

of deep synthetic interest.

"Slox, Magnan, S-L-O-X. Inveterate troublemakers from the Slox System, half a dozen lights in-Arm. It appears both they and the Groaci are claiming mandateship of Yudore, an unexceptional planet of a small Class G sun well off the trade routes."

"Well, why doesn't one of them just go mandate somewhere else?" a Commerce man demanded. "There are scads of available planets out that way."

"The Groaci state that Yudore falls within their natural sphere of influence," Thunderstroke said. "As for the Slox, their position is that they found the place first."

"They could flip a coin for it," the Commerce man snapped. "Then we could all get back to matters of importance, such as the abnormal rate of increase in the rate of decrease of the expansion of the trend toward reduction of increasing berp-nut consumption among unwed fathers ages nine through ninety on backward worlds of the Nicodeman group, a development which I just detected this morning through the use of refined psychostatistical techniques."

"Good lord, Chester"—a political forecast specialist picked up the cue—"what will be the projected impact of this downturn in the upturn?"

"Upturn of the downturn, if you must use layman's language," Chester corrected. "Why, at the present rate it appears that by fiscal ninety-seven, there'll be a record high in unwed fathers."

"To return to the subject at hand, gentlemen," Thunderstroke cut in ominously, "both parties to the dispute have dispatched battle fleets to stand by off Yudore, primed for action."

"Hmm. Seems to me there's a solution of sorts implicit in that datum," someone murmured.

"Let us hope not! An outbreak of hostilities in the Sector would blot our copybooks badly, gentlemen!" Thunderstroke glared at the offender. "Unfortunately, the Groaci Ambassador has assured me privately," he continued grimly, "that his government's position is unalterable. Groaci doctrine, as he explained matters, makes accommodation with what he terms 'vile-smelling opportunists' impossible, while a spokesman for the Slox has announced they refuse to yield an inch to the, ahem, 'five-eyed sticky-fingers,' as he refers to the opposition party."

"It sounds like a major policy blunder on the part of the Groaci," Magnan observed contentedly. "How refreshing that for once the CDT is not involved."

"We could hardly be said to be uninvolved, Mr. Magnan," Thunderstroke pointed out sternly, "if we undertake to mediate the dispute."

"No, I suppose not—but why be pessimistic? Who would be idiot enough to suggest poking our nose in that bag of Annelids?"

"As it happens," Thunderstroke said in a voice like an iceberg sliding into an Arctic sea, "I did!"

"You, sir?" Magnan croaked. "Why, what a splendid notion—now that I've had time to consider it in depth, I mean."

"After all, our function as diplomats is to maintain interplanetary tensions at a level short of violence," a fragile-looking acting Section Chief sprang to the Undersecretary's support.

"Would you want to make that 'reduce tensions,' Chester?" the Information Agency representative inquired, pencil poised, "Just in case you're quoted out of context."

"No reporters," Thunderstroke decreed. "I shudder to think what critics of the Corps might make of any little slip on our part in this affair."

"I suppose you'll be sending along a hundred-man Conciliation Team with a squadron of Peace Enforcers to deal with the matter," Magnan said, a speculative look on his narrow features.

"Hardly," Thunderstroke said flatly. "This is a job for finesse, not brute diplomacy. In a situation of this nature, a single shrewd, intrepid, coolly efficient negotiator is the logical choice."

"Of course, sir. How shallow of me not to have seen it at once." Magnan pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Naturally, the task calls for a man of wide experience—"

"With a total contempt for deadly personal danger," someone put in.

"Preferably without a family," Magnan added, nodding.

"Too bad that lets me out," a Deputy Assistant Undersecretary said briskly. "As you know, I'm the sole support of twelve cats and a most demanding parakeet—"

"I wasn't thinking of you, Henry," Thunderstroke said severely. "I had in mind a more senior diplomat; a man of lofty IQ, unshakeable principle, and unquestioned dexterity in the verbal arena."

"Good lord, sir," Magnan blurted. "I appreciate your confidence, but my duties here—"

"Unfortunately," Thunderstroke bored on, "the files have failed to produce the name of any such paragon; hence, I must make do with the material at hand."

"Well!" Magnan muttered under his breath, then paled as Thunderstroke fixed him with an imperious eye.

"I assume your inoculations are in order?" the Undersecretary inquired coldly.

"Mine, sir?" Magnan said, pushing his chair back and rising hastily. "Actually, my hayfever shot is due in just under half an hour—"

"I suggest you ask for a heavy dosage of antiradiation drugs while you're there," the Assistant for ET Affairs said cheerfully. "And of course a tetanus shot wouldn't do any harm."

"Kindly be seated, Magnan," Thunderstroke barked. "Now, you'll be going in in a plainly marked courier vessel; I suggest you exercise caution as you approach the battle flotillas; the Slox are said to be even more trigger-happy than the notoriously impetuous Groaci."

"I'm to go into that hornet's nest, sir—in an unarmed boat?"

"You'll be armed with instructions, Magnan. Buck up, man! This is no time to show the white feather!"

Magnan sank into his chair. "As for myself, I'm delighted, of course," he said breathlessly. "I was just thinking of all those innocent crew members."

"I'd consider that aspect, Magnan. And, of course you're right. It would be folly to risk the lives of an entire crew."

Magnan brightened. "Therefore, you'll be dropped a fractional A.U. from the scene of action in a fast one-man scout."

"A one-man boat? But—" Magnan paused. "But unfortunately," he went on in tones of relief, "I don't know how to pilot one."

"Why not?" Thunderstroke demanded.

"Sector regs discourage it," Magnan said crisply. "Only last month a chap in my department received a severe dressing-down for engaging in acrobatics over Lake Prabchinc—"

"Oh? What's this fellow's name?"

"Retief, sir; but as I said, he's already received a reprimand, so it won't be necessary—"

"Retief," Thunderstroke made a note. "Very well. Make that a two-man scout, Magnan."

"But—"

"No buts, Magnan! This is war—or it will be if you fail! And time is of the essence! I'll expect you and this Retief fellow to be on the way to the battle zone in an hour."

"But, sir! Two diplomats against two fleets?"

"Hm. Phrased in that fashion, it does sound a bit unfair. Still—they started it! Let them take the consequences!"

2

Strapped into the confining seat of the thirty-foot skiff waiting in the drop-bay of the Corps transport, Magnan watched the launch clock nervously.

"Actually," he said, "the Undersecretary had his heart set on a one-man mission; but at my insistence he agreed to send me along with you.

"I wondered who my benefactor was," Retief said. "Nice to know you were thinking of me."

"Retief—are you implying—" Magnan broke off as the voice of the Captain of the mother ship rang from the panel speaker:

"Fifteen seconds, gentlemen. Say, I hope your policies are all paid up; from what my translator tells me about the transmissions those boys are exchanging up ahead, you're going to arrive just in time for M minute."

"I wish he'd trip the launch lever," Magnan snapped. "I'll be profoundly happy to depart this hulk, if only to be away from that gloating voice."

I heard that," the Captain said. "What's the matter, no sense of humor?"

"I'm convulsed," Magnan said.

"Better unconvulse," came the swift suggestion. "This is it. Happy landings!" There was a slam of relays, a thud, a jolt that dimmed the passengers' vision for a long, dizzying moment; when it cleared, black space dotted with fiery points glared from the screens. Astern, the transport dwindled and was gone.

"I'm picking them up already," Retief said, manipulating the controls of the R-screen. "Our daredevil Captain practically dropped us in their midst."

"Has the shooting started?" Magnan gasped.

"Not yet; but from the look of those battle formations, it won't be long."

"Maybe we ought to transmit our plea for peace from here," Magnan said hurriedly. "Something eloquent to appeal to their finer natures, with just a smidgin of veiled threat on the side."

"I have a feeling it's going to take more than sparkling conversation to stop these fellows," Retief said. "Anybody who owns a brand-new battlewagon has a natural yen to see if it works."

"I've been thinking," Magnan said abruptly. "You know how short the CDT is of trained personnel; now that we've seen the hopelessness of the task, it's our duty to salvage what we can from the debacle. Besides, an eyewitness report will be of inestimable value to the Undersecretary when the Board of Inquiry starts digging into the question of how he allowed a war to start right under our noses."

"I'm with you so far, Mr. Magnan."

"That being the case," Magnan went on, "if you should insist on withdrawing from the scene at this point, I hardly see how I could prevent you."

"You're in command, Mr. Magnan," Retief pointed out. "But I have a distinct feeling that our reception back at Sector would be less than enthusiastic if

we don't have at least a few blast burns on the hull to show for our trouble."

"But, Retief!" Magnan pointed at the screen on which the long, deadly looking shape of a Groaci cruiser was growing steadily: "Look at that monster, abristle with guns from stem to stern! How can you reason with that kind of firepower?"

At that moment a crackle of static blared from the screen. A pale, alien visage with five stalked eyes stared out at the Terrans from under a flared war helmet.

"To identify yourselves at once, rash interlopers!" a weak voice hissed in sibilant Groaci. "To be gone instanter or suffer dire consequences!"

"Why, if it isn't Broodmaster Slith!" Magnan cried. "Retief, it's Broodmaster Slith! You remember Broodmaster Slith, of the Groacian Trade Mission to Haunch IV?"

"Is it you, Magnan?" the Groaci grated. "When last we met, you were meddling in Groaci affairs under the guise of selfless uplifter, disrupting peaceful commerce. In what role do you now intrude in Groacian space?"

"Now, Slith, you have to confess it was a bit much, selling plastic frankfurters to those poor backward hotdog lovers—"

"How were we to know their inferior metabolisms were incapable of assimilating wholesome polystyrenes?" Slith snarled. "Enough of this chatter! Withdraw at once or take full responsibility for precipitation of a regrettable incident!"

"Now, don't be hasty, Broodmaster—"

"You may address me as Grand Commander of Avenging Flotillas Slith, if you please! As for haste, it is a virtue I recommend to you! In sixty seconds I order my gunners to fire!"

"I suggest you reconsider. Commander," Retief said. "At the first shot from your guns, three will get you five the Slox open up on you with everything they've got."

"What matter!" Slith hissed. "Let the miscreants invoke the full wrath of outraged Groacihood!"

"At a rough count, they have thirty-one ships to your twenty-four," Retief pointed out. "I think they've got you outwathed."

"But what's all this talk of shooting?" Magnan cried gaily. "What could possibly be gained by gunfire?"

"Certain parcels of real estate, for a starter," Slith said crisply. "Plus the elimination of certain alien vermin."

Magnan gasped. "You confess you're here to take Yudore by force?"

"Hardly—not that the matter is of any concern to Terry spies! My mission

here is to prevent the invasion of hapless Yudore by the insidious Slox—"

"I hear this!" a rasping, high-pitched voice cut in from the auxiliary screen, accompanied by a hissing of background noise. A wavering image formed on the tube, steadied into the form of a shiny, purplish-red cranium, long and narrow, knobbed and spiked, with a pair of yellow eyes mounted on outriggers that projected a foot on either side. "I outrage! I do not endure! You are gave one minutes, Eastern Standard Time, for total abandon of vicinity! Counting! Nine, twelve, two, several—"

"Wha—what is it?" Magnan gasped, staring at the newcomer to the conversation.

"Aha—collusion between Soft One and Slox!" Slith keened. "I see it now! You thought to distract my attention with an exchange of civilities whilst your vile cronies executed a sneak attack around left end!"

"I—Chief General Okkyokk—chum to these monstrosities?" The Slox spokesman screeched.

"Such indignant my language lack! Insufficient you threaten to lowly benefits of Slox Protectorate—but addition of insults! My goodness! Drat! Other obscenity as required!"

"It will avail you naught to rant, traitor!" Slith whispered in a venomous tone. "My guns stand ready to answer your slurs!"

"Only incredible restrains of high-class Slox general intrudes herself to spare those skinny neck!" Okkyokk yelled in reply.

"Now, now, gentlemen, don't get carried away," Magnan called over the hiss of static. "I'm sure this can all be worked out equitably—"

"Unless this pernicious meddler in the Groaci destiny disperses his flimsy hulls at once, I'll not be responsible for the result!" Slith declared.

"My frustrate!" Okkyokk yelled, and brandished a pair of anterior limbs tipped with complicated shredding devices. "Gosh, such wish to know sensation of plait all five eyes into single superocular, followed by pluck like obscene daisy!"

"To wait in patience until the happy moment when I officiate at your burial, head-down, in the ceremonial sandbox," Slith countered.

"Well, at least they're still speaking to each other," Magnan said behind his hand as the exchange raged on. "That's something."

"We may get through this without any hull-burns after all," Retief said. "They have each ther bluffed; it looks like talk rather than torpedoes will carry the day. I suggest we execute a strategic withdrawal while they slug it out, vocabulary-to-vocabulary."

"Hmm. Scant points in that for Terran diplomacy. That is, duty demands that we play a more creative role in the rapprochement." Magnan put a finger against his narrow chin. "Now, if I should be the one to propose an equitable solution..."

"Let's not remind them we're here, Mr. Magnan," Retief suggested. "Frustrated tempers are often taken out in thrown crockery, and we'd make a convenient teacup—"

"Nonsense, they'd never dare." Magnan leaned forward. "Gentlemen!" he called over the din of battle. "I have the perfect solution! Since there seems to be some lack of confidence on the part of each of you in the benign intentions of the other, I propose that Yudore be placed under a Terran Protectorate!" Magnan smiled expectantly.

There was an instant of total silence as two sets of alien sense organs froze, oriented toward the interruption. Slith was the first to break the paralysis.

"What? Leave the fruits of Groaci planning to Terran harvesting? Never!"

"I convulse!" Okkyokk howled. "I exacerbate! I froth at buccal cavity! How are you invite? Mercy! Heavens to Marmaduke! Et cetera!"

"Gentlemen!" Magnan cried. "We Terrans would only remain on Yudore until such time as the aborigines had been properly educated in modern commercial methods and sexual hygiene, after which we'd withdraw in favor of local self-determination!"

"First to pervert, then to abandon!" Slith hissed. "Bold threats, Soft Ones! But I defy you! General Okkyokk! I propose a truce, whilst we band together to confront the common enemy!"

"Done! Caramba! I affronterize! I mortal insult! I even annoy! First destruction we the kibitzer! Then procedure to Slox-Groaci quarrel!"

"Wait!" Magnan yelped. "You don't understand—!"

"I'm afraid they do," Retief said as he reached for the controls. "Hang on for evasive action, Mr. Magnan." The tiny craft leaped ahead, curvetting wildly left and right. There was a flash, and the screens went white and blanked out. The boat bucked wildly and flipped end-for-end. A second detonation sent it spinning like a flat stone skipped over a pond.

"Retief! Stop! We're headed straight for No Man's Land!" Magnan gasped as a lone screen flickered back to life, showing a vast Groaci battle wagon swelling dead ahead.

"We're going in under their guns," Retief snapped. "Running away, we'd be a sitting duck."

"Maybe they'll let us surrender!" Magnan bleated. "Can't we run out a white flag, or something?"

"I'm afraid it would just give them an aiming point." Retief wrenched the boat sideways, rode out another near-miss, drove on, to dive under the big ship's stern.

"Look out!" Magnan screeched as a vast, mottled, blue-green disk slid onto the screen. "We'll crash on Yudore!"

"If we're lucky," Retief agreed. Then the rising scream of splitting air made further conversation impossible.

3

Except for the fading hiss of escaping air and the ping! of hot metal contracting, the only sounds audible in the shattered cockpit were Magnan's groans as he extricated himself from the wreckage of his contour chair. Through a rent in the hull, yellow sunlight glared on the smoking ruins of the scout boat's control panel, the twisted and buckled floor plates, the empty pilot's seat.

"Glad to see you're awake," Retief said.

Magnan turned his aching head to see his companion leaning in the open escape hatch, apparently intact but for a bruise on the cheekbone and a burned patch on the front of his powder-blue afternoon informal blazer. "The air's a little thin, but the O2 content seems adequate. How do you feel?"

"Ghastly," Magnan confided. He fumbled his shock harness free and groped his way through the hatch to drop down shakily on a close-cropped, peach-colored sward. All around, tall, treelike growths with ribbed, red-orange trunks rose into the pale sky, supporting masses of spongy, tangerine-toned foliage. Clumps of yellow, amber, and magenta blossoms glowed in the shade like daubs of fluorescent paint.

"Why are we still alive?" the senior diplomat inquired dazedly. "The last thing I remember is a pale-pink mountaintip sticking up through a cloud bank directly in our path."

"We missed it," Retief reassured his chief. "There was just enough power left on our plates to cushion our touchdown. That and a lot of springy foliage saved our necks."

"Where are we?"

"On a small island in the northern hemisphere, which seems to be the only land on the planet. That's about as specific as I can be, I'm afraid—and I designated the North Pole arbitrarily at that."

"Well—let's get it over with," Magnan sighed, looking around. "Where are they? I suggest we throw ourselves on Slith's mercy. Frankly, I don't trust that Okkyokk; there's something shifty about those cantilevered oculars of his."

"I'm afraid we won't be able to surrender immediately," Retief said. "Our captors haven't arrived yet."

"Hmm. Doubtless they're making a somewhat less precipitous approach than we. I suppose we might as well make ourselves comfortable."

"On the other hand," Retief said reasonably, "why wait around?"

"What other hope of rescue have we?"



"I don't think either party would make the ideal host—assuming they bother with live prisoners in the first place."

"You're implying that Slith—a fellow bureaucrat—a being with whom I've shared many a convivial cup—would acquiesce in our execution out of hand?" Magnan gasped.

"He might—if he didn't do the job himself first."

"Heavens, Retief, what are we to do? How far do you suppose it is to the nearest native village?"

"I didn't see any signs of civilization on the way down: no towns, no roads or cleared fields. Let's give a listen on the long-wave bands."

Retief climbed back inside the wrecked craft, investigated the shock-mounted TRX, spliced a number of broken wires, and twirled the knob. There was nothing but faint static to be heard. He switched to the ship-to-ship frequency.

"—blundering two-eyed incompetent!" Slith's furious voice came through loud and clear. "Your broken-down excuse for a flagship was closer to them than my own superb standard-bearer! It was your responsibility to blast them from space—"

"My indignant! My furious! Heck! Darn! This accuse from a Five-eyes margarine-fingers! I intolerate! Too bad!"

"Have done!" Slith hissed. "These vituperations avail us naught! If the Soft Ones survive to make known that we fired on a Terran vessel—in self defense, of course—a horde of their execrable Peace Enforcers will descend on us like bim beetles in grub-harvest time!"

"I proposterate! My laughter! Your numbskull! Alive, oh! After such crashing, entirely! No, impossible; I rediculate! Au contraire, I suggestion my resumption our dispute. Where were? Indeed, yes—my descriptioning your ancestry—"

"Hark, mindless one! Like other low forms of life, the Soft Ones are tenacious of vitality. We must make sure of their demise! Hence, I shall descend to administer the coup de grâce to any survivors, whilst you stand by off-planet—or, preferably, withdraw to neutral space—"

"So you enable to theft these planet, unoppositioned? My amuse! My hysterical! Goodness me! I accompanate, quite so!"

"Very well—if you insist. You may accompany me aboard my personal gunboat. I'll designate a modest destroyer escort to convey us down to the surface."

"Nix. I preference to my own vessel, gratitudes anyhow. And my bring few Slox cruiser in order to not lonesome."

"Cruisers?" Slith said harshly. "In that case, I think a pair of Groaci battleships would be in order—just to balance the formation, you understand."

"Combination operate incompleteness unless Slox battlewagon also include!"

"Actually," Slith hissed, "I see no reason not to bring my entire fleet along—just in case you should entertain ideas of a sneak attack during my absence!"

"My agreeableness! I, too! The more the merriment! Gracious me! Full speed ahead! Devil take the hind parts!"

"Agreed! Roger and out," Slith snapped.

"Good heavens. Retief," Magnan muttered, "those two madmen are going to stage a fullscale invasion, just to keep an eye on each other—"

"No one could accuse us now of having failed to influence the course of Slox-Groaci relations," Retief said calmly. "Well, let's be off. We have about an hour before they arrive."

Quickly, he detached the compact radio from its mountings, extracted an emergency ration pack from the debris.

"Which way?" Magnan queried worriedly, staring at the deep-orange shade of the forest all around.

"Take your choice, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, indicating the four points of the compass. "Eenie, meenie, miney, or moe."

"Hmm. I think perhaps due meenie; it looks a tiny bit less forbidding; or possibly just a few points to the miney of meenie."

"Meenie by miney it is," Retief said, and led the way into the tall timber.

4

"Retief—I'm utterly exhausted," Magnan panted three quarters of an hour and three miles from the wrecked scout boat.

"We're not clear yet," Retief said. "We'd better keep going, and rest later."

"I'd as soon face a Groaci firing squad as die of heart failure and heat prostration." Magnan sank down on the yielding turf, lay breathing in great gulps.

"How about a Slox skinning party?" Retief suggested. "I understand they start with the scalp and work downward, like peeling a banana."

"Jape if you must," Magnan groaned. "I'm past caring." He sat up suddenly, staring suspiciously at a small, bell-shaped blossom, with petals of a delicate shade of coral pink.

"Bees," he said distastefully. "Allergic as I am even to Terran insects, a sting from an alien form would probably be instantly fatal."

"Still, as you pointed out, one demise is pretty much like another." Retief consoled his superior. "If it actually was a bee you saw, it's the first native animal life to make its presence known."

"I didn't see it—but I heard it distinctly," Magnan said severely. "It buzzed practically in my ear."

"This is a rather curious forest," Retief observed. "Only one variety of tree, one kind of grass, one type of flower, in assorted sizes and colors. But no weeds. No parasitic vines. No big trees crowding out smaller ones, no stunted growth. Not even any deadfalls."

"Ump," Magnan grunted. "Retief, suppose for the nonce we succeed in eluding capture; what then? Nobody knows we're here. How will we ever be rescued?"

"Interesting question, Mr. Magnan."

"Not that it matters a great deal," Magnan went on morosely. "With my mission a failure—worse than a failure—my career is in ruins!"

He groaned. "Do you realize that if it hadn't been for our meddling, this invasion would probably never have come to pass?"

"The thought had occurred to me," Retief conceded.

"To say nothing of the loss of the scout boat. If the Undersecretary holds me responsible—holds us responsible, I should say—that is, in the event he doesn't hold you personally responsible, Retief, as pilot—why, you'll be years paying it off," he went on more cheerfully. "Still, I'll put in a word for you. After all, Slith was shooting at us."

"There is that."

"And actually, who's to say it was my friendly attempt to offer a compromise that precipitated the invasion? I daresay the hotheads would have embarked on their conquest in any event."

"Possibly," Retief agreed.

"Actually, by engaging them in conversation, I doubtless delayed the inevitable for a... a length of time."

"Several seconds, at least."

"Why, actually, Retief, by offering myself as a sacrifice on the altar of interbeing chumship, I may have saved countless lives!"

"I suppose a certain number of bacteria were lost in our crash landing," Retief pointed out.

"You scoff," Magnan charged. "But history will vindicate my stand! Why, I wouldn't be surprised if a special posthumous medal were struck—" He broke off with a start. "There it is again!" He scrambled up. "It sounded like an enraged hornet! Where did it go?"

Retief cocked his head, listening, then leaned over to examine the clumps of apricot-colored flowers nodding on long stems, beside which Magnan had been sitting.

"Don't waste time plucking nosegays!" Magnan yelled. "I'm under attack!"

"Mr. Magnan, I don't think there are any insects in the vicinity," Retief demurred.

"Eh? Why, I can hear them quite plainly!" Magnan frowned. "It sounds like one of those old-fashioned hand-crank telephones still in use out on Jawbone, when you leave it off the hook."

"Close, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, and leaned down to put his ear to the trumpet-shaped bloom.

"Well, I thought you'd never speak!" a tiny voice said distinctly in his ear.

5

"Buzzing blossoms is quite fantastic enough," Magnan said wonderingly, "but talking tulips! Who'd ever believe it?"

"...somebody to converse with," the cricket-sized voice was saying. "I'm dying to know all the news. Now, just tell me all about yourself: your hopes, your dreams, how you happened to be here—everything!"

Retief held a blossom to his lips as if it were indeed the mouthpiece of a phone. "I'm Retief; this is my colleague, Mr. Magnan. Whom have we the honor of addressing?"

"Well, nice to know you, Retief. And Mister Magnan, too. May I call you 'Mister' for short? First names are so much more sort of informal. I'm Herby. Just a nickname, of course. Actually, I don't have a name. At least I didn't have, until dear Renfrew came along. You have no idea what a sheltered life I'd led up until then. Why, do you know, I had the idea I was the only sentient intelligence in the Galaxy?"

"Who... who are you?" Magnan blurted. "Where are you? Why is the microphone camouflaged to look like a plant?"

"Camouflage? Why, there's no camouflage, mister. You see me just as I am."

"But—I don't see you at all!" Magnan complained, looking around warily. "Where are you hiding?"

"You're squeezing me at this very moment," Herby said.

"You mean—" Magnan held the faintly aromatic blossom at arm's length and stared at it. "You mean—I'm... you're... we're..."

"Now you're getting the idea," the voice said encouragingly.

"Talking flowers—here, in the middle of nowhere—and speaking Terran at that? I must be hallucinating! I've been driven mad by hardship!"

"I doubt it, Mr. Magnan," Retief said soothingly. "I hear it too."

"If I can imagine I hear voices coming out of posies, I can imagine you hearing them too," Magnan retorted tartly.

"Oh, I'm real enough," the voice said reassuringly. "Why should you doubt me?"

"Who taught you to speak Terran?" Retief asked.

"Renfrew. I learned so much from him. Curious—but before he came, it never occurred to me to be lonely—"

"Who is Renfrew?"

"A friend. A very dear friend."

"Retief, this is fantastic!" Magnan whispered. "Are there... are there many like you?" he inquired of the bloom.

"No—just me. After all, there'd hardly be room, you know—"

"What a coincidence!" Magnan exclaimed. "One talking plant on the entire world, and we stumble on it in the first hour! I'm beginning to think our luck is still holding!"

"Now, where are you from, if you don't mind my asking?" the plant inquired.

"We're Terrans," Magnan said. "And I'm sure we're going to get on famously, er, Herby."

"But—I understood Terra was the name of Renfrew's home planet...?"

"Quite so. Marvelous place, you'd love it, now that all the jungles have been cleared and replaced by parking lots..." Magnan caught himself. "Ah, no offense intended, of course," he added hastily. "Why, some of my best friends are plants."

"Heavens—all three of you from one planet? No wonder you left! Such overcrowding."

"Yes—now, Mr. Herby—if you could just tell us the way to the nearest native settlement..."

"Buildings, you mean, and streets, spaceports, that sort of thing?"

"Yes! Preferably not one of these dismal provincial towns. Something in a modest metropolis will do—"

"Sorry, there isn't one—though Renfrew told me about them, of course."

Magnan groaned. "No towns at all? Then..."

"Just jungle."

"If this fellow Renfrew has a ship, we may be able to catch a ride with him. I wonder—could we meet him...?"

"Well—I suppose so, mister. He's quite nearby, as it happens—"

"He's still here, then?"

"Oh, yes indeed."

"Saved," Magnan breathed in relief. "Can you direct us, Herby?"

"Certainly. Just press on meenie, bearing a little to the miney after you cross the stream, then hard moe at the lake. You can't miss him."

Magnan looked startled. "How did you know?" He frowned at Retief in puzzlement. "I thought we named the local directions..."

"Oh, indeed," Herby spoke up. "I merely employed your own nomenclature."

"You must have a fantastic ear," Magnan said wonderingly. "That discussion was held miles from here."

"I don't miss much," Herby said complacently.

"He's remarkably sophisticated for such a modest bloom," Magnan commented as they started off.

"I suspect most of Herby is underground, Mr. Magnan," Retief pointed out. "There's no room for a speech center in the part we saw."

"Gad—a subterranean cerebrum—like a giant potato?" Magnan said uneasily, treading lightly. "A spooky thought, Retief."

Twenty minutes' brisk hike brought the two Terrans to the shore of a small, gurgling brook overhung with majestically arching foliage. They followed the bank to the right for a quarter of a mile, at which point the waters spilled down in a foaming amber cataract into a placid pond half a mile across.

"So far so good," Magnan said uncertainly. "But I see no signs of habitation, not even a hut, to say nothing of a ship..."

Retief moved past Magnan toward a dense thicket which obtruded somewhat from the smooth line of trees edging the lakeshore. He parted the broad, copper-colored leaves, revealing a surface of rust-pitted metal curving away into the dimness.

"Lousy Ann II"—he read the corroded letters welded to the crumbling hull plates. "Looks like we've found Renfrew's ship." He pulled a low-growing branch aside. "And here's Renfrew."

"Splendid!" Magnan hurried up, halted abruptly to stare in horror at the heap of moldering bones topped by a grinning skull still wearing a jaunty yachting cap.

"That's... Renfrew?" he quavered.

"Quite so," said a deep voice from somewhere overhead. "And take my word for it, mister—it's been a long, lonely time since he sat down there."

6

"Two hundred years, give or take a decade or two," Retief said as he climbed out through the derelict's sagging port, brushing the dust and rust-scale from his hands. "She was a Concordiat-registered racing sloop, converted for long-range cruising. What's left of the crew quarters suggests

she was fitted out for one-man operation."

"That's right," agreed the resonant baritone—which, the Terrans had determined, emanated from a large, orchidlike blossom sprouting amid the foliage twenty feet above their heads. "Just Renfrew. It was a small world he inhabited, but he seemed content with it. Not that he was stand-offish, of course. He was as friendly as could be—right up until the difficulty about his leaving."

"What sort of, ah, difficulty?" Magnan inquired.

"He seemed quite upset that his vessel was unable to function. I did my best to console him; regaled him with stories and poems, sang merry songs—"

"Where did you learn them?" Magnan cut in sharply. "I understood Renfrew was the first Terran to visit here."

"Why, from him, of course."

"Good lord—imagine having your own chestnuts endlessly repeated back at you," Magnan whispered behind his hand.

"Did you ever tell a joke to an Ambassador?" Retief inquired.

"A telling point," Magnan conceded. "But at least they usually add a little variety by garbling the punch line."

"How did Renfrew happen to crash-land here?" Retief inquired.

"Oh, he didn't; he came to rest very gently."

"Then, why couldn't he take off again?" Magnan demanded.

"I believe he described it as foreign matter in the warpilator field windings," the voice replied vaguely. "But let's not talk about the past. The present is so much more exciting! Heavens! There hasn't been such activity here since the last glacial age!"

"Retief—there's something slightly piscine about this situation," Magnan murmured. "I'm not sure I trust these garrulous gardenias. Herby said he was the only one of his kind on the planet—yet here's another equally verbose vegetable."

"Oh, that was quite true," the voice above spoke up promptly. "Why in the world would I lie to you?"

"Kindly refrain from eavesdropping," Magnan said coldly. "This happens to be a personal conversation."

"Not as personal as calling me a potato-brain," the orchid said a trifle coolly.

"Goodness—I hope you don't listen to irresponsible gossip," Magnan replied with dignity. "Do I appear the type to employ such an epithet?" He put his mouth to Retief's ear. "The grapevine here surpasses anything I've

encountered, even at a diplomatic reception!"

"Now, let me see," the voice from on high mused. "You mentioned something called a parking lot. I'd like to know more about that, and—"

"I suppose Herby told you that, too!" Magnan snapped. "If I'd known he was such a blabbermouth, I'd never have confided in him! Come, Retief—we'll withdraw to where we can have a modicum of privacy."

"As to that, Mr. Magnan—" Retief started.

"Not here," Magnan interrupted. He led the way a hundred feet down the shore, halted under a spreading bough. "It's apparent I was indiscreet with that Herby person," he said from the corner of his mouth, without moving his lips. "I see now he was a rumor-monger of the worst stripe, in addition to being of questionable veracity. Sole representative of his race, indeed! Why, I suspect every shrub in sight has a wagging tongue!"

"Very probably," Retief agreed.

"There's nothing to do now, quite obviously," Magnan said, "but select an honest-looking plant and approach the problem afresh, impressing the vegetable with our sincerity and benign intentions. Then, when we've wormed our way into its confidence, we can determine how to make use of it to our own best advantage. How does it sound?"

"Familiar," Retief said.

"Excuse me..." Magnan jumped a foot as a voice squeaked the words almost in his ear. "What does 'sincerity' mean in this context?"

"Very little," Retief addressed a cluster of small, russet buds almost invisible among the roan leaves overhead.

"Is there no privacy to be found anywhere in the confounded wilderness?" Magnan inquired with asperity.

"I'm afraid not," the miniature voice piped. "As I was telling you a while ago, there's not a great deal I miss."

"A while ago?" Magnan repeated with a rising inflection. "Why, we've only just met!"

"I don't understand. Mister. I'm Herby. You know me!"

"Nonsense! Herby is a little chap growing under a tree a mile from here."

"Of course! I grow everywhere, naturally. After all, it's my island, isn't it? Not that I'm not willing to share it with a few friends."

"Utter nonsense!" Magnan sputtered. "I might have known a potato was incapable of coherent thought!"

"Herby's telling the truth," Retief said. "It's all one plant: the trees, the grass—everything. Like a banyan tree, only more so." He examined a flower closely. "There's a tympanic membrane that serves as both microphone and



speaker. Very ingenious of Mother Nature."

"In that case—they—or it—"

"He," Retief amended.

"He's overheard every word that's been spoken since we landed." Magnan addressed the blossoms directly: "Look here, Herby—you're aware that we're distressed diplomats, marooned here by an unfortunate accident—"

"I thought Slith and that other-fellow—Okkyokk—were responsible," Herby corrected. "They seem dreadfully argumentative chaps. I do wish they'd lower their voices."

"Quite. Now, you're aware of their hostile intentions toward Mr. Retief and myself—"

"Oh, my," Herby interrupted, "they do seem upset. Such language!"

"Yes. Now, as I was saying..." Magnan paused. "What do you mean, 'such language'?"

"I was referring to Grand Commander Slith's rather graphic use of invective," Herby explained. "Not that General Okkyokk isn't holding his own, of course. I must say my vocabulary is expanding rapidly!"

"You speak as though you could hear them now," Magnan commented, puzzled.

"Ummm. On the ship-to-shore band."

"But—you don't have a radio—do you?"

"A what?"

"If he has organs for detecting sound," Retief said, "why not organs for picking up short wave?"

"Why—that's remarkable!" Magnan exclaimed. "But short wave? It would be rather too much to hope that you can send as well as receive...?"

"Why, I suppose I could transmit, via my snarf nodes, if there were any reason to."

"Retief—we're saved!" Magnan caroled. "Herby—send the following message at once: Ah... Special Priority-Z Mayday, CDT Sector HQ, Aldo Cerise. CDT 87903 subject unprovoked attack—no, make that unwarranted attack—resulting in emergency planetfall—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, mister," Herby cut in. "I couldn't send that."

"But—why not?"

"Why, if I did, some nose parker might come and take you away."

"I sincerely hope so!"

"I've waited two hundred standard years for someone to talk to," Herby said in a hurt tone. "Now you're talking of rushing off. Well, I won't do it."

"The SOS is our sole hope!" Magnan cried. "Would you stand in the way of our rescue?"

"Please—calm yourself, mister. Look at Retief: he's not making a scene. Just resign yourself to the fact that you'll spend the rest of your life here, and we'll get on famously—just as Renfrew and I did—right up until the last few days."

"The rest of our lives?" Magnan gasped. "But—but that's unthinkable! We may linger on for another fifty years!"

"Not if Slith has his way," Retief said. "Where are they now, Herby?"

"I was about to say," Herby began, "they would be arriving any moment..." The vegetable voice was drowned by a rising drone that swelled swiftly to a bellowing roar. A sleek, shark-nosed shape swept overhead, followed by another, two more, then an entire squadron. Sonic booms crashed across the jungle, laying patterns of shock ripples across the still water of the lake. Treetops whipped in the turbulent wakes as two battle fleets hurtled past at low altitude, dwindled, were gone.

"You see?" Herby said a trifle breathlessly into the echoing silence. "Two's company, but a crowd is altogether too much!"

Retief twisted the knob of the radio slung at his belt.

"...pinpointed our quarry!" Slith's breathy voice was keening. "If you will employ your units in encircling the south shore of the island. General, I shall close the pincer to the north."

"Looks like they've spotted us," Retief said. "Slith must carry better optical and IR gear than I gave him credit for."

Sunlight winked on distant craft circling back to spread out on the far side of the lake, sinking down out of sight behind the massed foliage of the forest. Other vessels were visible to left and right, and behind them.

"Not much point in running cross-country," Retief said thoughtfully. "They've got us surrounded."

"What are we going to do?" Magnan yelled. "We can't just stand here!"

"Ouch!" Herby said suddenly. "Ooh! Ahh!"

"What's the matter?" Magnan leaped in alarm, staring around him.

"Why, that hurts like anything!" Herby exclaimed indignantly.

"It's the landing blasts." Retief indicated the smoke rising from points all around the compass. "The Groaci still use old-style reaction motors for atmospheric maneuvering. Must be scorching Herby quite painfully."

Magnan gasped. "You see what sort of uncouth ruffians they are?" he said

indignantly. "Now, wouldn't you like to change your mind, Herby, and assist us—"

"And collect a new crop of third-degree burns when your friends arrive? No, thank you! It's out of the question!"

A deep-toned whickering sound had started up, grew quickly louder.

"A heli," Retief said. "They're not wasting any time."

In the shelter of the tree the two Terrans watched the approach of the small, speedy craft. It swung out over the lake, riffling the water, and hovered two hundred feet in the [probably something missing here].

"ATTENTION, TERRY SPIES!" an electronically amplified voice boomed out from it. "SURRENDER AT ONCE OR SUFFER A FATE UNSPEAKABLE!"

"Herby—if those barbarians get their hands on us, our usefulness as conversationalists will come to an abrupt end," Magnan said urgently.

"YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!" the PA blared. "EMERGE AT ONCE, EMPTY-HANDED!"

"Maybe we can hide out in this dense growth," Magnan said. "If Herby will keep us apprised of their whereabouts. Maybe we can elude capture until help comes."

The copter had drifted closer.

"THIRTY SECONDS," the big voice boomed. "IF AT THE END OF THAT TIME YOU HAVE NOT SUBMITTED YOURSELVES TO GROACI JUSTICE, THE ENTIRE ISLAND WILL BE ENGULFED IN FIRE!"

"Cook us alive?" Magnan gasped. "They wouldn't!"

"Retief... mister..." Herby said worriedly. "Did he mean?"

"I'm afraid so, Herby," Retief said. "But don't worry. We won't let matters proceed that far. Shall we go, Mr. Magnan?"

Magnan swallowed with difficulty. "I suppose a comfortable garroting in a civilized cell is preferable to broiling alive," he said in a choked voice as they walked out from the shade into the bright-orange sunlight of the beach.

7

"A wise decision, Soft Ones," Slith whispered. "In return for your cooperation, I give my reassurances that your remains will be transmitted to your loved ones suitably packaged, with a friendly note explaining that you fell foul of the alert Groacian anti-spy apparatus and were dispatched ere my personal intervention could save you from the just retribution your crimes deserved."

"Why, that's very thoughtful of you, I'm sure, Grand Commander," Magnan said, mustering a ghastly smile. "But might I suggest just one teensy

change? Why not intervene just a bit sooner, and return us safe and sound—a stirring gesture of interbeing amity—"

"My researches into the Terry nature," Slith interrupted, steeping his eyes—an effect which failed to reassure his listeners—"indicate that your kith respond most generously to those who adhere to a policy of unanswering hostility. This evidence of Groaci determination will evoke, I doubt not, a sizable increase in the Terry subsidy to the Keep Groac Gray drive—funds which will of course be quietly diverted to our urgently needed naval modernization program, by the way."

"But why?" Magnan clanked his chains disconsolately. "Why can't we all just be dear, dear friends?"

"Alas," Slith said. "Aside from the fact that we Groaci find you Soft Ones singularly repellent to all nine senses, rendering social intercourse awkward, and the further fact that Terran ambitions Galactic-expansionwise conflict with manifest Groaci destiny—plus the fact that I owe you suitable recompense for your malicious sabotage of my mercantile efforts at Haunch II—aside from these matters, I say—it's necessary at this juncture to silence you."

"S-silence us?" Magnan said. "Why, heavens, Commander Slith—if you're referring to the little misunderstanding that led to our unscheduled landing here on Yudore, don't give it a thought! Why, I've already forgotten it! Actually, it was probably just pilot error on the part of my colleague, Mr. Retief—"

"He's not talking about that, Mr, Magnan," Retief said. "He's talking about his use of Yudore as a red herring to cover an attack on the Slox Empire."

"Silence, verbose one!" Slith hissed; but Okkyokk, whose image on the conference screen had been quietly occupying a complicated perch in the background, spoke up: "Who this? My fascinate! Gosh! Tell more!"

"Fool!" Slith leaped to his feet, vibrating his throat sac at Retief. "Your groundless insinuations deprive you of life's last sweet moments!" He signaled the guards. "On with the executions, forthwith!"

"Not so hurry. Five-eyes!" Okkyokk snarled. "Conversation me, Terry; my interest, oh yes! Tell on!"

"Keep out of this, Okkyokk!" Slith hissed as the guards started forward eagerly.

"My listen!" Okkyokk yelled. "Your forgot, Slith—I guns train on you! My chat these Terry—blow your in fragmentation, or!"

"Better humor him, Slith," Retief said. "Inasmuch as your fleet consists of disguised barges with dummy guns, you're in no position to call his bluff."

Slith made spluttering sounds.

"No gun?" Okkyokk chortled. "Good new tonight! Tell more, Terry!"

"It's quite simple," Retief said. "Slith lured you out here to get your

gunboats out of the way so he could proceed to attack the Slox home planets with minimal interference. The bombardment is probably underway right now."

"Lies!" Slith found his frail voice. "Okkyokk—heed not the traitor's vile fables! He seeks to set us at odds, each with other!"

"I grateful you extreme, Terry!" the Slox Commander grated in a voice like a steel girder shearing, ignoring Slith's appeal. "Preparation you for dead, Groaci bigshot! Fake up big war, eh, you tell. Make fool allbody, eh? Then join force and invasion Terries, eh? Fruits and nuts! You never delusion me for every! Hold on hats, kids—"

"Don't fire!" Slith screeched. "The Soft One lies—which I can prove in most dramatic fashion—by blasting your cancerous aggregation of derelicts into their component atoms!"

"Retief—say something!" Magnan yelled. "If they start shooting—"

"Then you Soft Ones will die!" Slith hissed. "If they prevail—you die with my flagship—and if I prevail—then long shall you linger under the knives of my virtuosi!"

"How you plan do so big shoot with empty gun?" Okkyokk inquired warily.

"Retief!" Slith cried. "Confess to him you lied—else will I decree torments yet uninvented to adorn your passing!"

"Better open fire quick—if you can," Retief said. "As for you, General," he addressed the screen, "it always pays to get in the first lick—"

"Retief, what are you saying?" Magnan yelled. "Why goad them to this madness? No matter who wins, we lose!"

"My confuse!" Okkyokk stated. "Splendor idea, shoot up unarmed Five-eyes—but what if Terry big lying?"

"Don't let him get the jump on you, Slith," Retief advised.

"Gunnery Officer!" the Groaci Commander hissed in sudden agonized decision. "All batteries—open salvo fire!"

The response was instantaneous; a series of hollow clicking sounds over the intercom. Then the dumbfounded voice of the Gunnery Officer:

"Exalted one—I regret to report ..."

"Sabotage!" Slith yelled. On the screen, Okkyokk paused, one digital member poised above a large puce button.

"How, no exploding? Guns fails operationing, just as Terry inform? Splendor!" the Slox leader waggled his ocular extrusions. "Now time procedure to extermination you with leisurely! Master Gunner—procedure blow picture window in Five-eyes flagship, give Commander Slith good viewing of eventuals!"

Slith hissed and sprang for the door, where he fought for position with the guards who had reached the portal before him. Magnan covered his ears and screwed his eyes shut.

"Whats?" Okkyokk's puzzled voice was coming from the screen. "Hows? Malfunctionate of firepower at times like these? My intolerate! Caramba! Oh, heck!"

"I suggest both you gentlemen relax," Retief raised his voice slightly over the hubbub. "No one's going to do any shooting."

"So... your spies have infiltrated my flagship!" Slith hissed. "Little will it avail you, Retief! Once in space, my most creative efforts will be lavished on your quivering corpori!" He scrabbled on the rug, came up with his command mike. "Engineer! Lift off, emergency crash procedures!"

"Another disappointment in store, I'm afraid, Slith," Retief said as no surge of acceleration followed. "Herby's particularly sensitive to rocket blasts," he explained gently. "Ergo—no lift-off."

"Herby?" Slith keened, wagging his eyes, from which the jeweled shields had fallen in the tussle. "Herby?"

"Herby," Okkyokk muttered. "What Herby, which?"

"Herby!" Magnan gasped. "But... but..."

"Undone?" Slith whispered. "Trapped here by the treachery of the insidious Soft Ones? But briefly shall you gloat, my Retief!" The Groaci jerked the elaborately ornamented power-gun from the plastic alligator-hide holster at his bony hip, took aim...

"Three and out," Retief said, as Slith stared in goggle-eyed paralysis at the small, coral-toned flower growing from the barrel of the weapon. "Herby appreciates my conversation far too much to let you blow holes in me. Right. Herby?"

"Quite so, Retief, a cricket-sized voice chirped from the dainty blossom.

"My departure, golly whiz!" Okkyokk's voice blasted from the screen. "Navigationer—full fast ahead!"

"No use, General," Retief said. "Everybody's grounded. Your field windings are full of vines, I'm afraid."

"So that's why Renfrew couldn't leave!" Magnan gulped. "I knew it all along, of course."

"What does this mean?" Slith whispered.

"It means you've been conquered single-handed by a population of one," Retief addressed the alien leaders. "So—if you're ready, gentlemen, I'm sure Herby will be willing to discuss the terms of your surrender."

"Heavens, Retief," Magnan said, adjusting the overlapping puce lapels of his top-formal midmorning cutaway in the gilt-framed mirror outside the impressive mahogany doors of the Undersecretary for Extraterrestrial Affairs. "If we hadn't seized a moment to transmit a distress call on Slith's TX while Herby was busy taking the surrender, we might still be languishing in boredom on that dismal island."

"I doubt if we'd have been bored," Retief pointed out, "with several hundred grounded sailors roaming the woods blaming us for their troubles."

"What a ghastly experience, with every bush and bough jabbering away in colloquial Slox and accentless Groaci, carrying on twelve hundred scrambled conversations at once!"

"In time I think Herby would have mastered the knack of segregating his dialogues," Retief said. "Even with a slice missing from that four-mile-long brain the soundings showed, he should be a fast learner."

"He certainly mastered the technique of creative negotiation with record speed," Magnan agreed. "I can't help feeling a trifle sorry for poor Slith and Okkyokk; their fleets consigned to molder on the ground, the while they supply teams of conversationalists in relays in perpetuity for the diversion of their conqueror."

Retief and Magnan turned as the elevator doors opened behind them. An orderly emerged, pushing a teacart on which rested a handsome teak tub containing a tall, lilylike plant topped by a six-inch flower, glowing a healthy pink and yellow.

"Ah, gentlemen," the blossom greeted them in a mellow tenor voice, "I'm happy to report that new scenes seem to stimulate me—or at least this slice of me!"

Magnan shuddered delicately. "Imagine sprouting a bureaucrat from a wedge of frontal lobe," he said behind his hand. "It makes my head ache just to think of it."

A slender man with thick spectacles thrust his head from the Secretarial suite.

"The Secretary will see you now," he announced, and held the door as the orderly wheeled the cart through.

"Mr. Secretary," Magnan said grandly, "I have the honor to present His Excellency the Herbaceous Ambassador."

"Delighted to meet you, sir or madam," Thunderstroke rumbled, inclining his head graciously to the bloom, which nodded in reply. "Now—do tell me all the details of how you captured two fully armed war fleets..."

Retief and Magnan withdrew, leaving the Undersecretary listening attentively to his visitor's account of the sapless victory.

"Lobotomy seems to agree with Herby," Magnan observed complacently. "Well, I must hurry along, Retief. I have a modest cutting I plan to infiltrate into the flowerbed under the Groaci Ambassador's window." He

hurried off.

"Tsk," said a tiny voice from the pink boutonniere adorning Retief's topmost lapel. "The segment of me you left with the Undersecretary is being regaled with a rather gamey anecdote about cross-fertilizing tearose begonias..."

"It's not considered polite to listen in on private conversations, Herby," Retief pointed out.

"How can I help it?" the blossom protested. "After all, it's me he's talking to!"

"Just don't repeat what you hear. Unless," Retief added as he strolled off toward the Chancery bar, "it's something you think I really ought to know..."