damn you," he said. "You found your lost city, didn't you?"

Gibson sounded a little disgusted, as if he were still angry with himself over some private stupidity. "I'd have found it sooner if I'd had any brains. It was under water, of course."

IN THE *Marco Four*, Gibson routed Stryker out of his cubicle and mixed drinks around, leaving Farrell comfortably relaxed in the padded control chair. The paralysis was still wearing off slowly, easing Farrell's fear of being permanently disabled.

"We never saw the city from the scouter because we didn't go high enough," Gibson said. "I realized that finally, remembering how they used high-altitude blimps during the First Wars to spot submarines, and when I took the scouter up far enough there it was, at the ocean bottom—a city to compare with anything men ever built."

Stryker stared. "A marine city? What use would sea-creatures have for buildings?"

"None," Gibson said. "I think the city must have been built ages ago—by men or by a manlike race, judging from the architecture—and was submerged later by a sinking of land masses that killed off the original builders and left Arz nothing but an oversized archipelago. The squids took over then, and from all appearances they've developed a culture of their own."

"I don't see it," Stryker complained, shaking his head. "The pink fishers—"

"Are cattle, or less," Gibson finished. "The octopods are the dominant race, and they're so far above Fifth Order that we're completely out of bounds here. Under Terran Regulations we can't colonize Arz. It would be armed invasion."

"Invasion of a squid world?" Farrell protested, baffled. "Why should surface colonization conflict with an undersea culture, Gib? Why couldn't we share the planet?"

"Because the octopods own the islands too, and keep them policed," Gibson said patiently. "They even own the pink fishers. It was one of the squid-people, making a dry-land canvass of his preserve here to pick a couple of victims for this morning's show, that carried you off last night."

"Behold a familiar pattern shaping up," Stryker said. He laughed suddenly, a great irrepressible below of sound. "Arz is a squid's

world, Arthur, don't you see? And like most civilized peoples, they're sportsmen. The flying-lizards are the game they hunt, and they raise the pink fishers for—"

Farrell swore in astonishment. "Then those poor devils are put out there deliberately, like worms on a hook—angling in reverse! No wonder I couldn't spot their motivation!"

Gibson got up and sealed the port, shutting out the soft morning breeze. "Colonization being out of the question, we may as well move on before the octopods get curious enough about us to make trouble. Do you feel up to the acceleration, Arthur?"

Farrell and Stryker looked at each other, grinning. Farrell said: "You don't think I want to stick here and be used for bait again, do you?"

He and Stryker were still grinning over it when Gibson, unamused, blasted the *Marco Four* free of Arz.

———— THE END ————