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Surfeit

by
Alan Dean Foster

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For many years I lived near the Santa Monica Pier, in greater Los Angeles. The Santa Monica Pier is the one you've seen in dozens of movies and television shows, the one with the old merry-go-round built on its shoreside end. (Remember it from the movie *The Sting*?)

Below the pier young men and women fake hara-kiri every day by surfing between the barnacle-encrusted pilings. This is called shooting the gap or shooting the pier. It goes on every day and you have to be nuts to try it.

Less daring, I rode the waves well clear of the dangerous pilings. Now I live in Arizona, where the big waves are more than scarce. But the memories linger, of salt on your lips and 'sand under your wetsuit, of the stormy days when the Big Ones would come rolling in all the way from Japan and only the skilled and/or foolhardy would chance the angry water. And as with all memories of early pleasures, sometimes those waves rise a little higher with each retelling...

The Monster was all mouth and no body, and you would hear it before you could see it.

Joao Acorizal knew of it without having to employ sight or sound. He knew of it through story and legends, which are far more descriptive than simple senses could be. He'd studied the history of the Monster, its whims and habits, colors and moods.

From the time he'd been a boy on Thalia Major and had first heard of the Monsters of Dis he knew someday he would confront and do battle with them. It was preordained.

His parents and friends had listened to his somber daydreaming and had laughed at him. If by some chance he one day managed to raise enough money to travel to far Dis he would cower fearfully before the Monster, too weak to confront it. One or two friends had actually seen tapes of the Monster and assured Joao it was too much for any man of Thalia to handle. Better to forget it and aim for the attainable.

Kirsi had been his wife for twenty years and hadn't been able to make him forget the dream.

She spoke as she paced the floor of their living room, her sandals clacking intermittently on the floor as she alternately crossed thick throw rugs and smooth ter-ratone tiles.

"I fail to understand you, Joao." She was waving her hands at him, as full of animated little gestures as the noisy macaques which roamed the trees in the garden behind the house. "You've worked hard all your life. So have I." She stopped, indicated the tastefully furnished, comfortable room.

"We'll never be rich, you and I, but we'll never go begging either. We've a good life. We've two fine children who are just old enough now to realize that their father is crazy. Everything we've worked for, all that we've built up together, you want to throw away to satisfy a childhood infatuation." She shook her head pityingly, her long black hair swirling against the back of the white print dress. "Husband of my life, I don't understand you."

Joao sighed and looked away from her, out the broad window which overlooked the beach. The sun was rising over the Atlantic. Tranquil waves broke like eggs against the sand. Thalia's sun, slightly yellower and smaller than Sol, turned the water to topaz. Thalia Minor, the twin world, was out of sight, hiding on the other side of the globe.

"We have more than enough money. The trip will not inconvenience us save for a little while."

"Money? You think I give a damn about money?" She came up behind him, locked her arms possessively around his waist, and leaned her head on his back. Her warmth sent a shiver through him, as it had on that first night twenty years ago.

"Money is nothing, husband. You are everything." She turned him around and gazed hard into his face, searching, trying to find the key to whatever drove him so she could somehow pull it from his mind and cast it into the sea. "I do not want you dead, Joao."

He smiled, though she couldn't see it. "Neither do I, Kirsi."

She pulled away sharply. "Then why are you in such a hurry to throw life aside? God knows you're no antique, but you're not a professional athlete either."

He turned and bent to kiss her gently. She made a fuss of flinching. "And that, my love, is precisely why I must go to Dis now, before it is too late..."

Conversation and Kirsi seemed so far away now. He was on Dis at last, and soon he would confront the Monster and its relatives. For thirty years he'd dreamed of the challenge to come. Thirty years of practice, thirty years of honing his skills, thirty years of dreaming, about to become reality.

That is, if he could muster one day's worth of great courage.

His eyes tried to penetrate the salt mist as he and his companion challengers made their way across the damp, barren rocks. A few low scrubs clung tenaciously to the surface. Sea crustaceans crawled fitfully from crack to crevice.

There were twenty-four competitors in the group. Eighteen men and six women, ranging in age from eighteen to forty-two. Joao was grateful he was not the oldest. Only second oldest.

But not in spirit, he told himself firmly, and not in heart.

Salt spray drifted foglike around them. The raucous complaining of seabirds mixed with the sibilant hissing of ichthyorniths filled the moist air of morning.

The walk was a ritual part of the contest. No spectators were allowed to join the competitors on the walk, no judges or media reporters. The first confrontation with the Monster would be made by the entire group. Then they would return to the assembly and departure station to make final preparations for their individual, intimate meetings.

Conversation was by way of whispered shouts; whispers out of respect for their opponent, shouts so they could be heard above the periodic roars of the Monster. They were now very near the end of the peninsula, and the bellowing from up ahead shook the solid granite, sending a subtle warning tremor through the contestants' bare feet. They could not see the Monster yet, but it was hissing at them through the rock.

"First time?"

"What?" Joao wiped spray drip from his forehead and eyes and looked to the source of the query.

"I asked if it was your first time." The man who spoke was very short and extremely muscular. It was not the well-defined muscularity of the body builder but the squat, thick build of the truly strong. He had bright blue eyes and his hair was cut bristle short, a blond brush that gave him a falsely belligerent look. His swim briefs were blue and red checks in front, solid red behind.

"Yes." Joao stepped over a dull mustard-colored crab-thing armed with quadruple pincers. It flinched back but did not flee from him. "Is it that obvious?"

"Not really. But if you've been through it before you can tell." They walked on.

"How many times for you?" Joao asked curiously.

"This'll be my third." The man grinned. "It's hard, since the contest is held only every three years. Would be my fourth, but I broke my leg the last time."

"You don't have to warn me. I've read about this every year for the last thirty."

The man laughed. "I didn't break it during the contest. Two days before time I slipped on my front porch and snap, that was it for the next three years. Spent the whole contest watching."

Joao managed to laugh with him. They walked on silently for several minutes. The sea mist thickened, was partly countered by the rise of a stiff breeze. The rest of the contestants kept pace nearby.

"Name's Janwin." The man put out a hand. Joao shook it. It was not wrinkled as he expected but smooth. The grasp was firm, controlled. "I'm local."

"Joao Acorizal, from Thalia Major. I'm a builder, mostly private homes."

"Circulatory surgeon, Dis Central Hospital Complex. Pleased to meet you. The important thing is to have confidence in yourself. Be alert, keep an eye on your path and the other alert for the predators. Don't be afraid to use your balpole, and if you're going over or under, use your rockets and get the hell out. Everyone does. Risk taking impresses the judges, but points don't mean a damn to dead pulp."

"You get three chances during the contest but only one life. There's nothing to be ashamed about if you bail out. My first contest there were only fifteen rides out of forty-five attempts, and no completes. I've never had a complete ride and seen damn few." He went quiet, studied Joao professionally. Ahead of them they could hear the rock-shattering groan of the Monster, very near now.

"You've got good legs, real good. Any tears or pulls in the past six months? This isn't something you go into if you're even slightly damaged."

Joao shook his head. "I know that. I've done thirty years of homework and as much practice for this day. I've never been in better shape."

"That's what your mind tells you. Well, I ought to shut up. I'm no fledgling either. Experience counts for a lot." He looked ahead. "Almost to the Point. I'm sure you've seen tapes of it. It's a little different in person, up close. Remember, watch out for predators and try to relax."

"That sounds like a contradiction, but I'll try. Thanks for the advice." He added impulsively, "If I don't win, I hope you do."

Janwin shrugged. "I've never placed higher than seventh. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that I'm still here. With all my parts. Keep that in mind when you're out there and tempted to push your luck a little. All the points in the world won't make up for the loss of an arm or an eye." He looked a little uncertain, finally asked, "You have a family?" Joao nodded. "Are they here?"

"No. I wouldn't let them come."

The surgeon nodded approvingly. "Good. If anything happens I'll see that the details are properly taken care of. You can do the same for me, though I have friends here."

"Agreed!" Joao had to scream it out because they were at the slight rise at the end of the promontory that marked the tip of the narrow peninsula.

Then they were slowing, everyone crowding unconsciously close together, and he could see the Monster.

High overhead, hanging like dark eyes in a pale blue sky misted with sea spray, were Cerberus, Charon, and Pluto, three of the four large moons that circle the planet Dis. Grouped together like that they occupied much of the morning sky. Dis's sun was just above the horizon, below the moons. The three satellites were also rising, their perambulating orbits bringing them into alignment in this manner only once every three years. Soon the sun would be behind them, and for a while daylight would touch land in surreal confusion.

Below was the Monster they helped to raise.

The wave was larger than any Joao had ever seen, but he expected that. He studied it calmly, analytically, and did not shake. The wave lifted heavenward, still far out at sea. White foam like broken teeth began to appear on its crest. It surged hungrily toward the high promontory. It started to break.

The curl appeared, began to retreat steadily southward, and the roar came to those who watched. It was a roar that stirred the blood and primeval thoughts. All the dark dreams of childhood, all the terror of drowning and smothering under a great weight, were wrapped up in that single monstrous, relentless wave.

And still it rose as it broke to the south, an immense gray-green blanket suffocating the horizon, the thunder of its sharp curl wiping out all other sounds. From the safety of the salt-swept point the contestants watched the curl and wave as it fled away from them, ducking only when the trailing backside of the wave smashed its green hammerhead against the rock to drench them all.

Out at sea, visible through the mist, making good use of the peculiar slope of the seabottom, Dis's lighter gravity, and the tidal confluence of the sun and three fat moons, the next Monster was growing.

The contestants stood, chattering loudly in order to be heard, all eyes appraising the water.

"About eighty feet," said Janwin thoughtfully. "Normal runs fifty, storm-drive pulses sixty to seventy. We only get these really big ones when the three moons line up every three years and add their pull to everything else. It should be an interesting couple of days."

Three contestants withdrew on the way back to the assembly area. No one taunted or chided them. The inmates have no right to make fun of the sane. The judges calmly marked the dropouts off the list.

Assistants were available to help in preparation. Acorizal turned their eager faces away. He'd lived with his board for five years. He'd broken it in, broken it for real, had repaired it lovingly with his own hands. He knew every inch of it, every contortion in the grain. He needed no help. But he made sure to work alongside the helpful Janwin and watched him make ready so that he could ask questions.

Once one of the contest supervisors approached the surgeon, whispered something to him before moving on to the next contestant. Janwin had listened, nodded, then ambled over to where Acorizal was checking the release pulls on his backpack and making certain the solid fuel boosters were clean and full.

"Weather report just in. Scattered clouds, winds five to ten out of the southwest. That shouldn't affect balance or crests. There's a tropical cyclonic storm weaving around out there. We shouldn't get any bad winds, but you know what that'll do to the swells. On top of everything else." There was a twinkle in his eye.

"I've never had a chance to ride a hundred-footer. If a proper swell comes in on us, get out of my way."

"I'll race you for it," Acorizal replied with a grin. Janwin moved away and the builder turned back to readying himself. He dismissed the thought of a hundred-foot wave. It could no more be comprehended than the distance between two stars, or the gulf that was the number billion. It was a physical abstract only, one without counterpart in reality. For himself he wished only an uncomplicated wave. That, and to survive.

His board was formed of honeycomb tripoxy resins. It was fifteen feet long by four wide and light enough for one man to carry. Twin shark-fin stabilizers protruded downward from the front third of the board,

another pair from near the blunt stern. Above the stern were twin air stabilizers joined by an adjustable airfoil.

Studs set into the upper surface of the board were connected to thin duralloy control wires running to the four stabilizers and the airfoil. You could not touch the studs with your hands, only with your feet.

He picked up his balpole. It was made of the same material as the board except for the twin spiked knobs that ballooned from either end. The pole could be used for balancing or for fighting off any carnivores who might frequent the turbulence of a great wave. Several such were indigenous to Dis. No energy weapons or devices of any kind were permitted save for the tiny solid-fuel backpacks.

The pack was your life. A rider who was thrown or who lost control of a wave had several options. You could dive into the body of the wave and hope to swim out through the backside. You could shrink into a fetal ball and hope to ride the wave out. Or you could fire your pack with either of two releasing shoulder pulls and soar above the wave, to drop freely behind it into the water. Whenever possible, it was best to use the pack.

He checked his wet suit for leaks. Pressure or impact of a certain degree would automatically cause the heavy rubberized suit to inflate, hopefully to send a helpless rider bobbing to the surface. The suit would also protect against bruises and scrapes. It would not always save your life. Joao pulled the hood over his head, wiggled his toes. Only his face was exposed. His suit was bright orange with red striping.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder. Janwin was there, not smiling now. His face beamed from a suit hood of electric orange. "Ready? Time to go."

Acorizal nodded, hefted his board. There was nothing more to be done but to do it.

Another rider backed out as they were boarding the skimmers. Acorizal watched her, sitting forlornly on her board, as the skimmer he was in lifted. He waved understandingly, but she did not wave back. The Monster had beaten her already, as it had beaten several others. There was no shame in that.

Acorizal had not even thought of withdrawing. Not yet, anyway. At least he was going to get wet.

The skimmer rose, turning in formation with two others. Cheering was continuous from the assembled spectators who'd gathered to watch the contestants prepare. Tridee pickups turned smoothly to follow the skimmers as they hummed westward.

Acorizal wondered if tonight, incredibly far away, Kirsi and the children would be watching. Kirsi had told him prior to his departure that under no circumstances would she watch the broadcast or allow the children to, but he wasn't so sure.

Picking up speed, the skimmers left the staging area. Soon the cliffs that fringed the western coast of Dis's largest continent fell away below. Lines of color marked the places on the cliffs where the spectators were strung out like opaque glass beads.

A wave was passing below. Its aspect was very different when viewed from high overhead instead of face on. The white crest reminded him not of teeth now but of lace lining the flowing, rippling hem of a woman's skirt. The lace drew a smooth line southward as the curl broke steadily toward distant Scratch Bay. Acorizal watched until the curl faded from sight.

Soon the skimmers' engines also began to fade and the little craft dropped surfaceward. Out here on the broad open ocean the waves were merely cocoons from which the Monsters would hatch. The Monster now had a back as well as a face, and the skimmers set down on its undulating spine. Engines raced as the craft settled into the water. Riders and boards dropped over the sides, to pepper the dark green surface.

Acorizal felt stronger the instant he tumbled in. He floated easily, his board attached to his ankle by a breakaway cord. He ducked his head and swam beneath it. The water was chilly out over the deeps. It shocked his eyes open and dissolved the cobwebs of uncertainty in his brain.

All around him, riders were mounting their boards. The brightly hued wet suits looked like confetti scattered across the water.

Acorizal felt something lift him, heave him skyward. He went up, up, along with his board and companions, ten, twenty feet, only to be gently lowered again. A wave had just passed beneath them, full of power and incipient threat.

It left him feeling not fearful but exhilarated. There, he thought. That alone was worth it. If I do nothing else, if I can't make a wave, it was worth coming all this way just to feel that swell.

A board was coming toward him, light as a feather on the surface. Janwin stopped paddling, looked over at him. "Save your legs and mount up, man."

Acorizal spat salt water. "It feels good."

"Sure it does, but don't waste your energy. Your adrenaline's all pumped up. Get on your board, relax, and let it go down."

Acorizal decided to take the advice, clambered onto his board with the ease of long practice, and sat there, his face drying in the rising sun. "When do we start?"

He was watching the monitoring skimmer, bobbing nearby.

"We've already started." Janwin grinned at the other man's expression of surprise. "Some can't stand to wait. Two took off on that last swell." He shook his head. "There's no advantage to going first, but you'll never convince some people of that."

"I never saw them go," Acorizal murmured. "So soon. Isn't it better to wait for a wave that feels right?"

Janwin shrugged. "To some I guess the first wave feels like the right wave."

"Well, I'm taking my time. I'm in no hurry. I've come a long way for this, and I'll be damned if I'm going to rush it."

"Good for you." Janwin nodded approvingly. "You don't get many chances. I prefer to wait too."

Hours passed. One by one the riders took off, to disappear southward. Once something large, white, and full of teeth appeared, to be driven off by a shot from the monitor skimmer's lookout. Reports on the progress of vanished riders were broadcast to those who remained, amplified by the skimmer's sound system.

"Meswith Brookings... four hours, twenty minutes. Bailout clean. Harlkit Romm... three hours, forty-five minutes. Swimout, exhaustion, but otherwise clean." Acorizal knew Romm would score higher than Brookings for bailing out without using his backpack.

"Eryl-cith al Hazram... four hours, thirty-two minutes." There was a pause, then the voice from the speaker added softly, "Bailout failure; wipeout. Body not yet recovered." There was silence for a while, then the voice continued mechanically. "El Tolst, five hours fifty-six minutes. Swimout, collapsed lung, neck sprain, otherwise clean. Jewel Parquella, five hours, ten minutes..."

During the waiting another pair of riders withdrew, were helped silently aboard the monitoring skimmer. The sun rose higher while beneath it three moons jostled for pulling position. Janwin and Acorizal discussed water.

"Normally we could expect double sets," the surgeon was saying, giving the swell lifting them a critical eye. "Three large waves followed by three small. The storm's changed that. We're getting three large, three small, and three or four storm waves larger still but highly variant." He glanced over at his companion.

"Naturally you'd like to catch one of the latter, but they can be tricky. You might get a double wave, one

crest on top of another, and that would force an early bailout. You'd get a ride, but too short to score many points."

The sound of an arriving skimmer interrupted their conversation. Besides the surgeon and Acorizal two other riders still waited for a wave. One went away with the swell that rolled under them as the skimmer touched down.

A board appeared on its flank, went over the side followed by a rider. The man mounted, paddled over to join the remaining three contestants. It was Brook-ings. He was lean, much younger than Janwin or Acorizal. His face was flushed and scoured clean, but he was not panting very hard and his strokes were smooth and sure.

"Hello, Brookings. Back for your second?" Janwin inquired. The younger man nodded, looked understandably pleased with himself.

"Caught a seventy-five-footer," he told them. He leaned back on his board, hyperventilating. "The first couple of hours were easy enough. After that you start to feel it in the legs. Then your eyes get snaky. I decided to bail out when I found myself seeing a double tube behind me."

"Smart move," said Janwin. "We got your report. You had a good ride on a good wave. Have they found al Hazram yet?"

Brookings looked past them, toward the invisible coast "Not yet. They're afraid his suit might've failed. They told me he caught a storm wave at least a hundred feet five. He was apparently doing fine until he got too fancy. Got too low on the wave and too close to the curl. The wind from the collapsing tube blew him off his board."

"What about his pack?" Acorizal asked.

"Ignited okay but he was so low the crest caught him. He didn't clear it and it broke right over him. If his suit failed they'll never find him." He went quiet for a moment, then sat up straight on his board and began paddling. They were rising toward the sky.

"I like this one... see you." Then the swell had him in its grasp and he was gone.

"We'd better get going," Acorizal observed. "If he's on his second wave..."

Janwin shook his head. "Competition comes second, remember. Survival's first. You've got to feel comfortable with the wave you choose or you might as well turn in your corpse right now."

So they continued waiting. Janwin took off fifteen minutes later. That left Acorizal and the last rider. Swells came and went as they sat on their boards.

Kirsi... I'm glad you're not here and I wish, oh how I wish that you were! His face was getting hot from the midday sun.

The sound of a returning skimmer drifted down to the two waiting riders. He squinted, made out the prong noses of two boards projecting from the racks on one side of the little craft. Two more successful riders re-turning for their second waves. He couldn't wait much longer or it would be too late to try for the required three rides. There was only tonight and tomorrow. He did not want to have to make two rides tomorrow, and not even a saint would try to ride the Monster at night.

Then he saw the swell. It loomed high behind him over his right shoulder, so green it was almost black. It was a huge one, wide as the sky and rising like a bubble breathed out from something vast and patient. But he was not alone and there was courtesy to observe.

He looked anxiously across at the other waiting rider, saw that the man also saw the nearing swell. It continued to rise steadily, bearing down on them like a runaway starship. Acorizal had to force himself to wait.

Abruptly the other rider let out an agonized cry of despair and started paddling for the monitor skimmer, taking himself out of competition for the swell, out of the day, out of the contest. Acorizal turned his head eastward and began paddling furiously, his balpole clipped lengthwise beneath his knees.

He was afraid he'd waited too long. For a long moment he hung suspended atop the swell. Then he was moving forward with less and less effort. He stopped paddling, continued to move, picking up speed and beginning to slide slightly downward. The swell continued to build and a giant green-black hand boosted him toward the sky. Now he could pick out the faint, far line of cliffs that marked the land.

He climbed to his knees from his belly, accelerating steadily. His toes tensed on the slightly resilient surface of the board. He stood, edged back on his rear leg an inch, then moved his front leg to match. The fingers of his left hand tightened on the ignition cord of the backpack.

He felt fine. The ride was smooth and easy, the board responding instantly to his subtly shifting weight and gentle toe-touches on the control studs. The bal-pole he held tightly in his right hand. He stopped rising, hung suspended in midair.

Then he looked down. His fingers tensed further on the loop of the backpack release as instinct almost betrayed him.

Far, far below was the surface of the water, flat and shining like steel in the rising sun. Air ripped at his face; salt stung his eyes. Wind whistled around him. His mind was momentarily numbed by the hundred-foot drop he overhung, but twenty years of practice took over, shifted his body.

Then he was screaming down the face of the gigantic wave, ten, twenty, thirty feet. He leveled off, keeping his weight back but centered, adjusting the airfoil to slow the precipitous drop. The stabilizers kept him level as the front four feet of his board hung over emptiness and sliced through the air.

An incredible rush went through him, an indescribable combination of sheer terror and pure ecstasy. To his right was a moving green cliff that towered over his head, thousands of tons of living water. To his left was nothingness.

He grew conscious of the steady, unvarying roar of the Monster, only now it was not terrifying but simply awesome. He was set on the board, had become part of it. He risked a look backward.

Behind him tons of water cascaded endlessly from thirty feet overhead to smash into the withdrawing waters seventy feet below. It formed a vast glassy green tunnel which rising sunlight turned into an elongated emerald: the tube. Wind blew out of it as curling water forced air ahead of the collapsing arc. It sounded a special, higher note in the overall thunder of the Monster.

He held tight to the balpole with both hands, letting loose of the pack release, and adjusted his balance. Then he thought to check his suit chronometer. He'd been on the wave thirty minutes.

Moving slightly backward he luxuriated in the feel of the matchless ride, always watching the curl and the crest high above to make sure no surprises were about to tumble down to crush him. The waves held their shape with remarkable consistency, but occasionally one could collapse unexpectedly, the curl vanishing as the unwary, too-confident rider found himself buried under a million tons of water.

But Acorizal's wave rolled on and on, machinelike, the curl trailing behind his board like a friend urging him onward.

Gradually his confidence grew. He let himself feel out the wave, slipping his board high up on the green wall only to plunge dizzily back down when it seemed sure he'd burst through the crest, dropping low almost into the bottom of the curl to stare up at eighty feet of liquid cliff high above.

When he felt secure enough, and he'd been three hours on the wave, he let himself slide backward, back into the tube. It was almost peaceful inside, so numbing was the roar of the breaking curl. The tunnel he rode in was high and wide, the wind powerful behind him. He had to be careful. He did not want to be

blown off the board by a collapsing tube, to be swallowed by the tumbling crest.

Something materialized in front of his face, just outside the curl. He frowned, then let the board edge outward. The apparition multiplied into many.

He'd been told of the Trintaglias. They floated just ahead of him, their blue eyes bulging curiously at the strange figure that appeared in their midst. Their air sacs were fully inflated, the taut yellow-pink skin stretched thin as paper. They varied in size from several inches to a foot in diameter, riding the air current that preceded the tube on long, thin fins that doubled as wings.

Occasionally one would dip down to snatch something edible from the water. Some would collapse their sacs and vanish into the wall of the wave; others would drift higher or lower according to internal pressures. Once he reached out and touched one. It jerked away from him, turned to float sideways in the air and regard him wide-eyed and reproachful.

He checked his time. Five hours and thirty-five minutes. He had already managed the second-longest ride of the day. His legs were throbbing, and the gastro-ceriemius of the left was starting to cramp. His eyes were red from the salt spray, while his mouth, paradoxically, was dry from lack of water.

Off to his left, as he moved cautiously out of the tube, he could see the high, running ridge of the continental edge. Ahead, as always, there was only the endless, thundering curve of water.

Another thirty minutes, he promised himself. Another thirty minutes and I'll have the longest ride of the day. He couldn't bring himself to bail out yet, though his legs threatened to fail him and his arms felt like limp weeds. Everything had gone so well. The wave still had size and power and exhibited no signs of weakening. How far did they run, he wondered? He hadn't researched it much, not thinking he'd ever be in a position to care. Could you ride one all the way around the continent? Or perhaps from pole to pole?

Another thirty minutes. Another thirty minutes of wet hell and he could bail out.

The Vaxials almost got him.

Only the fact that one mistook the end of the balpole for part of the rider saved Acorizal. The narrow, eellike head reached out of the wave wall and snapped at it viciously, teeth grinding on the sharp metal. All six longitudinal fins were extended for balance, and the dark red gill slits back of the jaws were pulsing with excitement. An eye the size of his hand stared malevolently out of the wave at the startled Acorizal.

Somehow he kept his balance on the board, but it was a near thing as he instinctively leaned away from those thin, needle-sharp teeth.

The reaction helped him. The Vaxial let loose of the inedible balpole and snapped at the air where Acorizal's shoulder had been an instant earlier. The weight shift caused the board to shoot upward along the wave face. The crest of the Monster came closer with shocking speed.

Acorizal left his feet and threw himself forward. Down, damn you, get your nose *down!*

The board responded, dipping to slide rapidly downward. It had been a close thing. Acorizal had nearly shot out through the crest. At best he would have flown into the air on the other side of the wave, a good ride completed and the Vaxials circling to pick him off the board. At worst he would have caught the crest with the nose of the board and gone over backward, to fall helplessly head over heels until the entire immense weight of the wave pulped him against the water below.

He continued to race down the front of the wave. Behind him, a pair of blunt, toothy snouts attached to twenty-foot-long snakelike bodies glided through the wave in pursuit. Eventually the Vaxials would catch up to him. They lived in the waves and had no worries about balance.

He readied the balpole as he pushed back into a kneeling position, tried to judge how he was going to strike out without losing his balance and board.

An ugly head emerged from the water. Acorizal leaned, slashed down and sideways with the spiked end of the pole. It made contact with a flat, glassy eye, and blood spurted. The Vaxial vanished instantly.

Lucky blow, Acorizal told himself grimly. He was so tired his hands shook. He scanned the green wall for signs of the other carnivore. Maybe, he thought, it's gone to help the other. Maybe they're mates. He stared, locating wave fish and other creatures but no hint of the Vaxial.

Then there was awful pressure on his back and a ripping sound.

He fell forward, desperately trying to keep his balance on the board despite the weight on his back. He could feel those long, needlelike teeth on his neck, piercing the tough material of the suit and his skin and his spine. He screamed in terror.

Then the pressure was gone. He hadn't seen the Vaxial attack and did not see it go, but it did not reappear. Which was no wonder, if the backpack had gone down its throat.

He held the balpole weakly with one shaky hand as he lay prone on the board and felt at his back with the other. The pack was definitely gone, wrenched from its clips on the suit by those powerful jaws. His eyes frantically scanned the water all around the board, but the creature did not show itself again. After a while the Trintaglias returned, in ones and twos, and he took their presence for a good sign.

He no longer could isolate individual bruises and sores. His body was one continuous ache as he studied the wave. With his backpack gone there was no easy bailout. He could rise to the crest and hope to break cleanly through to the other side, or he could dive into the wall, swim like mad, and then inflate his suit to bob to the surface... if the Vaxial hadn't torn the suit's air chambers as well.

If he misjudged either attempt he would very likely drown. If he wasn't battered to death inside the wave.

One thing he was certain of: he could not get back on his feet. His legs were too far gone. He let the balpole slip away and hugged the board with both arms, not caring if some swimming predator beneath chose to make a meal of his clutching fingers.

He'd had a good ride, one of the best of the day. Somehow his anguished muscles would have to hold him tightly to the board until someone on shore realized the danger and sent out a skimmer to rescue him.

Please God, let that be soon, because I have no strength left in me.

He willed himself to stay conscious. If he went to sleep on the board it would all be over in seconds. The board would rise up into the crest as his weight slipped backward, and he would go over the falls, to be thrown a hundred feet downward. At least that would be quick. There would be no drowning. Just a single quick, irresistible weight and then unconsciousness and death.

He shook himself, pulled himself forward on the board. He'd been daydreaming and had risen to within ten feet of the crest. Now he numbly nosed the board downward again, back into the safety of the middle part of the wave. The sonorous boom of the curl followed patiently on his heels.

God, I'm tired, so tired, he thought. Let it be over. I've done what I came for and more. Now I just want it to be over. Where the hell was the rescue skimmer? Couldn't they see he was on the verge?

He would have to do something, he knew. He could not hang onto the board much longer, let alone guide it properly. Both his brain and body were worn out. Only sheer stubbornness had held him together this long.

Diving into the wave was out. He didn't have enough strength left to swim two feet, let alone drive his body through the water. It would have to be a crest break, then.

He started to let the board slip upward. One hand felt down the slick side of the wet suit until it touched on the inflation knob. Once he broke through the crest he'd inflate the suit, hoping the monitoring skimmers would pick him up before the next wave came by. He hoped he could stay conscious enough of his surroundings to inflate the suit at the proper instant.

Everything was a wet blur before his salt-encrusted eyes. Sky and water merged into one. Was he at the crest yet? If he waited too long he'd go over the falls.

Then white washed over him and he coughed weakly. The wave had not waited for him to make a decision. He remembered Janwin's warning about the uncertain actions of storm-generated waves.

The curl disappeared, subsumed in a single endless break as the wave lost its shape and collapsed atop him.

It was dark and wet and his board was gone. Dimly, he pressed at the inflate switch on his suit side, knowing it would only allow the wave to pound him repeatedly against the surface or the sandy bottom. But at least this way they might locate his body.

I'm sorry, Kirsi. Good-bye.

Then he was up again, bobbing in the air, his arms and legs unable to move for the air that enveloped them. Too soon, it was too soon. He twisted, turning on his belly-balloon.

Two men were coming toward him. That surprised him. The second, bigger surprise was that they were not swimming. They were wading. Dazed, Acorizal tried to focus burning eyes. There was a hissing sound. One of the men was deflating his suit. He tried to yell at the man, but his mouth wasn't working any better than his brain. He thought he could hear people yelling.

Then the air had drained from the suit and he was in the water once more. Only there was no supportive salt water this time but instead the arms of the two men holding him up. They had to. He didn't have the strength to stand.

"What... ?" Tongue and jaw wouldn't work together. "What... ?"

One of the men, young and tall, was looking at him with a mixture of wonder and admiration. "You don't know?"

"Don't know...anything," Acorizal mumbled, coughing.

"This is Scratch Bay. This is where the waves die, rider." The man pronounced the last word with emphasis. "You rode your wave all the way in. All the way."

"How... how big when I went over?"

"Oh, that? We all thought that was a last-minute flair to impress the judges. It wasn't?"

"Judges can go to hell. No.. .flair. How big?"

"About ten feet," said the other man, who had Acorizal's right arm across his shoulders. "You just rolled over." He gestured forward with a nod of his head "Your board's safe, up on the beach."

"Ten feet." Acorizal's mouth twisted.

A familiar face was waiting to greet him as they stumbled into the shallows. It peered concernedly into Acorizal's as the rider was laid out on a suspension mattress on the beach. Cheers filled the air, drunken parodies of true speech to Acorizal's mind. They were mixed with the admonitions of officials who kept the near-hysterical crowd at bay.

"Hello, Joao," said Janwin as he checked his friend's heartbeat. "How are you?"

Acorizal squinted through the salt at his friend. "Chewed up," he gasped softly. "Chewed up and spit out like an old wad of gum." He saw that a bandage was draped across the surgeon's head and suspension straps supported his plastisealed left arm, and he framed a question with his eyes.

"Oh, this?" Janwin smiled, moved his sealed arm. "I went into mine, tried to swim out. Too late to use my

pack. Tore the shoulder ligaments. I'm afraid my riding's over for this year. What the hell happened to your pack?"

"Vaxial," Acorizal explained. He spent a few moments choking before he could continue. "It was trying to eat me. I hope it suffocates. How long was I up? I can't see too well."

"Eight hours and five minutes. The last hour spent glued to your board, I'm told. You lost a stabilizer. They're fixing it now."

"That's nice."

"First complete ride in twelve years," Janwin continued admiringly. "Except for Nuotuan in 'twenty-four, and she was dead by the time they got to her. You're not dead."

"No, I'm not."

Janwin hesitated. "I guess I ought to let you rest, but I have to know." He leaned closer, away from the probing reporters. "How was it?"

But Acorizal was already unconscious.

He got points for riding the tube. He got points for fighting off the Vaxials. He got points for style and points for length. Brookings had more cumulative time but fewer style points. On the basis of the one ride Acorizal was declared winner. They told him about it two days later, when he regained consciousness.

One of the honorary judges, a media star from Terra, was present to hand over the trophy and prize money. Media reporters flocked around the man who'd never swum more than a hundred yards at any one time in his life. The man was very tall and handsome and not a very bad actor. His voice was rich and deep, well suited to making presentations.

But they couldn't find Acorizal. He wasn't in his hotel room and he wasn't anywhere to be found in Scratch Bay Towne. They searched for him on the beach, expecting to find him bathing in the rapturous stares of his admirers, but he wasn't there either.

Who they finally found was Janwin, sitting at the board works helping a younger rider align his newly fitted stabilizers.

"I'm busy and I'm due back at the hospital tonight," the surgeon told the anxious cluster of reporters and officials.

"Just tell us, do you know where he is?"

"Yeah, I know where he is."

The media star looked very distressed. "I'm on contract here." He checked his bejeweled chronometer.

"I'll give this another ten minutes, and then I've got to catch the shuttle out to my ship."

"Then you'll have to miss him," said Janwin.

"Where the hell is he?" wondered one of the more irritated honorary officials, a man with much money and little else.

Janwin shook his head. "Where do you think he'd be?" He pointed northwestward. "He took a skimmer and follow crew with him."

"Crazy," muttered the official. "Doesn't he want his trophy and money?"

"I expect he does," said the surgeon thoughtfully. "But he told me he has to go home tomorrow. I'm sure he'll be grateful to accept the prize and cash."

"But first he has to catch another wave..."

End