

Markus Müller Gone Fishing

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For Alyson Hannigan, who said the Dolphin Thing.
Thanks to her, watching "Flipper" will never be the same.

When Father Bannister opened his eyes, he didn't feel very good. And when he started to remember what had happened, he felt even worse.

Curse on boats and reefs and everything nautical, he thought. Oh, Lord! How could you let this happen?

He remembered the shipmaster, who had refused to enter the dangerous waters inside the archipelago and who instead had put the Father and his little luggage in a little rowing boat and provided him with a small compass, a rudely painted map and countless warnings about practically everything there is. He remembered himself taking everything with his usual self-confidence and faithful determination, saying: "The Lord will take me the right way!", not considering that the Lord might be busy with something else at this time.

He remembered himself rowing in the vague direction of Pilahana, where he was to replace the late Father O'Connor, and finally finding out, what the shipmaster had meant by "lots of bloody sharp rocks lurking in the bloody water". He remembered himself struggling against waves and rocks and wooden planks hitting him, recalled the moment when he had clutched to one of the larger pieces of the shattered boat and how he finally had reached the shore, where his body had made his own statement about long, exhausting swimming-excursions before lunch time and had broken down unconscious. Now he was shipwrecked, or at least boatwrecked, with all his luggage sunk to the bottom of the

ocean, lost at a place which by all means could only be described by the words 'somewhere else'. Guidance by the Lord in a nutshell.

For a moment he was content with just lying around, watching the clouds above his head, listening to the surf and being very angry. Then he heard the noise. A foot moving in the sand. Not very loud, but pretty near.

The Father jerked upright, then gripped at his head and produced a deep groaning sound, giving the overall impression of a stranded whale with a prize-winning hangover. When the funny forms eventually stopped dancing in his sight and disappeared, he saw someone standing in front of him: Two boys, slender and well-tanned, naked except a short loincloth, and grinning like madmen. Their long spears pointed at his nose.

"Ook!" one of them said.

Jeez, the missionary thought. What a start ...

But he didn't really disapprove. They were natives of a hostile wilderness. To them it was pretty normal to point at everything unknown with their spears, just to see how it reacted and whether you could eat it or what. "Oh! Uuum ... hello, dear Sirs," he said, "I presume this is not the beach of Pinahala?" He was a native of good old London. To him any expression beyond a mild surprise was inconceivable for a first conversation, no matter how naked or heavily armed his opponent was.

"Ook?"

"Father O'Connor?" he ventured, hoping the name would ring a bell.

"Ook?"

"Apparently not," he sighed. For a moment he gave in to a deep feeling of anger and desperation. Then his mind suddenly snapped back into the right position, getting aware of the situation: He was a missionary on an unexplored island, facing two heathens, who were barely able to speak. The result was plain and simple: An opportunity to do his work!

He ignored the spears, stood up, straightened his robe and brushed off some sand and seaweed. The effect was stupefying. Father Bannister in an upright position was quite impressive, adding an entire new dimension to the meaning of the word 'skinny' - next to him almost *everyone* looked skinny. The natives stepped back a little.

The Father took the opportunity to support his impressive appearance with his even more impressive voice. Pointing with his hands to his chest he yelled: "HELLO! MY NAME IS FATHER BANNISTER!" Just like every representative of a country involved in colonialization he assumed that his own language was to be understood everywhere if only yelled out loud enough. "YOU'RE POOR FAITHLESS SAVAGES, AREN'T YOU? I'VE COME TO BRING TO YOU THE WORD OF GOD!"

"Ook?"

The Father produced his bible from the depths of his robe and shook it in the direction of the two faithless savages. "THE BIBLE!" he shouted. "THE WORD OF GOD! I'VE COME TO SAVE YOUR SOULS FROM ETERNAL DAMNATION!"

The savages looked at each other, still grinning.

"Ook!" one of them said, pointing at the missionary and rubbing his stomach in an obvious gesture. He even licked his lips a little, just to play it safe.

The Father backed away. "OH NO!" he said hastily. "YOU MUST NOT EAT ME!" He shook his head and added some forbidding gestures, just to make this vital point absolutely clear. "THAT'S A SIN!"

One of the savages shrugged. "Ook?" he said. Then he made a gesture, and the other boy ran away. The remaining savage poked the Father's mountain-like belly with his spear and pointed in the direction, where the other boy had disappeared.

"Ook!" he commanded

The best trick ever invented by Catholicism was the concept of adopting conversion. After endless decades of fruitlessly slaughtered missionaries, they had finally found out that - instead of just wandering into the next Negro gral or Viking village and telling the folks there, that everything they had believed in for centuries was complete rubbish - it was much

better, first to explore the local habits and superstitions, then add a little bit of Christian rite to it and finally tell the people, they actually had been Christians all the time without knowing it, so it was really about time to baptize them, unless they wanted to burn in hell after their death.¹

But to do all this, of course, you had to know some tricks. Learning the savages' language was one. Not getting eaten by them was another. At the moment the father was in doubt whether he could perform at least one of them.

When they were halfway across the dunes, the second boy came back, nodded to his companion, and together they escorted him to a small village. There were several dozens of small huts mostly made of driftwood and seagrass, populated with lots of young boys and women of all ages, the adult men probably being out fishing or something. They all looked healthy and strong, and the women were astoundingly pretty, which was easy enough to judge, for there was not too much clothing to get in the way.

When they saw the Father and his guards descending from the dunes, they gathered and lined up in two long rows, making a passage into the village. The girls started giggling, and the boys burst out into a concert of frightening Ooks.

The missionary felt awkward. It wasn't his first experience of that kind, but it always had made him nervous. The gauntlet ended right in front of a hut in the center of the village. It was

Or burn at the market place after tea time, which turned out to be a little more impressive to the rather fanatical heathens among them.

slightly bigger than the rest of the buildings, just about big enough to point out the importance of the inhabitant without stressing that particular point too much. Its walls were covered with colored paintings of the clearly folcloristic kind.

The boys gestured to him, uttering several Ooks, to make him wait there, then went inside, their grin almost parting their heads in halves.

The crowd all of a sudden fell silent. Father Bannister felt quite uneasy, sensing this mute mass of people around him. But when he looked around, he was surprised to see so many friendly smiles and nods whenever his glance passed a face. Bewildered by the disturbing mixture of menace and approval and the general lack of any kind of textiles, he finally stopped to look around and started to examine the paintings instead.

In an ocean of crystal blue and erratic spots of indigo he saw numerous forms of all kinds of fish and seafood - sharks, whales, crabs, clams and so on. And dolphins. Lots of dolphins. They seemed to be kind of an overall theme to all the paintings, since nearly every figure out of two was a swimming dolphin, or someone riding on a dolphin or something pursued by a dolphin or another thing being eaten by a dolphin, all painted in mindbogglingly garish colors. If the average artwork made by so called savages was to tell a whispering story about their thoughts and concerns, this particular hut was rather a shouting. The ancient designers

obviously had given a damn about subtlety - they'd had a point and had decided to make it absolutely clear.

The boys returned, lead him inside and then vanished silently, perhaps looking for a remote place where they could eventually stop grinning and burst out into shouts of laughter.

The inside of the hut was gloomy. The only light was the small strip of sunlight falling through the entrance and occasional flecks of yellow filtering through the roof. But even so the Father could see, that there were more paintings on the inside. Dimly lit spots of shimmering green and blue and red, connected by a pattern of familiar white sparks: Dolphins splashing imaginary waters with their shiny tails. The lack of proper lighting gave it the air of a place underwater, a faint palace of the deeper and older dolphindreams, far away and beneath the surface of daylight imagery.

In the center of that palace two men were sitting on simple chairs. One of them was a well-fed little man, bald and beardless, with friendly wrinkles around his eyes, dressed in nothing but a short loincloth and overall cheerfulness. The other man was old and gaunt, hiding his tall figure under a long blue robe. There was definitely no trace of friendly wrinkles around his eyes, the motionless face seemed to be cut out of stone, and a small ominous fire seemed to be glowing in his eyes, expressing clear disapproval of this unexpected visitor. The Father examined the two men and immediately recognized the arrangement: The chief and his medicine man.

He cleared his throat and started: "GREETINGS, GOOD MEN!" Any other man probably had hesitated to do so. Under such circumstances it usually was best not to speak, until you were asked to do so. But Father Bannister hadn't become such a successful missionary by hesitation. And since he couldn't tell one Ook from another and therefore wouldn't know, whether the actual Ook uttered at him was to say 'Welcome, stranger! What's your name?' or 'Don't you dare speaking, foreign bastard!', it didn't really matter anyway. "MY NAME IS FATHER BANNISTER—"

The man he took for the chief stirred under the sudden attack of the missionary's voice. He raised his hand in a halting gesture and interrupted him: "Whew, no need for shouting, mate! I'm not deaf, for heaven's sake!"

The Father, whose mind had been very busy with finding strong arguments for breaking up with certain ancient cooking traditions¹, gasped in astonishment. It took him a couple of seconds to identify the words as quite straight English.

"You speak my language?" he asked, entirely puzzled - like a goldfish, which just had, while swimming around in its bowl, collided with Captain Ahab's *Pequod*.

The chief started laughing: "'course I do! Haven't thought you're the first English speaking bloke to show up, have yer?" In fact, this was exactly what Father Bannister had thought.

"You mean I'm not?"

¹ And translating them into a series of impressing Ooks, if necessary.

"Well, obviously not. But no worries, mate. Everyone makes that mistake."

"But the boys who took me here—"

"Oh!" The Chief started laughing. "You mean the Ookthing? Sorry for that. It's them young fellas - always in for a good joke." He winked in a manner way too jolly for his position, wich added its own share of grotesque to the situation. "Do it with all the guys they find at the beach. Their way to say hello."

"Uum, very nice ..." The Father was completely fuddled.

"So, you're a missionary, huh?"

"Well, yes."

"Fine. I'm Chief Kanda. And this is Teninnaweek, our High Priest."

"You better hadn't come," said the High Priest stiffly, radiating a surprising hostility.

"He's not very fond of missionaries," Kanda explained.

"Sounds like you already had some."

"Enough to know we don't want them here." Again Teninnaweek's deep and husky voice.

"Teni, please!" Kanda gave him a reproachful look.

"En leka raku," the High Priest answered in the savages' own language. "Nu karé ..."

Chief and High Priest started a little discussion which ended up with Teninnaweek jumping up from his chair, shooting a malicious glance in Father Bannister's direction and rushing away in a furious hurry.

"I'm sorry," Kanda said. "He's a nice man, but ... well, a bit *particular* about religion, you know."

"Well—" The Father was at a loss. Since most of his more acute fears and concerns had suddenly turned out pointless, his mind was at an uneasy free-run, like a bullet which found itself suddenly ignored by gravity and now had to find alternatives to the usual strategy of ballistics. "What ... was that about the ... other missionaries?" he finally managed to ask

"Actually there was only one," Kanda told him. "Some silly old fellow from the continent. Black robe, strange talking. Came here just like you, together with most of his boat. Old Friar Preachalot we used to call him - dunno what his real name was. 'course I was still a lad then, some twenty years ago, I guess."

"Twenty years," the Father repeated, "so I assume he's dead now?"

"Yep. Died a couple of months after he'd come."

"That's amazing."

"Well, he was old, mate."

"No, I mean, I've never heard of another mission on these islands. There are no records about it. Of course there is a lot of missionaries who don't come back from where they were sent, but in most cases we at least know from *where* they don't

return. But if there had been a missionary sent here, I ought to know about it."

"Well, 'course he actually wanted to go somewhere else," Kanda explained. "Most of the folks coming here actually want to go somewhere else. The currency lets them drift abroad and the rocks can wreck a boat inna minute, if yer dunno the right way. When we found ol' Preachalot, he was pretty livid, always ranting about this not being Kuanahela and stuff like that—"

"Father Kilmore!" the missionary gasped. "So that's what has happened to him."

"Maybe that was him, yeah," the Chief agreed. "Bad luck for him, however, since Kuanahela is hardly twenty sea-miles away. Unfortunately, he died before the merchants came to pick him up."

"The merchants?"

"Yep. Drop by every couple of months, trading for pearls and artwork and exotic fish recipes and stuff like that. Them rich fellows on the continent seem to be pretty keen on 'em."

The Father sighed: "Seems that the records urgently need some updates. We usually ask all the local traders for information before starting a mission, but they didn't say a single word about all this."

"Very likely," Kanda said. "Traders usually keep their secrets. It's a tough business."

"Not the only one," the Father murmured.

"Of course you are our guest until the merchants come around for the next time."

"Well," the missionary said, quite aware of the subtle and unspoken 'And not a single minute longer!' the chief had managed to convey without the slightest trace of open objection. "That's very friendly."

"No problem, mate. You can use the old Friar's hut, if you like. It surely needs a broom and some repairs, but it's still there, right outside the village." Kanda got out of his chair and went for the door, waving the Father to follow him. "Ol' Preachalot couldn't stand to be among us for long. Had to do with the girls, I guess. They seemed to kind of upset him."

"I'm sure they did," the Father mumbled. Then he followed him outside, still puzzled about the way things had developed.

The hut was small and obviously assembled in a hurry. Two girls from the village had cleaned it up a little, but it still looked pretty shabby. The mattress on the floor was ragged to pieces, maybe by mice or crabs or some other little animals, who are in charge of ragging human property to pieces over the time. There was a wooden chest, containing the very few items the late missionary apparently had managed to rescue from his wrecked boat: a rosary, a bible, some old clothing everything just as worn and ragged and out-of-duty as the mattress. The chest stood in front of a wacky table, made out of unfitting planks of driftwood. On it the remains of old paper

in a very final state of decay, together with an empty inkpot, an ink-stained gull-feather still stuck into it. Father Bannister suddenly felt very tired. He sat down on the box, put his chin on his fists, and sighed.

"You better don't start to feel too much at home," a voice suddenly said. The Father looked up. A shadow had appeared in the doorway, on its top the old and earnest face of Teninnaweek

"Er, hello."

"You will leave with the first merchant's ship that comes here," Teninnaweek stated. "And in the meantime you better don't do anything. You should not be here."

Father Bannister hesitated. There was something about this man that touched his most inner professional instincts and made him refuse to accept Teninnaweek as a fellow priest. A something which he decided to interpret as a touch of vague evil. "Well, I'm not here deliberately," he said.

"So wasn't the last," the High Priest answered. "Though he caused some trouble. You better not make the same mistake."

Father Bannister smiled as friendly as possible. "I'm not here to make any trouble."

"So said the last. And then he started to poison my people with strange ideas about his cruel and angry god."

"Oh, this must be a misunderstanding," the Father tried to explain. "Our God is a god of love and forgiving—"

"That's what I mean!" the High Priest interrupted him. "I don't think, there's anything to forgive. And I'd like to leave it this way." His black eyes were sparkling with anger. "Stay away from my people! We don't need a missionary here." He turned and went away, leaving behind a slightly flustered and disheartened Father.

This might become a bit more difficult than I thought.

Even though the islanders were the most friendly bunch of people one could hope to encounter, the Father wasn't really happy with his situation.

For one, he wasn't really a fish-eater. Being stranded on an island with an agriculture restricted to palms and seagrass, this was kind of a problem. His attempts to explain to the islanders the concept of a ham-sandwich turned out a complete failure, mainly because they hadn't the slightest idea about meat and bread, or, when it came to that, about pigs and wheat. When he asked for vegetables, they gave him a coconut.

Another thing bugging him was the fact that he still had not found a proper way to even start with doing his job, mainly because the islanders had turned out to be annoyingly unreligious. He watched like a hawk, but he never heard an ancient song about how the gods had made the world or saw anyone conducting some picturesque religious rites. They didn't sacrifice fish or virgins. They didn't even have a temple or sacred stone or anything, where such an action could have

taken place. In the religious field, the only thing they apparently had was an angry High Priest, whose task was completely elusive and who did his best to stay out of the Father's way.

After a couple of days he really had to pull himself together not to follow his more basic instincts and do something typically missionary - preaching or building a church or something. He was determined to follow the reformed handbook of missionary, provided he had something to start with, which he hadn't. Finally he decided to try something else.

When they haven't any idea about organized religion, he thought, then maybe it's about time to give them one.

So one morning, after the usual fish-breakfast, he sat at the village's only fireside and tried to introduce Chief Kanda to the more basic issues of decent Christianity. The task, however, turned out a little difficult, mainly because of Kanda's unnerving pragmatism, which proved itself quite resistent to any kind of spiritual bliss.

"... whew, that's strange stuff, mate!" the chief presently said. "Why, lemme get this straight: There was this Jesus-guy, and he died because of all that sin-stuff and all. And he said: Now I've died for you, so don't be naked or get laid with some of the girls, or there'll be trouble?"

Not for the first time, Father Bannister felt very tired. "Sweet Jesus! You said, you folks have already had a missionary here."

Kanda smirked. "I didn't say he was very successful."

"Well, then—that kind of sums it up, I think," Father Bannister sighed.

"Silly," Kanda said. "Might turn out lethal for the concept of a growing community, don't you think?"

"Well, of course you can do it for the purpose of reproduction, since that's what it is all about. But you are not supposed to do it for *lust*!"

Kanda kept a thoughtful silence for a moment. "You mean, it's okay, as long as you don't have fun with it?" he asked then.

"Yes," the Father gave in and sighed a little more. "You may say so." Meanwhile he coulnd't help but thinking that this annoyingly cheerful man was playing some kind of game with him and that this conversation was nothing but a big, emberassing waste of time. But he was not willing to give up on it. Not yet. There were souls to be saved and he was the only one around, who was able to do it. So giving up was not an option.

"Silly," Kanda repeated. "That somehow spoils the whole thing a bit, doesn't it? I mean, raising children is hard enough, but when you're not even allowed to have a little fun while making them, people might loose their interest, don't you think? They might say: 'Well, what's the point then?' and go fishing or something. And anyway - it surely wasn't fine with the dolphins—"

"The dolphins?" The Father gave him an amazed glance. "What in all the Saints' Names has that to do with *dolphins*?"

The islander suddenly frowned. "Nothing," he answered a bit too hastily, "it's just ... a figure of speech, you know."

Now Father Bannister had a hard time to suppress a triumphant smile. After all, he seemed to have discovered something. "But the dolphins seem to be a vital part of your ... believes, I think. I mean, this hut of yours ..." he pointed to the hut he had been taken to at the day of his arrival. "All these paintings—"

"They're just paintings."

"But all the dolphins—"

"Nothing. They're just ... wudduyacallit? Folkloric?"

"You mean, it's nothing religious?"

"What? Nope! Absolutely not! No religion!" Kanda assured firmly. He seemed very uneasy now.

"Well, then." The missionary decided to change his strategy. "Indeed I couldn't help tonotice a general lack of religious activities, so I wonder what you have a High Priest for."

The chief hesitated awkwardly. "He's taking care of the really important things," he finally said.

"That is?"

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"Fishing."
"Fishing."
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Kanda finally had escaped the Father's cross-examination by simply keeping an awkward silence and going away to take care of some things, leaving behind a Father who was ... well, in fact he was simply curious like hell. They were hiding something! The efforts the islanders made to appear completely unreligious were a dead giveaway, that there was something about their religion, which might be really interesting to know.

For a while he just sat there, thinking hard. Then he suddenly remembered, what the chief had said about the tasks of the High Priest.

The really important things, he thought. And then: Fishing! Indeed, everything the islanders seemed to be concerned with was fish. But this was at least something to start with. In his experience everything could make a religion.

He decided to take a little walk around the island. He had talked to the chief and to the High Priest, and they had turned out to be not very helpful. So maybe it was about time to talk to some fishermen.

They were easy to find, since the island had only one harbor at the east side. There were a strip of white sand and terraces of stone, softly ascending to the top of the cliffs in several steps. Right through the middle of the terraces a narrow path was cut, leading from the village down to the shoreline, parting the whole area into two pieces like a granite wedding-cake. A couple of fishing boats were rocking in the gentle swell of the harbor. There were nets and bundles of dry fish hanging from wooden poles, and between them, sitting in the sand, fishermen performing mysterious craft-work with needles, nets and things which looked like fish-heads. And to his surprise he also saw something else: Dolphins! They were crossing between the boats, pretending this to be as normal as sea-gulls around a dump.

They have dolphins here! he thought in astonishment. Fishermen! Allowing dolphins around their very own realm! Now there's a secret I'd really like to discover.

To ask the fishermen some questions was quite easy. To get an answer was nearly impossible though. Unfortunately, the fishermen didn't share the excellent English of their leaders. In fact, most of them didn't understand a single word. Finally the fishermen gathered for kind of a conference, and after a heavy discussion one of them was pushed forward: Obviously he had been elected as the linguistic expert of their group.

"I Mato," the man said. "I can you speak."

"Fine!" Father Bannister rubbed his hands. "Now, my dear friend, I hope you can answer me some questions about those dolphins."

Mato gave him a questioning look.

"The dolphins," Father Bannister said and pointed at the silvery shapes.

"Uh. Kato!"

"Yes, dolphins. I just wonder ... why are they here?"

"What you mean?" Mato asked skeptically. "They dolphin. This water. Dolphin live in water."

"No. I mean: Why are they here, not out in the ocean?"

Mato gave him puzzled look, than he turned around to his pals for a brief discussion.

"They like here," the answer finally came.

"Obviously. But I always thought, fishermen weren't too fond of dolphins. I mean, usually their ruining your business, aren't they? So why are they here, and why do you tolerate that?"

Mato wrinkled his forehead, then he turned again for another discussion

"Gela-kato come here," Mato finally explained. "Dolphin like Gela-kato."

"Gela-kato?"

Another short conference.

"In your speak is ... dolphin-priestess?"

"What's a dolphin priestess?"

"Not of your business!" a voice said from behind. Father Bannister already knew this voice. It was a voice without obvious spite or harshness, though not to be overheard or taken lightly, and definitely on the far side of soft - like a bag of smooth and shiny pebbles constantly smashing on a kitten's head. A High Priest's voice, no doubt.

"Go!" the voice said. The fishermen slowly disappeared, their feet being the only thing about them not running away in a fearful hurry.

Father Bannister turned around, seething under his breath. In his opinion the High Priest had a disturbing talent for dramatic show-ups.

"Excuse me," he said, raising an eyebrow, his face and tone as British as five-o'clock-tea. "We've been talking."

"I told you not to do that," the High Priest said, his voice still as smooth and even as a fine razor-blade. But faced with the High Priest's look, even a brick would have started sweating.

Well - the Father wasn't a brick. He was a priest and a missionary. If there was anyone to use a *voice* or to shoot around *looks*, it was him!

"To do what?"

"This." The High Priest nodded in the direction of the fishermen. "To do missionary work."

"How do you come to think that I did?"

"You're a missionary. So everything you say or do is a missionary's saying or doing. A fish can't help being a fish."

The Father suddenly laughed, which earned him a puzzled look from the High Priest. "You people are really amazing," he said. "I mean, no matter what, sooner or later everybody will end up talking about fish."

"Fish is life," the High Priest stated.

"Doesn't sound like much of a life to me."

"You think we're narrow-minded?" Teninnaweek asked, his voice suddenly all friendliness.

Take care! the Father reminded himself. He might be a savage, but he is a man of certain power, and he certainly isn't stupid. And he's not used to discussing things.

"To be frank," he said tentatively, "I'm not sure what to think anymore. I mean, you people will not stop surprising me. And this time I'm not talking about fish. I'm talking about the fact that, for example, *you* are a complete mystery to me: You call yourself a Priest, but I really do wonder why, since there seems to be no religion around."

"That you don't see it, doesn't mean it isn't there."

"But I haven't seen a temple or something."

"Why should we have one?" Teninnaweek raised an eyebrow.

"Well ... to do some praying, for a beginning."

"We don't pray."

"That was my impression, too. And it really makes me wonder. Don't you have any gods?"

"Of course we do have gods! What kind of silly question is that?"

"Just as silly as having gods and doing nothing but ignore them."

"We don't ignore them. We only don't talk to them."

"But everybody talks to his gods," the missionary exclaimed in clear amazement. "I mean, that's what religion is all about, isn't it?"

"Is that so?" Teninnaweek showed the faintest suggestion of a smile. "I always thought, all this talking to the gods is of no use at all, since after all there's nothing we could tell them they don't already know."

The Father sighed. Obviously these poor islanders had no idea about the concept of a proper religion. But when it came to that, he was the man to fix that. In the end it was exactly what his profession was all about: to tell people how to be religious. "Look: Praying is not actually about providing information to them, you know. It's rather about ... well, worshipping them, praising and things like that. Showing your humble gratitude."

"Oh, we are grateful. We show them every day."

"Doesn't look much like it." Father Bannister stretched out his arm in a gesture, which was supposed to point to all the non-existing temples around. "How do you think you're showing your gratitude?"

"You don't think, the gods gave us all this—" He made a gesture, a small one, but somehow it managed to include virtually everything around them, the sea, land and sky and very certainly the fish. "—if they expected us to waste time with building temples, do you?"

"But praying—"

"Waste of time. We live our lives, and the gods know what's in our hearts. What reason could there be for talking? And it surely is no gratitude to bother them with complaints, is it?"

For a moment the missionary was baffled. In his life he had heard literally hundreds of excuses why some folks slaughtered sheep or virgins and had slaves building enormous temples for the god of headaches or the goddess of cow-pats. People always had a good excuse for praying. But never before he had heard such an elaborate excuse for *not* talking to the gods. He suddenly saw himself in urge to remember the basic excuses for praying he had heard so many times. "But when you make a mistake?" he finally asked. "When you do something wrong and the gods get angry?"

"Then they're angry until they're done with it. We small humans certainly cannot persuade them to change their minds"

The Father snorted. This conversation was practically beyond weird. In his thirty years of being a missionary he had seen some things. He had met a lot of priests and shamans and other folks in the spiritual business. Most of them had been simple fanatics, spilling around the innards of goats all day or eating mushrooms, which made them believe they were lizards or little bushes or other mushrooms. Usually you only had to replace the goats and mushrooms for some bread and wine, and things found a way to work themselves out. But this time, the Father was afraid, it wouldn't be that easy. There were, for example, no goats or mushrooms or anything like that, and as savage priests usually went, Teninnaweek was disturbingly sober. In fact, this High Priest was the most gnostic cleric he had ever met, on a mission or elsewhere.

"But what are you doing then?" he asked, afraid that he already knew the answer.

"I take care of the really important things."

"Fishing, yes. I already know that one." He waved with his hand impatiently. "And gods are not important?"

"They're gods. Of course they're important. And I'm sure they themselves know well about their importance. Why waste time with telling them the very obvious?"

"But you are a *priest*, for heaven's sake!" the Father yelled in a last attempt to make his point. "That's a *religious* profession. How can you call yourself a priest, when you're not staying in touch with your gods? It simply makes no

sense! And please spare me your usual comments about fish, which is, I'm afraid, just about to come right now. For me, it makes no sense. Period."

The High Priest sighed. "You have the same problem the last missionary had: You think, that praying is the only way to make things work. That's why you wouldn't understand. And that's why I don't want you to mess up with my business."

"But-"

"Leave it alone," the High Priest told him, his voice eventually finding back to its old qualities. "You can stay here. But if you prefer living in peace, you better learn to respect our secrets."

Father Bannister had his very own opinion about respecting secrets, ending up in the simple attitude, that it's best to know the secret first and then decide whether to respect it or not. After all, he was a missionary. Shyness didn't convert people. Determination did

He decided to pamper his determination a little bit by retreating to his hut and going through Father Kilmore's notes. Unfortunately they were not much more than a small heap of loose sheets, inscribed with a shaky, tiny hand. Time and the moist and salty air had rendered most of it unreadable, and the very few decipherable parts weren't really helpful - most of the time the author was complaining about the food or ranting about nudity and the general lack of organized religion.

Reading all this, Father Bannister felt very fond of the old preacherman, who apparently had suffered from the same things as he did now, and for a moment the old papers appeared like a friend, providing some consolation. With renewed confidence he studied the last entrance.

"... preparing kind of a celebration ..." the Father read, "... after all, it seems that this savages do ... else than fishing all the time ... High Priest keeps an ... silence concerning the whole issue. Perhaps ... find out ...bout the damn dolphins ..."

The Father paused. I knew it! he thought. They do have a religion - and it's something to do with the dolphins!

"... going to participate ..." the final paragraph said. "... might reveal some of the secrets these unsuspi... savages obviously have ... this night ... maybe the final breakthr..."

The diary ended at this point. When Father Kilmore had found out something, he hadn't been able to write it down.

For a while Father Bannister stared ponderously at the sheet. Then his glance wandered off to the window and the ocean beyond it. Small black points at the horizon marked the fishermen's boats coming home.

What was it, the good old man discovered? he thought. It must have been something important. If I only knew what this celebration was about.

The missionary gasped, then with sudden excitement examined the paper again, deciphering the numbers at the top

of the page. After a couple of seconds he smiled.

Well, whatever it is - tomorrow I'll have an opportunity to find out.

The next morning, Father Bannister was in a good mood. Now he finally had something to start with. When he put on his robe, he whistled a jolly tune, all his senses wide awake, his mind filled up with energy. So many things do to, so many secrets to discover.

The first thing he discovered, when he went through the doorway, was a spear pointing to his belly. Behind the spear was a bulky mass of human muscles with a face on top, wearing a serene and not too bright expression¹. This wasn't just a guard, but more like a human watchtower.

"Stop!" the watchtower said.

"Well, good morning for you, too," the missionary said, using the same tone and look, he usually spared for acolytes he caught with their noses in the Communion wine. A look that said: 'You better have a really good excuse!'

"What is this about?" he asked then, grabbed for the spear and tried to shake it angrily. But it didn't move, just as though it was cemented into mid-air. The missionary's hand decided to perform a careful tactical retreat.

"This my weapon," the guard explained calmly.

¹ It seems to be a general law of nature, that every human being has to be created out of exactly the same amount of material. This implies, that when you are going to create a man with a nine feet frame and the bulkiness of a small elephant, you have to spare somewhere else

"I can see that, thank you. But why are you pointing it in my direction?"

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"To make you stop."

"Well, it worked. But would you mind telling me why?"

"High Priest said so."

"Really? Any idea what made him do so?"

"No."

"No."

"You're not much of a talker, are you?"

"No."
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Father Bannister took a deep breath. He was a man of certain qualities. One of them was patience. Not only that normal kind of patience, people usually fail to perform while waiting for the 4:11 train to Sussex, but that kind of robust and sophisticated patience you need while talking to people, who thought the sun was a big burning something which had dropped off the backside of the Great Hippo Of The Heavens. Patience that could sit through a really long teatime with Auntie Ignorance, before it started to stare at the tapestry or pretended to have other important obligations. But at the moment it had just had a long day with linguistically challenged fishermen, a non-praying High Priest and a chief, who seriously thought, that Jesus was just another long haired guy with funny ideas, and therefore it already started fidgeting around on its chair now.

"Well, what *exactly* did the High Priest say to you?" the missionary asked, slightly altering his strategy.

The guard glanced at him, obviously irritated, while he searched for an answer. "High Priest say: Black robe must stay inside hut," he finally managed to say. "Black robe must not see celebration."

"Oh! There's a celebration?" the Father asked, pretending to be surprised.

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"No."
"No?"
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"High Priest say not tell you about the celebration."

Patience just nodded absently to another story about uncle Bob's nasty boozing problems. The Father managed a grim smile, though, convinced, that it was about time to help the basic principles of logic to their victory.

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"So there is a celebration?"
"No."
"No?"
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Patience decided, that this was the right time to step out on the porch for a quick smoke. "But you've just mentioned it, for heaven's sake!" the missionary yelled. "So, how can you tell me now there is no celebration?"

"High Priest said so."

The problem with logic - as the Father had to acknowledge - was, that it only worked with the smart ones. "Fine then. Let me get this straight, will you?" he said. "You're *really* telling

me, I'm not allowed to leave my hut, because the High Priest does not want me to see a celebration, which actually isn't taking place?"

"Yes," the guard eventually said, after having hacked his way through the semantic depths of this long and angry sentence. "There no celebration and you not allowed to see it."

Father Bannister crossed his arms and gave the guard a reproachful look. "Am I the only one here thinking, that this conversation is a bit weird?"

"Yes," the guard answered evenly, looking down on the missionary in a way that seemed to say: 'Well, I'm a savage. What's your excuse?'

"I want to talk to the High Priest," the Father demanded, grabbing what was left of his patience by the collar and dragging it inside for another cup of tea.

"No."

"Yes, I do," Father Bannister said, dangerously calm. "Don't you tell me, what I want!"

"No"

"I really wish, you'd stop saying 'no' all the time and instead go and get me the High Priest."

"Cannot."

"Why not?"

"He not here."

"Well ... where is he, for heaven's sake?"

"He busy preparing the celebration."

This is leading nowhere, Father Bannister thought. Patience just had packed things and murmured something about important meetings at the club later that evening before rushing out the door in a suspicious hurry.

"Listen, my friend: You will have someone go for the High Priest - *now!* And don't tell me he's busy. He ought to have plenty of time, with all these celebrations not taking place."

Of course the High Priest didn't show up before sundown. When he finally did, the Father was furious.

"This is ridiculous," he yelled. "You're not going to imprison me in my own hut, you're not!"

"I'm sorry," the High Priest said, though it didn't sound very repentantly, "but I have my reasons."

"Like what?" Father Bannister asked in his most spiteful tone. "Oh, let me guess: It has to do with the preparings you're not doing for a celebration not taking place to contribute to a religion you don't have, right?"

"Maybe—"

"Don't say 'maybe' to me! You think I'm stupid? You think I don't see that you're trying to hide something?"

"No. And your behaviour proves that I'm right to do so."

"Well, what kind of behaviour would you prefer? You certainly don't expect me to sit in my hut all day, talking to the flies."

"To be frank, I'd prefer exactly this."

The Father narrowed his eyes, trying to look behind the dark and motionless mask of Teninnaweek's face. "You're playing jokes on me, aren't you?"

"No."

Father Bannister grunted. "Of course you don't. When humor was distributed, you certainly were off fishing."

The High Priest smiled meaningfully, ignoring the obvious insult. "Very likely."

The missionary took a deep breath, for the moment rendered speechless. Nothing seemed to be able to stir up the High Priest's cool determination. Arguing with him was like arguing with a mountain. At the end, all you got back was an echo of your own frustration. Teninnaweek would have made a perfect arch-bishop.

The Father approached to the High Priest, his entire body under tension, until his massive belly nearly touched Teninnaweek's blue robe.

"You're a clever little man, aren't you? And you surely know how to keep a secret." His glance wandered to the old Friar's diary. "But the old man, the other missionary - he found out, didn't he? Something happened twenty years ago, and you don't want it to happen again. You've learned to be cautious."

"For the sake of my people," the High Priest answered, disturbingly unimpressed by the frightening mass of both Father Bannister's body and wrath, "the old friar ... I thought he would understand, but he didn't."

"Well, I'm not him. Why don't you try me?"

"Can't take the risk. His ideas are your ideas, and they are dangerous. When I first noticed, it was almost too late. I don't want this to happen again. That's why you will stay in this hut until the celebration is over."

After this last sentence the High Priest simply turned around and left the hut. He said something to the guard, which the Father couldn't understand. The guard nodded and shot a grim look at the missionary. Then he closed the door.

The following hour the Father spent with walking about the hut like ... well, not exactly like a tiger in his cage. Except the preference for decent meals, the Father had absolutely nothing in common with five hundred orange-striped pounds of muscle, teeth, and lethal instincts, so he had to be content with walking about the hut like a fat missionary who is seriously pissed-off.

This wasn't only about philosophy anymore. This was personal. At least he was a priest - a *real* priest - and missionary, a harbinger of faith, Major in God's own army and therefore someone to be respected. But Teninnaweek didn't seem to respect any of it. He didn't even seem to respect his own gods. This man was nuts!

The Father finally knew why God had sent him there: This was an emergency! This island had fallen prey to Satan in the shape of Teninnaweek. And it was up to him to exorcise the devil from this island and lead these poor people home to the Lord.

But first he had to find out about the origin of the High Priest's power. He had to find out what he was doing. Which meant: He had to find a way to leave this bloody hut.

Somewhere in his mind a small thought stirred awkwardly. He had lurked in the back of his mind for quite a while, doing his best to keep out of the way. But now he raised his little arm, cleared his throat and said: "Uum—"

The Father stopped his walking routine, stunned with surprise. He looked at the closed door with the guard on its other side. Than he looked at the window.

Eventually he pushed the table aside and stuck his head out into the cool nightly breeze coming from the shore. The light of a full moon sparkled on the surf and made flecks of white and silver dance across the water. A nice view, neat and peacefully - and in a highly pleasant way completely deserted.

The Father drew back his head, wearing an expression of pure satisfaction. He couldn't help to think that God had definitely helped him out of here.¹

¹ It wasn't God, of course, but more likely the laws of mental economy. When it came to housing, the islanders didn't think in terms of "amazing architectural structures" or "flood this room with morning light" or stuff like that. They rather thought in terms of "Well, it's to keep the bloody weather outside, isn't it?" Therefore they saw no need for a hut to have more holes than absolutely necessary - one hole to get everything in and out had to be enough. All this lead to the habit to think, that the doorway was the only natural way to get into our out of a hut, which might explain, why Teninnaweek, despite all his smarts, had forgotten to put a

Of course they were at the harbor. When the Father had found the village completely deserted, he knew where he would find them. Now he was sitting on one of the cliffs above the harbor and watched the scenery.

All boats were in but the water was in motion, shimmering in orange reflections from the torches put to every available place. Between the golden fire of the torch-lit waves were oddly familiar forms, long shining thumps of silver: Dolphins - dozens of them, sliding between the boats like beams of wet moonlight. He heard their whistling, the splash of water, when they fell back after a playful jump.

On the shore the whole tribe had gathered, crowding the narrow strip of the beach and the stony terraces above. Right down at the waterline stood the High Priest, surrounded by his apprentices, his arms raised. He shouted some strange words, and just like following these words the dolphins suddenly stopped playing around and came closer.

And then the girls came. Almost twenty of them, all naked. They came down the narrow path, singing a wordless tune. They all passed the High Priest, who gave them kind of a blessing, and then stood along the shore, each of them facing a particular glistening shadow of white in the harbor's waters. There they were, dolphins and girls, one on one, silent and motionless like dancing couples waiting for the music to start.

second guard at the window.

Teninnaweek shouted another single word and the girls jumped into the water and started to swim with the dolphins, playing around, swailing, diving, coming up again in a hurry, just like dolphins would do if they had legs and arms and acute drowning-problems. And the dolphins joined them into kind of a complicated dance. After a while the dancing grew slower and girls and dolphins came closer to each other. And for a second or two it even looked as if they were ...

Father Bannister's eyes and mind started a fierce argument concerning the question whether the things the eyes were reporting to the mind could possibly be true. The eyes remarked that of course they were true, but the mind replied it had severe difficulties to accept them, since they were not exactly the kind of things a mind of his reputation was keen to be bothered with. The eyes stated that they weren't responsible for the things they reported and how bloody annoying all this 'Can I trust my eyes?'-stuff really was and if the mind wasn't fine with what the eyes had to report it should simply beat it. The mind pondered that propose for a moment and decided that sulking was exactly the right answer to that. During all that the rest of Father Bannister decided that it might be a pretty good idea to have a closer look before making any further judgements, but since the mind still was having its sulks it forgot the fact that right beyond the edge of the cliff rock ended and gravity began.

No matter how much you try to ignore it: Gravity never sulks. It's always on duty and right now it grabbed for the disturbed missionary, gave balance a solid kick, and drew him down. After forty feet of doing a good job it let his massive body splash into the harbor's waters like a small cursing meteorite, right between the dancing couples of girls and dolphins.

His mind, so rudely disturbed in its sulks, got a little tired of it all at last and therefore perceived the whole business of nearly drowning, getting supported by some dolphins and a couple of naked girls, and finally being dragged out of the water quite half-heartedly ...

The first thing Father Bannister saw, when his vision had cleared, was the angry face of Teninnaweek.

"We should simply have thrown you back as I demanded," the High Priest said in a dead-calm voice. His entire appearance was one of total but well-controlled fury.

The Father's mind now recalled some of its duties and with them the first rule of dealing with savages: Never get defensive!

"I'm man not fish!" he answered. "And what for heaven's sake is this all about?" he demanded to know in his very best 'What the hell you think you're doing?'-tone-of-voice, pointing with his finger to the bunch of naked girls who were still standing around them.

"This is our temple," Teninnaweek explained rudely, "with the Gela-Kato worshipping our gods. You had no right to disturb this holy act!"

"Your *temple*?" the Father exclaimed. "You're telling me, *this* is what you do for *praying*? Worshipping your *gods*?" He raised himself to an upright position, so he could face the High Priest from a less embarrassing position. "Pah! Saying some decent *Ave Marias* or burning some incense - that's worshipping the God's for me," he growled. "But what *I* saw, had nothing to do with praying!"

"What you saw," the High Priest replied angrily, "were the dolphin-priestesses performing the most holy act known to our folks—"

"Pah! Holy! Didn't look very holy to me. How can anything be decently holy as long as women are involved, naked or not?" Father Bannister was really furious, determined to break Teninnaweek's ignorance with the wrath of the righteous. "You, Mr. High Priest, are completely nuts! Evil! A messenger of the devil! Don't you dare talking about something holy, since all I could see was these girls doing ... it with those blasted dolphins!"

"Of course you did," said a third and quite worried voice. It belonged to Kanda, who was presently joining the conversation. He shoved the furious High Priest aside to prevent anger from turning into something more physical. "And of course you find it ... well, strange, since your not

familiar with our traditions. That's why we didn't want you to see any of this. But now that it's happened you may just as well hear the entire story." He smiled awkwardly.

"You better have a really good story," Father Bannister said, wringing out the sleeves of his soaked robe. "And I warn you: You'll have a pretty hard time to convince me that this man —" He pointed to the High Priest. "—is *not* the devil and obsessing some poor islanders with evil ideas."

"That's ridiculous!" the High Priest yelled with unconcealed malignity. "I'm not going to listen to the insults of this fat foreigner for another—"

"Teninnaweek!" The chief's voice suddenly had an unfamiliar tone, very commanding and severe. "You've already made your point, haven't you? We all know how important religious issues are to you, right? Now, would you please shut up for a minute, so we can sort this out? There's no need to get rude and there's still a whole lot of things to be done, so why don't you just finish the celebration, while I explain the whole thing to our visitor, will you?"

For a moment the High Priest stood there, trembling with wrath, and looked like he was about to go for someone's throat – Father Bannister's or even the chief's. But then he suddenly turned around and shouted some commands to the apprentices and to the crowd of islanders, telling them to go back to their places and keep the holy silence which was necessary for such a holy moment and so on.

The chief helped the missionary to stand up and led him aside, to a place where they could sit on the body of a reversed fishing boat. Father Bannister was quite happy with that. He really wasn't interested in seeing more of this unholy attraction going on.

"Of course Teninnaweek's a little pissed," Kanda explained. "But maybe you two come together, as soon as you know the whole story. He couldn't with old Preachalot, of course, but you seem to be less silly than him, right?"

Something in Kanda's voice told Father Bannister that this was hardly a question and that a simple 'no' might cause some further trouble.

"Tell me," he eventually gave in.

"All right!" The islander smiled. "Now, let me tell you about our mother Numakara. She lived centuries ago, and was the most beautiful woman one can imagine. She shared her love with Pator, the greatest of men, and together they were parents to many children, who became our ancestors and all. They all lived happily on this island for a long time. But then there came the time, when fortune turned her back on them for no obvious reason. There was no fish to eat anymore and many children died. So Pator went out on the sea as far as possible to see were all the fish had gone. Numakara seated herself on the shore of this harbor and waited for him. But after seven weeks had passed without Pator coming back, she knew that he was dead, lost in the ocean, and that all her

children were doomed to starve. And she started to cry bitterly, shedding all her sorrow into the water of the ocean. And then came Kato."

"You mean a dolphin?"

"Yep! Kato, god-brother of men, the divine reflection of our poor self. He, who never drowns and needs no boat for fishing." The chief made a small and complicated gesture in the direction of the ocean, before he continued: "So Kato came to the shore and asked Numakara, why she was crying. 'My loved one has gone, and my children will die', Numakara answered. 'I'm alone and desperate. There's no hope for me or my family.' And Kato said: 'Well, maybe we can help each other. It's a pretty lonesome thing to roam the oceans, you know? And never before I've seen so much beauty in a human being. So maybe we can make a deal!'"

"A deal?" Father Bannister asked wearily. "Not what I think, is it? Oh, sweet Jesus!"

"Oh, yes," Kanda replied happily, "and it was a good one! Numakara shared herself with the divine Kato and in return he showed new fishing grounds to her, so her children didn't need do starve anymore. And Numakara's love and beauty was so great that Kato told all his divine brothers about it and they came in loads with news about fish and they earned what Kato had earned for his help. And Numakara taught all her daughters the ways of enjoying the Kato and since then the most beautiful daughters of Numakara become Gela-kato,

"Wait a minute!" the Father interrupted him. The last couple of minutes his mind had more or less contented itself with listening to the words in the particular professionally disinterested manner it had grown accustomed to over the years, while listening to hundreds of dumb explanations, why exactly *this* virgin had to be slaughtered on *this* very special stone and why goats were less holier than crocodiles and all that stuff. Stuff people *believed* in. But this time something was different. The whole story had a clear air of pragmatism. And suddenly he could understand most of it. Of course 'understand' didn't mean 'approve' or 'let them go on with it' but at least he could grasp the reasons.

It's a hard life here, he thought. No time to waste. In the end it's all about survival. So when contacting divinity you better do it with some practical purpose in your mind.

"So what you say is – you trade sex for fish?"

"Yep! That pretty much sums it up, I think," Kanda agreed, smirking.

"But the High Priest - he makes it so ... religious."

"Well, of course the dolphins are gods and holy, aren't they? And for such things you need a Priest, don't you? Someone earnest and wise, who is in charge, organizing things and stuff and what-to-dos. The Kato are quite picky, you know? He's taking care that only the girls fit for the job come to go for it. Testing and teaching the best candidates. Making sure the Kato will have no reason to complain."

"So that's his job? That's his *religious* business? Deciding the ... the *Miss-Dolphin-Contest*?"

"Mainly, yes. To that aspect he's the best High Priest we ever had. In his youth he could do—"

"Ten in a week," the Father finished the sentence, struck by sudden insight. "Dear Lord!"

"Well, at least that's the name the traders made up for him," the chief added and winked. "But now he's old, that's why he needs the apprentices."

"And they do-"

"Yes. The very same. It's the most wanted job, of course. When a new year has come, they stand in rows at his hut. But he's very picky either, you understand? Only those with the greatest—"

"Thank you," Father Bannister interrupted him quickly. "I think I get the hang of it!"

"Well, of course the length of their Dongos is also important."

"Your making fun of me. Please don't. This isn't a very good day for me."

The celebration seemed to be over now. The girls, their hair now heavy with water, their faces wearing a somewhat enraptured expression, wandered past, while the other people were descending from the stone-terraces and gathering at the beach for the usual discussions, just like any other community after church. But unlike any other community, they surely weren't discussing old Mrs. Bletchley's annoying snore during the sermon but much more likely things as 'Did you see what that girl did with her dolphin? Whew, she's a real fanatic about religion!' and so on. For a moment Father Bannister felt homesick like hell.

Teninnaweek was approaching, followed by his apprentices, who surely would be envied by the entire male part of the Commonwealth in case anything of this ever went around.

"Did he change his mind?" He addressed the chief, ignoring Father Bannister's massive figure completely, which was already by itself a pretty neat trick being close enough to hear him breath

"I didn't change my mind," the Father answered before the chief could say anything, "you didn't really expect that, did you? In a way I acknowledge the reasons you have for your doings and I have to admit that it's pretty clever, no doubt. Though it is of course under virtually any circumstances quite disgusting to do *this* with *fish*—"

Something was wrong. He could tell it from Teninnaweek's face. From the chief's face. From the face of nearly everyone who was close enough to hear his words. The formerly quite cheerful mood of the people had in one moment turned into this particular kind of non-speaking which left no doubt about

what everyone was thinking. Some ancient and seldomly used part of Father Bannister's mind, whose only task was to see sharp teeth behind every tree, suddenly felt like a prostitute who had started to sing a very dirty folk song at High Mass. But the rest of him was used to ignore such feelings.

Never get defensive with savages!

"I mean, from a more or less civilized point of view," he continued bravely, "it is of course hardly acceptable to bribe one fish to help you catch some other - not to speak in this very *special* way—"

He stopped. Something was terribly wrong! The High Priest's face was far beyond every grade of fury he had ever seen with a human being and so was - surprisingly - the face of the chief, who presently grabbed for a big fish hanging from one of the poles.

"That's enough," Kanda said, every word advertising the bad things which were to follow the words. "Teninnaweek was right: You'd never learn."

The last thing Father Bannister saw clearly was the chief, his face a mask of sheer wrath, swinging the fish and beating him unconscious

The nice part of being unconscious is that you are allowed to be completely indifferent towards all these terrible things happening around you. The cruel part usually comes, when you wake up and find out that these very things have used the time of your absence with an amazing efficiency to grow even worse.

The first thing the father had to wonder about when he opened his eyes again, was the fact that the ground was so far away.

Then his mind slowly started to consider all the incoming reports from the different parts of his body. After a couple of seconds it had made out an overall impression of pain. His wrists were aching like hell from the rope by which they were attached to something, but mainly from the weight of the Father's body, which they had to hold. Obviously the islanders had tied him up to a wooden pole, with his eyes facing the harbor down below, just as though he was dead fish, supposed to dry out in the sun. It dawned on him that he obviously had made an awful mistake, though he wasn't sure what it was.

The following hour he spent mostly with shouting and at least learned a few things, for example that it was really about time to loose some weight or that his vocabulary contained phrases like 'fish-fucking bastards'.

Of course nobody answered his shouting. The very few people ever coming along only looked at him, keeping an hostile silence, their angry looks saying the unspoken words: "Thou art a sinner and shalt not be spoken to!"

When he finally had gotten too exhausted for shouting, the High Priest suddenly showed up. He stood before him, saying nothing and showing the missionary an elusive smile which seemed to say: 'Well, here you are.' The Father suddenly felt stupid and forlorn. This little devil had played him out. Finally he summoned enough energy for a single hoarse question: "Why?"

The High Priest remained silent, giving him a look which the Father knew all to well, since he had used it himself thousands of times. A look that said: 'You really don't know, do you? Poor little bastard.'

Finally Teninnaweek went away. A couple of minutes later one of his apprentices came. He rammed another smaller pole into the ground and attached a plank to it. Words were written on the wood in red paint, but the Father couldn't read them clearly yet. The apprentice cast a grim look onto the miserable missionary, then he vanished as silently as he had come.

It took the missionary a couple of seconds to adjust his tired eyes, so that he could read the message, but when he finally got it, he immediately wished he hadn't.

So, that's it? he thought desperately. It's about nitpicking.

He almost laughed, but his body quitted this attempt with sheer pain.

And I always thought they don't know about sin.

He couldn't help to stare at the sign again, which was to make the High Priest's lesson about sacrilege absolutely clear. Its message was echoing in his head like the triumphant point of a long and complicated joke that God had played on him, and it was the last thing he saw flickering in his view before he fell unconscious again.

Thirteen simple letters, saying: "They're not fish!"