

Ballots and Bandits

1

Second Secretary Retief of the Terran Embassy emerged from his hotel into a bunting-draped street crowded with locals: bustling, furry folk with upraised, bushy tails, like oversized chipmunks, ranging in height from a foot to a yard. A party of placard-carrying marchers, emerging from a side street, jostled their way through the press, briskly ripping down political posters attached to shop walls and replacing them with posters of their own.

Their move was immediately countered by a group of leaflet distributors who set about applying mustaches, beards, and crossed eyes to the new placards. The passers-by joined in cheerfully, some blacking out teeth and adding warts to the tips of button noses, others grabbing the brushes from the defacers and applying them to their former owners' faces. Fists flew; the clamor rose.

Retief felt a tug at his knee; a small Oberonian dressed in blue breeches and a spotted white apron looked up at him with wide, worried eyes.

"Prithee, fair sir," the small creature piped in a shrill voice, "come quick, ere all is lost!"

"What's the matter?" Retief inquired, noting the flour smudge on the Oberonian's cheek and the dab of pink icing on the tip of his nose. "Are the cookies burning?"

"E'en worse than that, milord—'tis the Tsuggs! The great brutes would dismantle the shop entire! But follow and observe!" The Oberonian whirled and darted away.

Retief followed along the steeply sloping cobbled alley between close-pressing houses, his head level with the second-story balconies. Through open windows he caught glimpses of dollhouselike interiors, complete with toy tables and chairs and postage-stamp-sized TV screens. The bright-eyed inhabitants clustered at their railings, twittering like sparrows as he passed. He picked his way with care among the pedestrians crowding the way: twelve-inch Ploots and eighteen-inch Grimblees in purple and red leathers, two-foot Choobs in fringed caps and aprons, lordly three-foot-six-inch Bluffs, elegant in ruffles and curled pink wigs. Ahead, he heard shrill cries, a tinkle of breaking glass, a dull thump. Rounding a sharp turn, he came on the scene of action.

Before a shop with a sign bearing a crude painting of a salami, a crowd had gathered, ringing in a group of half a dozen giant Oberonians of a type new to Retief: swaggering dandies in soiled silks, with cruelly cropped tails, scimitars slung at their waists—if creatures of the approximate shape of tenpins can be said to have waists. One of the party held the bridles of their mounts—scaled, spike-maned brutes resembling gaily painted rhinoceri, but for their prominent canines and long, muscular legs. Two more of the oversized locals were busy with crowbars, levering at the lintel over the shop doorway. Another pair were briskly attacking the adjacent wall with sledge hammers. The sixth, distinguished by a scarlet sash with a

pistol thrust through it, stood with folded arms, smiling a sharp-toothed smile at the indignant mob.

" 'Tis the pastry and ale shop of Binkster Druzz, my granduncle twice removed!" Retief's diminutive guide shrilled. "A little lighthearted destruction in the course of making one's political views clear is all very well—but these pirates would reduce us to penury! Gramercy, milord, canst not impede the brutes?" He swarmed ahead, clearing a path through the onlookers. The red-sashed one, noticing Retief's approach, unfolded his arms, letting one hand linger near the butt of the pistol—a Groaci copy of a two-hundred-year-old Concordiat sliver-gun, Retief noted.

"Close enough, Off-worlder," the Tsugg said in a somewhat squeaky baritone. "What would ye here? Yer hutch lieth in the next street yonder."

Retief smiled gently at the bearlike Oberonian, who loomed over the crowd, his eyes almost on a level with Retief's own, his bulk far greater. "I want to buy a jelly doughnut," the Terran said. "Your lads seem to be blocking the doorway."

"Aroint thee, Terry; seek refreshment elsewhere. Being somewhat fatigued with campaigning, I plan to honor this low dive with my custom; my bullies must needs enlarge the door to comport with my noble dimensions."

"That won't be convenient," Retief said smoothly. "When I want a jelly doughnut I want it now." He took a step toward the door; the pistol jumped at him. The other Tsuggs were gathering around, hefting crowbars.

"Ah-ah," Retief cautioned, raising a finger—and at the same moment swung his foot in a short arc that ended just under the gunhandler's knee joint. The victim emitted a sharp yap and leaned forward far enough for his jaw to intersect the course of Retief's left fist. Retief palmed the gun deftly as the Tsugg staggered backward into the arms of his companions.

"Aroint thee, lads," the giant muttered reproachfully to his supporters, shaking his head dazedly. "We've been boon drinking chums these six Lesser Moons, and this is the first time ye've give me any of the good stuff... ."

"Spread out, lads," one of the Tsuggs ordered his companions. "We'll pound this knave into a thin paste."

"Better relax, gentlemen," Retief suggested. "This gun is messy at short range."

"An' I mistake me not," one of the crowbar wielders said, eyeing Retief sourly, "ye're one of the Outworld bureaucrats, here to connive in the allocation of loot, now the Sticky-fingers have gone."

"Ambassador Clawhammer prefers to refer to his role as refereeing the elections," Retief corrected.

"Aye," the Tsugg nodded, "that's what I said. So how is it ye're interfering with the free democratic process by coshing Dir Blash in the midst of exercising his voice in local affairs?"

"We bureaucrats are a mild lot," Retief clarified, "unless someone gets between us and our jelly doughnuts."

Red-sash was weaving on his feet, shaking his head. "'Tis a scurvy trick," he said blurrily, "sneaking a concealed anvil into a friendly little six-to-one crowbar affray."

"Let's go," one of the others said, "ere he produces a howitzer from his sleeve." The banditti mounted their wild-eyed steeds amid much snorting and tossing of fanged heads.

"But we'll not forget yer visage, Outworlder," another promised. "I wot well we'll meet again—and next time we'll be none so lenient."

A hubbub of pleased chatter broke out among the lesser Oberonians as the party passed from sight.

"Milord hath saved Greatuncle Binkster's fried fat this day," the small being who had enlisted Retief's aid cried. The Terran leaned over, hands on knees, which put his face on a level only a foot or two above that of the little fellow.

"Haven't I seen you before?" he asked.

"Certes, milord—until an hour since, I eked out a few coppers as third assistant pastrycook in the inn yonder, assigned to the cupcake division, decorative-icing branch." He sighed. "My specialty was rosebuds—but no need to burden Your Grace with my plaint."

"You lost your job?" Retief inquired.

"Aye, that did I—but forsooth, 'tis but a trifling circumstance, in light of what I o'erheard ere the hostler bade me hie from the premises forthwith!"

"Let's see, your name is...?"

"Prinkle, milord. Ipstitch Prinkle IX, at your service." The Twilpritt turned as a slightly plumper, grayer version of himself bustled up, bobbing his head and twitching his ears in a manner expressive of effusive gratitude. "And this, milord, is Uncle Binkster, in the flesh."

"Your sarvent, sir," Uncle Binkster squeaked, mopping at his face with a large striped handkerchief. "Wouldst honor me by accepting a cooling draft of pring-lizard milk and a lardy-tart after milord's exertions?"

"In sooth, Uncle, he needs something stronger than whey," Prinkle objected. "And in sooth, the Plump Sausage offers fine ale—if Your Grace can manage the approaches," he added, comparing Retief's six-foot-three with the doorway.

"I'll turn sideways," Retief reassured the Oberonian. He ducked through, was led across the crowded room by a bustling eighteen-inch tapman to a corner table, where he was able to squeeze himself onto a narrow bench against the wall.

"What'll it be, gents?" the landlord inquired.

"Under the circumstances, I'll stick to small beer," Retief said.

"Ale for me," Uncle Binkster said. "'Tis vice, perchance, to tipple ere lunchtime, but with Tsuggs roaming the Quarter battering down walls, one'd best tipple while opportunity presents itself."

"A sound principle," Retief agreed. "Who are these Tsuggs, Uncle Binkster?"

"Lawless rogues, down from the high crags for easy pickings," the elderly baker replied with a sigh. "After you Terrans sent the Groaci packing, we thought all our troubles were over. Alas, I fear me 'tis not the case. So soon as the ruffians got the word the Five-eyes were pulling out, they came swarming down out of the hills like zing-bugs after a jam-wagon—'tis plain they mean to elect their ruffianly chief, Hoobrik the Uncouth. Bands of them roam the city, and the countryside as well, terrorizing the voters—" He broke off as the landlord placed a foaming three-inch tankard before Retief.

"Away with that thimble, Squirmkin!" he exclaimed. "Our guest requires a heartier bumper than that!"

"'Tis an Emperor-sized mug," the landlord said, "but I allow his dimensions dwarf it. Mayhap I can knock the top out of a hog's head..." He hurried away.

"Pray, don't mistake me, milord," Uncle Binkster resumed. "Like any patriot, I rejoiced to see the Sticky-fingers go, leaving the conduct of Oberonian affairs to Oberonians. But who'd have guessed we normal-sized chaps would at once be subjected to depredations by our own oversized kith and kin exceeding anything the invaders ever practiced!"

"A student of history might have predicted it," Retief pointed out, "But I agree: Being pushed around by local hoodlums is even less satisfying than being exploited from afar."

"Indeed so," Prinkle agreed. "In the case of foreigners one can always gain a certain relief by hurling descriptive epithets, mocking their outlandish ways, and blaming everything on their inherent moral leprosy—an awkward technique to use on one's relatives."

The landlord returned, beaming, with a quart-sized wooden container topped by a respectable head. Retief raised it in salute and drank deep.

"And if what my nephew o'erheard be any indication," Uncle Binkster went on, wiping foam from his whiskers, "the worst is yet to come. Hast related all to our benefactor, lad?"

"Not yet, Uncle." Prinkle turned to Retief. "I was sweeping up crumbs in the VIP breakfast room, my mind on other matters, when I heard the word 'Tsugg' bandied among the company still sitting at table. I cocked an auricle, thinking to hear the scoundrels roundly denounced, only to catch the intelligence that their chief, that brawling bravo Hoobrik, representing himself to be spokesman and natural leader of all Oberon, withal, hath demanded audience of His Impressiveness, Ambassador Clawhammer! 'Twas but natural that I undertook to disabuse Their Lordships of this impertinent notion, accidentally overturning a pot of chocolate in process thereof—"

"Alas, my nephew is at times too enthusiastic in his espousal of his views," Uncle Binkster put in. "Though 'tis beyond dispute, in this instance he was sorely tried."

"In sooth, so was His Honor, Mr. Magnan, when the cocoa landed in his lap," Prinkle admitted. "Happily, 'twas somewhat cooled by long standing."

"A grotesque prospect," Uncle Binkster ruminated. "Those scapegrace villains lording it over us honest folk! Perish the thought, Sir Retief! I trow I'd sooner have the Five-eyes back!"

"At least they maintained a degree of control over the ne'er-do-wells," Prinkle said, "restricting them to their hills and caves."

"As will we, lad, once the election is consummated," Uncle Binkster reminded the youth. "Naturally, we Twilpritts stand ready to assume the burden of policing the rabble, as is only right and natural, so soon as our slate is elected, by reason of our superior virtues—"

"Hark not to the old dodderer's maunderings, Giant," a tiny voice peeped from the next table. A miniature Oberonian, no more than nine inches tall, raised his one-ounce glass in salute. "We Chimberts, being Nature's noblemen, are of course divinely appointed to a position of primacy among these lumbering brutes, saving your presence, milord—"

"Dost hear a dust-cricket chirping in the woodwork?" a medium-sized Oberonian with black circles resembling spectacles around his eyes inquired loudly from three tables away. "'Twere plain e'en to an Outworlder that we Choobs are the rightful inheritors of the mantle of superiority. Once in office we'll put an end to such public rantings."

"You in office?" Prinkle yelled. "O'er my dead corse, varlet!" He leaped up, slopping beer as he cocked his arm to peg the mug at the offender.

"Stay, Nephew!" Uncle Binkster restrained the youth. "Pay no heed to the wretch. Doubtless he's in his cups—"

"Drunk, am I, you old sot!" the Choob yelled, overturning the table as he leaped up, grabbing for the hilt of his foot-long sword. "I'll ha' a strip o' thy wrinkled hide for that allegation—" His threat was cut off abruptly as a tankard, hurled from across the room, clipped him over the ear, sending him reeling into the next table, whose occupants leaped up with indignant shouts and flailing fists.

"Gentlemen, time, time!" the landlord wailed, before diving behind the bar amid a barrage of pewter. Retief finished his beer in a long swallow, and rose, looming over the battle raging about his knees.

"A pleasure, gentlemen," he addressed the room at large. "I hate to leave such a friendly gathering, but Staff Meeting time is here."

"Farewell, Sir Retief," Prinkle panted from under the table, where he grappled with a pale-furred local of about his own weight. "Call around any time for a drop and a bit of friendly political chat."

"Thanks," Retief said. "If things get too slow in the frontline trenches I'll

remember your invitation."

2

As Retief entered the conference room—a converted packing room in the former warehouse temporarily housing the Terran Mission to the newly liberated planet Oberon—First Secretary Magnan gave him a sour look.

"Well—here you are at last. I'd begun to fear you'd lingered to roister with low companions in your usual manner."

"Not quite my usual manner," Retief corrected. "We'd barely started to roister when I remembered Staff Meeting. By the way, what do you know about a fellow called Hoobrik the Uncouth?"

Magnan looked startled. "Why, that name is known only to a handful of us in the inner security circle," he said in a lowered tone, glancing about. "Who leaked it to you, Retief?"

"A few hundred irate locals. They didn't seem to know it was a secret."

"Well, whatever you do, act surprised when the Ambassador mentions it," Magnan cautioned his junior as they took seats at the long table. "My," he went on as the shouts of the crowd outside the building rose to a thunderous level, "how elated the locals are, now they realize we've relieved them of the burdens of Groaci overlordship! Hear their merry cries!"

"Remarkable," Retief agreed. "They have a better command of invective than the Groaci themselves."

"Why, Wilbur," Magnan said as Colonel Saddlesore, the Military Attache, slipped into the chair beside him, avoiding his glance. "However did you get that alarming discoloration under your eye?"

"Quite simple, actually." The Colonel bit off his words like bullets. "I was struck by a thrown political slogan."

"Well!" Magnan sniffed. "There's no need for recourse to sarcasm."

"The slogan," Saddlesore amplified, "was inscribed on the rind of a bham-bham fruit of the approximate size and weight of a well-hit cricket ball."

"I saw three small riots myself on the way into the office," the Press Attache said in a pleased tone. "Remarkable enthusiasm these locals show for universal suffrage."

"I think it's time, however," the Counselor put in ponderously, "that someone explained to them that the term 'political machine' does not necessarily refer to medium tank."

The chatter around the long table cut off abruptly as Ambassador Clawhammer, a small, pink-faced man with an impressive paunch, entered the room, glowered at his staff as they rose, waved them to their seats as he waited for silence.

"Well, gentlemen"—he looked around the table—"what progress have you to report anent the preparation of the populace for the balloting?"

A profound silence ensued.

"What about you, Chester?" Clawhammer addressed the Counselor. "I seem to recall instructing you to initiate classes in parliamentary procedure among these riffraff—that is to say, among the free citizens of Oberon."

"I tried, Mr. Ambassador. I tried," Chester said sadly. "They didn't seem to quite grasp the idea. They chose up sides and staged a pitched battle for possession of the chair."

"Ah—I can report a teensy bit of progress in my campaign to put across the idea of one man, one vote," a slender-necked Political Officer spoke up. "They got the basic idea, all right..." He paused. "The only trouble was, they immediately deduced the corollary: One less man, one less vote." He sighed. "Luckily, they were evenly matched, so no actual votes were lost."

"You might point out the corollary to the corollary," Retief suggested. "The lighter the vote, the smaller the Post Office."

"What about your assigned task of voter registration, eh, Magnan?" the Chief of Mission barked. "Are you reporting failure too?"

"Why, no, indeed, sir, not exactly failure; at least not utter failure; it's too soon to announce that—"

"Oh?" The Ambassador looked ominous. "When do you think would be an appropriate time? After disaster strikes?"

"I'd like to propose a rule limiting the number of political parties to P minus 1, P being the number of voters," Magnan said hastily. "Otherwise we run the risk that no one gets a plurality."

"No good, Magnan," the Counselor for PR Affairs spoke up. "We don't want to risk a charge of meddling. However," he added thoughtfully, "we might just up the nomination fee to a figure sufficiently astronomical to keep the trash out—that is, to discourage the weakly motivated."

"I don't know, Irving." The Econ Officer ran his fingers through his thinning hair in a gesture of frustration. "What we really need is to prune the ranks of the voters more drastically. Now, far be it from me to propose strong-arm methods—but what if we tried out a modified Grandfather Rule?"

"Say—a touch of the traditional might be in order at that, Oscar," the Political Officer agreed tentatively. "Just what did you have in mind?"

"Actually, I haven't worked out the details; but how about limiting the franchise to those who have grandfathers? Or possibly grandchildren? Or even both?"

"Gentlemen!" Ambassador Clawhammer cut short the debate. "We must open our sights! The election promises to degenerate into a debacle of ruinous proportions, career-wise, unless we break through with a truly fresh

approach!" He paused impressively.

"Fortunately," he continued in the modest tones of Caesar accepting the crown, "I have evolved such an approach." He raised a hand in kindly remonstrance at the chorus of congratulations that broke out at his announcement.

"It's clear, gentlemen, that what is needed is the emergence of a political force which will weld together the strands of Oberonian political coloration into a unified party capable of seating handy majorities. A force conversant with the multitudinous benefits which would stem from a sympathetic attitude toward Terran interests in the Sector."

"Yes, Chief," an alert underling from the Admin Section took his cue. "But, gosh, who could possibly produce such a miracle from the welter of divergent political creeds here on Oberon, which they're at practically swords' points with each other over each and every question of policy, both foreign and domestic?"

Clawhammer nodded acknowledgment. "Your question is an acute one, Dimplick. Happily, the answer is at hand. I have made contact, through confidential channels, with a native leader of vast spiritual influence who bids fair to fulfill the role to perfection." He paused to allow the staff to voice spontaneous expressions of admiration, then raised a palm for silence.

"While 'Golly' and 'Wow!' are perhaps less elegant effusions than one might logically expect from an assemblage of senior career diplomats," he said sternly, but with a redeeming twinkle in his small, red-rimmed eyes, "I'll overlook the lapse this time on the basis of your obvious shock at receiving such glad tidings after your own abysmal failures to produce any discernible progress."

"Heavens, sir, may we know the name of this messiah?" Magnan chirped. "When do we get to meet him?"

"Curious that you should employ that particular term with reference to Hoobrik," Clawhammer said complacently. "At this moment, the guru is meditating in the mountains, surrounded by his chelas, or disciples, known as Tsuggs in the local patois."

"Did you say... Hoobrik?" Magnan queried uncertainly. "Goodness, what a coincidence that he should have the same name as that ruffian of a bandit chief who had the unmitigated effrontery to send one of his strong-arm men to threaten Your Excellency!"

Clawhammer's pink features deepened to a dull magenta which clashed sharply with his lime-green early-late-mid-afternoon hemi-demi-semi-informal seersucker dickey-suit. "I fear, Magnan," he said in a tone like a tire iron striking flesh, "that you've absorbed a number of erroneous impressions. His Truculence, Spiritual Leader Hoobrik, dispatched an emissary, it's true, to propose certain accommodations sphere-of-influence-wise; but to proceed from that circumstance to an inference that I have yielded to undue pressures is an unwarranted speculative leap!"

"Possibly I just misinterpreted his messenger's phraseology, sir," Magnan said with a tight little smile. "It didn't seem to me that 'foreign bloodsuckers' and 'craven paper-pushers' sounded all that friendly."

" 'IPBMs may fry our skins, but words will never hurt us,' eh, sir?" the Econ Officer piped brightly, netting himself a stab of the Ambassadorial eye.

"Still, it's rather strong language," Colonel Saddlesore spoke up to fill the conversational gap. "But I daresay you put the fellow in his place, eh, Mr. Ambassador?"

"Why, as to that, I've been pondering the precisely correct posture to adopt vis-a-vis the Tsuggs, protocol-wise. I confess for a few moments I toyed with the idea of a beefed-up 804-B: Massive Dignity, with overtones of Leashed Ire; but cooler counsels soon prevailed."

"How about a 764, sir?" the Econ Officer essayed: "Amused Contempt, with just a hint of Unpleasant Surprises in the Offing?"

"Too subtle," Colonel Saddlesore grunted. "What about the old standby, 26-A?"

"Oh, the old 'Threat to Break Off Talks' ploy, eh, Wilbur? Embellished with a side issue of Tableshape Dispute, I assume?"

"Gentlemen!" Clawhammer called the conference to heel. "You forget that the date of the elections is rushing toward us! We've no time for traditional maneuvers. The problem is simple: how best to arrive at a meeting of the minds with the guru."

"Why not just call him in and offer to back him in a take-over, provided he plays ball?" the PR Chief proposed bluntly.

"I assume, Irving," Clawhammer said into the shocked silence, "that what you actually meant to suggest was that we give His Truculence assurances of Corps support in his efforts to promote Oberonian welfare, in the event of his securing the confidence of the electorate, as evinced by victory at the polls, of course."

"Yeah, something like that," Irving muttered, sliding down in his chair.

"Now," Clawhammer said, "the question remains, how best to tender my compliments to His Truculence, isolated as he is in his remote fastness..."

"Why, simple enough, sir," Magnan said. "We just send a messenger along with an invitation to tea. Something impressive in a gold-embossed, I'd suggest."

"I understand this fellow Hoobrik has ten thousand bloodthirsty cutthroats—ah, that is, wisdom-hungry students—at his beck and call," the Econ Officer contributed. "They say anybody who goes up there comes back with his tail cropped."

"Small hazard, since we Terries have no tails," Magnan sniffed.

"I've got a funny feeling they'd figure out something else to crop," Oscar

retorted sharply.

"Am I to infer, Magnan, you're volunteering to convey the bid?" Clawhammer inquired blandly.

"Me, sir?" Magnan paled visibly. "Heavens, I'd love to—except that I'm under observation for possible fourth-degree cocoa burns."

"Fourth-degree burns?" Colonel Saddlesore wondered aloud. "I'd like to see that. I've heard of first, second, and third degree, but—"

"The symptoms are invisible to lay inspection," Magnan snapped. "Additionally, my asthma is aggravated by high altitudes."

"By gad," Colonel Saddlesore whispered to his neighbor, "I'd like a chance to confront these fellows..."

"Better wear your armor, Wilbur," his confidant replied. "From all reports, they weigh in at three hundred pounds, and wear six-foot cutlasses, with which they lay about them freely when aroused. And they say the sight of a Terry arouses them worse than anything."

"...but, as I was about to say, my duties require that I hole up in my office for the foreseeable future," the Colonel finished.

"Cutlasses, you say?" the Econ Officer pricked up his ears. "Hmm. Might be a market here for a few zillion up-to-date hand weapons—for police use only, of course."

"Capital notion, Depew." The Political Officer nodded approvingly. "Nothing like a little firepower to bring out the natural peace-loving tendencies of the people."

"Now, gentlemen—let us avoid giving voice to any illiberal doctrines," Clawhammer said sharply. "Our only motive, let us remember, is to bring the liberated populace to terms with the political realities—in this case, the obvious need for a man on horseback—or should I say a Tsugg on Vorchback?" The Terran envoy smiled indulgently at his whimsy.

"I have a question, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "Since we're here to supervise free elections, why don't we let the Oberonians work out their own political realities?"

Clawhammer looked blank.

"Just—ah—how do you mean?" the Political Officer prompted uneasily.

"Why don't we let them nominate whoever they want, and vote for any candidate they like?" Retief explained.

"I suggest you forget these radical notions, young fellow," Clawhammer said sternly. "These free elections will be conducted in the way that free elections have always been conducted. And now that I've considered the matter, it occurs to me it might be valuable experience for you to pay the proposed call on His Truculence. It might serve to polish your grasp of protocol a trifle."

"But, sir," Magnan spoke up. "I need Mr. Retief to help me do the Consolidated Report of Delinquent Reports Report—"

"You'll have to manage alone, I fear, Magnan. And now, back to the ramparts of democracy, gentlemen! As for you Retief..." The Ambassador fixed the latter with a poniard-sharp eye: "I suggest you comport yourself with a becoming modesty among the Tsuggs. I should dislike to have a report of any unfortunate incident."

"I'll do my best to see that no such report reaches you, sir," Retief said cheerfully.

3

The green morning sun of Oberon shone down warmly as Retief, mounted on a wiry Struke, a slightly smaller and more docile cousin of the fierce Vorch tamed by the Tsuggs, rode forth from the city gates. Pink and yellow borms warbled in the treetops; the elusive sprinch darted from grass tuft to grass tuft. The rhythmic whistling of doody-bugs crying to their young supplied a somnolent backdrop to the idyll.

Retief passed through a region of small, tidy farms, where sturdy Doob peasants gaped from the furrows. The forest closed in as the path wound upward into the foothills. In midafternoon he tethered the Struke and lunched beside a waterfall on pate sandwiches and sparkling Bacchus Black from a cold-flask. He was just finishing off his mousse éclair when a two-foot-long steel arrow whistled past his ear to bury itself six inches in the dense blue wood of a nunu tree behind him.

Retief rose casually, yawned, stretched, took out a vanilla dope stick and puffed it alight, at the same time scanning the underbrush. There was a quick movement behind a clump of foon bushes; a second bolt leaped past him, almost grazing his shoulder, to rattle away in the brush. Appearing to notice nothing, Retief took a leisurely step toward the nunu tree, slipped suddenly behind it. With a swift motion, he grasped a small, limber branch growing out at waist height on his side of the two-foot bole, bent it down and pegged the tip to the shaggy, porous bark, using the match-sized dope stick to pin it in place. Then he moved quickly off, keeping the tree between himself and the unseen archer, to the concealment of a dense patch of shrubbery.

A minute passed; a twig popped. A bulky, tattooed Tsugg appeared, a vast, dumpy figure clad in dirty silks, holding a short, thick, recurved bow clamped in one boulderlike fist, a quarrel nocked, the string drawn. The dacoit tiptoed forward, jumped suddenly around the tree. Finding his quarry fled, he turned, stood with his back to the tree peering into the undergrowth.

At that moment, the bent branch, released by the burning of the dope stick, sprang outward, ramming the astounded bowman in the seat of his baggy green velveteen trousers.

The arrow smacked into the dirt at his feet as he jumped, then stood rigid.

"Don't strike, sir!" he urged in a plaintive tenor. " 'Twas the older lads put

me up to it..."

Retief strolled forth from shelter, nodded easily to the Tsugg, plucked the bow from his nerveless grip.

"Nice workmanship," he said, inspecting the weapon. "Groaci trade goods?"

"Trade goods?" the Tsugg said with a note of indignation. "Just because yer partner has a dirk at me back's no cause to make mockery of me. I plundered it from the Five-eyes all open and aboveboard, so help me."

"Sorry," Retief said. He withdrew the arrow from the loam, fitted it to the bow experimentally.

"You're not by chance a member of Hoobrik's band, are you?" he inquired offhandedly.

"Too right it's not by chance," the Tsugg said emphatically. "I went through the Ordeal, same's the other lads."

"Lucky we met," Retief said. "I'm on my way to pay a call on His Truculence. Can you lead me to him?"

The Tsugg straightened his 290-pound bulk. "Tell yer crony to do his worst," he said with a small break in his voice. "Fim Gloob's not the Tsugg to play the traitor."

"It wasn't exactly treachery I had in mind," Retief demurred. "Just ordinary diplomacy."

"Yer threats will avail ye naught," Fim Gloob declared.

"I see what you mean," Retief said. "Still, there should be some way of working this out."

"No outsider goes to the camp of Hoobrik but as a prisoner." The Tsugg rolled his shiny black eyes at the Terran. "Ah, sir—would ye mind asking yer sidekick not to poke so hard? I fear me he'll rip me weskit, stole for me by me aged mums it were, a rare keepsake."

"Prisoner, eh, Fim? By the way, I don't have a sidekick."

"That being the way of it," Fim Gloob said carefully, after a short, thoughtful pause, "who'd be the villain holding the blade to me kip glands?"

"As far as I know," Retief said candidly, "there's nobody here but you and me."

The Tsugg turned his head cautiously, peered behind him. With a grunt of annoyance, he snapped a finger at the offending bough.

"Me and my overactive imagination," he snorted. "And now," he went on, turning to Retief with a scowl—

"Remember, I still have the bow," Retief said pleasantly.

"And a mort o' good it'll do ye," Fim snarled, advancing. "Only a Tsugg born

and bred has the arm to draw that stave!"

"Oh?" Retief set the arrow and with an easy motion pulled until the arrowhead rested against the bow, the latter being bent into a sharp curve. Another inch—and the stout laminated wood snapped with a sharp twang!

"I see what you mean," Retief said. "But then the Groaci always did produce flimsy merchandise."

"You... you broke it!" Fim Gloob said in tones of deep dismay.

"Never mind—I'll steal you a new one. We have some ladies' models in the Recreation Kits that ought not to overstrain you."

"But—I'm reckoned the stoutest Bowman in the band!"

"Don't give it another thought, Fim. They'll love you when you bring in a live Terry, singlehanded."

"Who, me?"

"Of course. After all, I'm alone and unarmed. How could I resist?"

"Aye—but still—"

"Taking me in as a prisoner would look a lot better than having me saunter in on my own and tell Hoobrik you showed me the route."

"Wouldst do such a dirty trick?" Fim gasped.

"I wouldst—unless we start immediately," Retief assured the Tsugg.

"O.K." Fim sighed. "I guess I know when I'm licked. I mean when you're licked. Let's go, prisoner. And let's hope His Truculence is in a good mood. Otherwise, he'll clap ye on the rack and have the whole tale out of ye in a trice!"

4

A few dozen heavyweights lazing about the communal cooking pot or sprawling in the shade under the striped awnings stretched between the trees looked up in mild interest as Retief appeared on Strukeback, Fim Gloob behind him astride his Vorch, glowering ferociously as he verbally prodded the lone Terran forward.

"Ho, that's far enough, varlet!" he roared. "Dismount, whilst I seek instruction o' His Truculence whether to h'ist ye out of hand, or ha' a bit o' sport wi' ye first!"

"Ha, what be this, Gloob?" a bulky outlaw boomed as Retief swung down from the saddle. "An Off-worlder, I trow!"

" 'Tis no Oberonian, 'tis plain," another offered. "Mayhap 'tis a two-eyed variety o' Five-eyes."

"Avaunt ye, rogues!" Fim yelled. "Clear the way! I've fetched this Terry here to divert the great Hoobrik wi' his saucy sayings!"

"Saucy sayings, is it! I've had enough o' yer own saucy sayings, Gloop! Methinks I'll split the creature on the spot!" The speaker drew a giant cutlass with a whistle of honed metal.

"Stay, Zub Larf!" a mountainous Tsugg in soiled yellow robes bellowed. "'Tis but dull, idling here in camp. I say let's see a sample o' the oddling's tricks, ere we slit his weasand."

"Here, what passes?" a familiar baritone cut through the clamor. A large Tsugg in a red sash pushed through the mob, which gave way grudgingly, with much muttering. The newcomer halted with a jerk when his eye fell on Retief.

"Methinks," he said, "I've seen you before, sirrah."

"We've met," Retief acknowledged.

"Though all you Terries look alike to me..." Dir Blash fingered his jaw gingerly. "Meseemeth 'twas in the Street of the Sweetmakers..."

"So it was."

"Aha! I've got it!" Dir Blash clapped Retief on the shoulder. "My boon companion! Ah, bullies," he addressed his fellows, "this Terry gave me a shot of something with a kick like a Vorch—though for the life of me I can't recall the precise circumstances. How wert thou yclept again, sirrah?"

"Retief. Lucky you have the kind of memory you do, Dir Blash; your compatriots were just debating the best method of putting me out of my misery."

"Say you so?" Dir Blash looked around threateningly, his hand on the hilt of his cutlass. "Nobody murders my drinking buddies but me, wot thee well, me hearties!" He turned back to Retief. "Say, you wouldn't chance to have any more of the same, would you?"

"I'm saving it for a special occasion," Retief said.

"Well, what could be more special than a reprieve from being staved out on a zing-wasp hive, eh?"

"We'll celebrate later," Retief said. "Right now I'd appreciate a short interview with His Truculence."

"If I use my influence to get you in, wilt let me have another sample later?"

"If things work out as they usually do," Retief said, "I think you can be sure of it."

"Then come along, Dir Tief. I'll see what I can do."

5

Hoobrik the Uncouth, lounging in a hammock under a varicolored canopy, gazed indifferently at Retief as Dir Blash made the introductions. He was an immense Tsugg, above the average height of his kind, his obesity

draped in voluminous beaded robes. He selected a large green berry from a dented silver bowl at his elbow, shook exotic salts over it from a heavy gold saltshaker, and popped it into his mouth.

"So?" he grunted, spitting the seeds over the side. "Why disturb my meditations with trifles? Dispose of the creature in any way that amuses you, Blash—but save the head. I'll impale it on a pike and give it to the Terry chieftain—gift-wrapped, of course."

Dir Blash nodded, scratching himself under the ribs. "Well, thus doth the tart disintegrate, Retief," he said in tones of mild regret. "Let's go—"

"I don't want to be a spoilsport. Your Truculence," Retief spoke up, "but Ambassador Clawhammer only allows his staff to be decapitated at Tuesday morning Staff Meetings."

"Staff Meetings?" Hoobrik wondered aloud. "Is that anything like a barbecue?"

"Close," Retief agreed, "Quite often a diplomat or two are flayed alive and roasted over a slow fire."

"Hmm." Hoobrik looked thoughtful. "Mayhap I should introduce the custom here. 'Tis my wish to keep up with the latest trends in government."

"In that connection," Retief said, offering the stiff parchment envelope containing the invitation to the reception, "His Excellency the Terrestrial Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary presents his compliments, and requests me to hand you this."

"Eh? What be this?" Hoobrik fingered the document gingerly.

"Ambassador Clawhammer requests the honor of your company at a ceremonial affair celebrating the election," Retief explained.

"Ceremonial affair?" Hoobrik shifted uneasily, causing the hammock to sway dangerously. "What kind of ceremony?"

"Just a small semiformal gathering of kindred souls. It gives everyone a chance to show off their clothes and exchange veiled insults face to face."

"Waugh! What kind of contest is this? Give me a good hand-to-hand disemboweling contest any day!"

"That comes later," Retief said. "It's known as Dropping by the Residence for a Drink After the Party."

"It hath an ominous sound," Hoobrik muttered. "Is it possible you Terries are more ferocious than I'd suspected?"

"Ha!" Dir Blash put in. "I myself dispatched half a dozen of the Off-worlders but this morn, when they sought to impede my entrance to a grog shop in the village."

"So?" Hoobrik yawned. "Too bad. For a moment, things were beginning to look interesting." He tore a corner off the gold-edged invitation and used it

to poke at a bit of fruit rind wedged between his teeth. "Well, off with you, Blash—unless you want to play a featured role at my first Staff Meeting."

"Come, Terry," the red-sashed Tsugg growled, reaching for Retief's arm. "I just remembered the part of yesterday's carouse that had slipped my mind."

"I think," Retief said, evading the subchief's grab, "it's time for that jolt I promised you." He stepped in close and rammed a pair of pile-driver punches to Dir Slash's midriff, laced a hard right to the jaw as the giant doubled over and fell past him, out cold.

"Here!" Hoobrik yelled. "Is that any way to repay my hospitality?" He stared down at his fallen henchman. "Dir Blash, get up, thou malingerer, and avenge my honor!"

Dir Blash groaned; one foot twitched; he settled back with a snore.

"My apologies, Your Truculence," Retief said, easing the Groaci pistol from inside his shirt. "Protocol has never been my strong suit. Having committed a faux pas, I'd best be on my way. Which route would be least likely to result in the demise of any of Your Truculence's alert sentries?"

"Stay, Outworlder! Wouldst spread tidings of this unflattering event abroad, to the detriment of my polling strength?"

"Word might leak out," Retief conceded. "Especially if any of your troops get in my way."

" 'Tis a shame not to be borne!" Hoobrik said hoarsely. "All Oberon knoweth that only a Tsugg can smite another Tsugg senseless." He looked thoughtful. "Still, if the molehill will not come to Meyer, Meyer must to the molehill, as the saying goeth. Since thou hast in sooth felled my liegeman, it follows you must be raised at once to Tsugghood, legitimizing the event after the fact, as it were."

"I'd be honored, Your Truculence," Retief said amiably. "Provided, of course. Your Truculence authorizes me to convey your gracious acceptance of His Excellency's invitation."

Hoobrik looked glum. "Well—we can always loot the Embassy afterward. Very well, Terry—Tsugg-to-be, that is. Done!" The chieftain heaved his bulk from the hammock, stirred Dir Blash with a booted toe, at which the latter groaned and sat up.

"Up, sluggard!" Hoobrik roared. "Summon a few varlets to robe me for a formal occasion! And my guest will require suitable robes, too." He glanced at Retief. "But don't don them yet, lest they be torn and muddied."

"The ceremony sounds rather strenuous," Retief commented.

"Not the Ceremony," Hoobrik corrected. "That cometh later. First cometh the Ordeal. If you survive that, I'll have my tailor fit you out as befits a subchief of the Tsugg!"

The Ceremonial Site for Ordeal Number One—a clearing on a forested slope with a breathtaking view of the valley below—was crowded with Tsugg tribesmen, good-naturedly quarreling, shouting taunts, offering and accepting wagers and challenges, passing wine-skins from hand to grimy hand.

"All right, everybody out of the Ring of the First Trial," Dir Blash shouted, implementing his suggestion with hearty buffets left and right. "Unless ye plan to share the novitiate's hazards."

The mountaineers gave ground, leaving an open space some fifty feet in diameter, to the center of which Retief was led.

"All right, the least ye can do is give the Outlander breathing space." Dir Blash exhorted the bystanders to edge back another yard. "Now, Retief—this is a sore trial, 'tis true, but 'twill show you the mettle of us Tsuggs, that we impose so arduous a criterion on oursel's!" He broke off at a sound of crashing in the underbrush. A pair of tribesmen on the outer fringe of the audience flew into the air as if blown up by a mine, as with ferocious snorts, a wild Vorch, seven feet at the shoulder and armed with downcurving tusks, charged from the underbrush. His rush carried him through the ranks of the spectators, to burst into the inner circle, his short tail whipping, his head tossing as he sought a new target. His inflamed eye fell on Dir Blash.

"Botheration," the latter commented in mild annoyance as the beast lowered its head and charged. Leaning aside, the Tsugg raised a fist the size and weight of a hand ax, brought it down with a resounding brongg! on the carnivore's skull. The unlucky beast folded in mid-leap, skidded chin-first to fetch up against Retief's feet.

"Nice timing," he remarked.

"Ye'd think the brute did it a-purpose, to pestificate a serious occasion," Dir Blash said disapprovingly. "Drag the silly creature away," he directed a pair of Tsuggs. "He'll be broke to harness for his pains. And now," he turned to Retief, "if ye're ready...?"

Retief smiled encouragingly.

"Right, then. The first trial is: Take a deep breath, and hold it for the count of ten!" Dir Blash watched Retief's expression alertly for signs of dismay. Seeing none, he raised a finger disappointedly.

"Very well: Inhale!"

Retief inhaled.

"Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnineten," Dir Blash said in a rush, and stared curiously at the Terran, who stood relaxed before him. A few approving shouts rang out, then scattered handclaps.

"Well," Dir Blash grunted. "You did pretty fair, I suppose, for an Outworlder. Hardly turned blue at all. You pass, I suppose."

"Hey," someone called from the front rank of the gallery. "He's not...?"

"Not still...?" someone else queried.

"Still holding his breath?" a third Tsugg said wonderingly.

"O'course not, lackwits!" Dir Blash bellowed. "How could he? E'en Grand Master Cutthroat Dirdir Hooch held out but to the count of twelve!" He looked closely at Retief. "Thou hast indeed resumed respiration...?" he murmured.

"Of course," Retief reassured the Tsugg. "I was just grandstanding."

Dir Blash grunted. "In sooth, I've a feeling ye went a good thirteen, if truth were known," he muttered confidentially. "Hast made a specialty of suffocation?"

"Staff Meetings, remember?" Retief prompted.

"To be sure." Dir Blash looked disgruntled. "Well, on to the Second Trial, Terry. Ye'll find this one e'en a straiter test of Tsugghood than the last!" He led the way upslope. Retief close behind, the crowd following. The path deteriorated into a rocky gully winding up between near-vertical walls of rock. Pebbles rattled around the party from the crumbling cliffs above as members of the party clambered toward choice vantage points. A medium-sized boulder came bounding down from a crag to whistle overhead and crash thunderously away among the trees below. The journey ended in a small natural amphitheater, the floor of which was thickly littered with stones of all sizes. The spectators took up positions around the periphery above, as pebbles continued to clatter down around the tester and testee, who stood alone at the center of the target. A head-sized rock smashed down a yard from Retief. A chunk the size of a grand piano poised directly above him gave an ominous rumble and slid downward six inches amid a shower of gravel.

"What happens if one of those scores a bull's eye on the candidate?" Retief inquired.

"It's considered a bad omen," Dir Blash said. "Drat the pesky motes!" he added as a small fragment bounded off the back of his neck. "These annoyances detract from the solemnity of the occasion!"

"On the contrary," Retief demurred politely. "I think they add a lot of interest to the situation."

"Umm. Mayhap." Dir Blash gazed absently upward, moving his head slightly to avoid being brained by a baseball-sized missile. "Now, Outworlder!" he addressed Retief, "prepare for the moment of truth! Bend over"—he paused impressively—"and touch your toes!"

"Do I get to bend my knees?" Retief temporized.

"Bend whatever you like," Dir Blash said with airy contempt. "I trow this is one feat ye've not practiced at your Ordeal of the Staff Meeting!"

"True," Retief conceded. "The closest we come is lifting ourselves by our bootstraps." He assumed a serious expression, bent over, and with a smooth motion, touched his fingertips to his toes.

"Zounds!" someone called. "He did it in one try!"

"Didn't even take a bounce!" another added. Then the applause was general.

"Lacking in style," Dir Blash grumbled. "But a pass, I allow. But now you face the Third Ordeal, where yer tricks will do ye no good. Come along." As they moved off, his words were drowned as the stone piano crunched down on the spot he and Retief had just vacated.

7

The route to the Third Site led upward through a narrow cut to emerge on a bare rock slope. Fifty feet away a flat-topped rock spire loomed up from the depths, joined to the main mass of the peak by a meandering ribbon of rock some six inches in width, except where it narrowed to a knife edge, halfway across. Dir Blash sauntered out across the narrow bridge, gazing around him at the scenery.

"A splendid prospect, eh, Retief?" he called over his shoulder. "Look on it well; it may be thy last. What comest next has broken many a strong Tsugg down into a babbling Glert."

Retief tried the footing; it held. Keeping his eyes on the platform ahead, he walked quickly across.

"Now," Dir Blash said, "you may wish to take a moment to commune with your patron devils or whatever it is you Outlanders burn incense to, ere the Third Ordeal lays ye low!"

"Thanks, I'm in good shape incantationwise," Retief reassured his inquisitor, "only last night I joined in a toast to the auditors."

"In that case..." Dir Blash pointed impressively to a flat stone that lay across two square rocks, the top of which cleared the ground by a good twelve inches.

"Leap the obstacle!" the subchief commanded. "In a single bound, mind you!"

Retief studied the hurdle from several angles before taking up his position before it.

"I see you hesitate," Dir Blash taunted. "Dost doubt thy powers at last, Terry?"

"Last year an associate of mine jumped fifty names on the promotion list," Retief said. "Can I do less?" Standing flat-footed, he hopped over the barrier. Turning, he hopped back again.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then pandemonium broke out. Dir Blash hesitated only a moment, then joined in the glad cries.

"Congratulations, Dir Tief!" he bellowed, pounding the Terran on the shoulder. "I warrant an Outworlder of thy abilities would be an embarrassment to all hands, but in sooth thou'rt now a Tsugg of the

Tsuggs, and thy attainments are an adornment to our ilk!"

8

"Remarkable," said Hoobrik the Uncouth as he stuffed a handful of sugar-coated green olives into his mouth. "According to Blash here, you went through the Ordeal like a Tsugg to the pavilion born! I may keep you on as bodyguard, Dir Tief, after I get the vote out and myself in."

"Coming from Your Truculence, that's praise indeed," Retief said. "Considering your willingness to offer yourself as a candidate without a whimper."

"What's to whimper?" Hoobrik demanded. "After my lads have rounded up more voters than the opposition can muster, I'll be free to fill my pockets as best I may. 'Tis a prospect I face calmly."

"True," Retief said. "But first there are a few rituals to be gotten past. There's Whistle-stopping, Baby-kissing, Fence-sitting, and Mud-slinging, plus a considerable amount of Viewing-with-Alarm."

"Hmm." Hoobrik rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Are these Ordeals the equal of our Rites of Tsugghood, Retief?"

"Possibly even worse," Retief solemnly assured the chieftain. "Especially if you wear an Indian war bonnet."

"Out upon it!" Hoobrik pounded his tankard on the table. "A Tsugg fears neither man nor beast!"

"But did you ever face a quorum of Women Voters?" Retief countered quickly.

"Nay—but my stout lads will ride down all opposition," Hoobrik declared with finality. "I've already made secret arrangements with certain Five-eyed Off-worlders to supply me with all the write-in ballots I need to make everything legal and proper. Once in office, I can settle down to businesslike looting in an orderly manner."

"But remember," Retief cautioned, "you'll be expected to stand on your Party Platform—at least for the first few weeks."

"W-weeks?" Hoobrik faltered. "What is this platform, Retief?"

"It's a pretty shaky structure," Retief confided. "I've never known one to last past the first Legislative Rebuff."

"What, yet another Ordeal?"

"Don't worry about it, Your Truculence; it seldom goes as far as Impeachment."

"Well? Well? Don't keep me in suspense!" Hoobrik roared. "What doth this rite entail?"

"This is where your rival politicians get even with you for winning, by

charging you with High Crimes and Misdemeanors—"

"Stay!" Hoobrik yelled. "Is there no end to these torments?"

"Certainly," Retief reassured the aroused leader. "After you retire, you become a Statesman, and are allowed out on alternate All Fools' Days to be queried as to your views on any subject sufficiently trivial to grace the pages of the Sunday Supplements."

"Arrrhh!" Hoobrik growled, and drained his mug. "See here, Retief," he said. "On pondering the matter, methinks 'twould be a gracious gesture on my part to take second place on the ticket and let a younger Tsugg assume party leadership; you, for example, Blash," he addressed the subchief.

"Who, me?" the latter blurted. "Nay, my liege—as I've said before, I am not now and do not intend to be a candidate!"

"Who, then?" Hoobrik waved his arms in agitation. "We need a Tsugg who'll appeal to a broad spectrum of voters! A good scimitar-man, for beating down opposition inside the party, a handy club-wielder to bring in the Independents, a cool hand with a dirk, for committee infighting..." He paused, looking suddenly thoughtful.

"Well, I'll leave you gentlemen to look over the lists," Retief said, rising. "May I tell the Ambassador to expect you at the post-election victory reception?"

"We'll be there," Hoobrik said. "And I think I have a sure-fire Tsugg standard-bearer in mind to pull in the vote..."

9

In the varicolored glow of the lights strung in the hedges ringing the former miniature golf course pressed into service as Embassy grounds, the Terran diplomats stood in conversational clumps across the fairways and greens, glasses in hand, nervously eying the door through which Ambassador Clawhammer's entrance was expected momentarily.

"Gracious, Retief," Magnan said, glancing at his watch, "the first results will be in any moment; I'm all atwitter."

"I think we need have no fear of the outcome," Saddlesore stated. "Guru Hoobrik's students have been particularly active in these final hours, zealously applying posters to the polling places."

"And applying knots to the heads of reluctant converts," the Political Officer added. "What I'm wondering is—after Hoobrik's inauguration, what's to prevent his applying the same techniques to foreign diplomats?"

"Tradition, my boy," the Colonel said soothingly. "We may be shot as spies or deported as undesirable aliens; but shaped up by ward heelers, never!"

There was a stir across the lawn; Ambassador Clawhammer appeared, ornate in the Burgundy cutaway and puce jodhpurs specified by CDT Regs for early evening ceremonial wear.

"Well? No word yet?" he stared challengingly at his underlings, accepting one of the four drinks simultaneously thrust at him by alert junior officers. "My private polls indicate an early lead for the Tsugg party, increasing to a commanding majority as the rural counties report."

"Commanding is right," Magnan muttered behind his hand. "One of the ruffians had the audacity to order me to hold his gluepot while he affixed a poster to the front door of the Embassy."

"What cheek," the Political Officer gasped. "You didn't do it?"

"Of course not," Magnan replied haughtily. "He held the gluepot, and I affixed the placard."

Happy shouts sounded from the direction of the gate; a party of Tsuggs appeared, flamboyant in pink and yellow, handing out foot-long yellow cigars. A throng of lesser Oberonians followed, all apparently in good spirits.

" 'Tis a landslide victory," one called to the assembly at large. "Break out the wassail bowl!"

"Is this official, Depew?" the Ambassador demanded of his Counselor, who arrived at that moment at a trot, waving a sheaf of papers.

"I'm afraid so—that is, I'm delighted to confirm the people's choice," he panted. "It's amazing; the Tsugg candidate polled an absolute majority, even in the oppositions' strongholds! It looks like every voter on the rolls voted the straight Tsugg ticket!"

"Certes, Terry," a Grimble confirmed jovially, grabbing two glasses from a passing tray. "We know a compromise candidate when we see one!"

" 'Tis a clear mandate from the people," a Tsugg declaimed. "Hoobrik will be along in a trice to help with sorting out the spoils. As for myself, I'm not greedy; a minor Cabinet post will do nicely."

"Out upon thee!" a jovial voice boomed as the Tsugg chieftain swept through the gate flanked by an honor guard of grinning scimitar-bearers. "No undignified rooting at the trough, lads! There's plenty to go around!"

"Congratulations, Your Truculence," Ambassador Clawhammer cried, advancing with outstretched hand. "I'm sure that at this moment you're feeling both proud and humble as you point with pride—"

"Humble!" Hoobrik roared. "That's for losers, Terry!"

"To be sure," Clawhammer conceded the point. "Now, Your Truculence, I don't want to delay the victory celebration, but why don't we just sign this little Treaty of Eternal Peace and Friendship set up to run for five years with a renewal option—"

"You'll have to speak to the new Planetary President about that, Terry." The chieftain waved the proffered document away. "As for myself, I have some important drinking to catch up on!"

"But I was informed by a usually reliable source"—Clawhammer turned to glare at the Counselor—"that the Tsugg party had carried off all honors!"

"True enough! By the way, where is he?"

"Where is who?"

"Our new Chief Executive, of course—" Hoobrik broke off, pushed past Clawhammer, rushed forward with outstretched arms, narrowly missing a small water hazard, to embrace Retief, who had just appeared on the scene.

"Stand aside, Retief," Clawhammer snapped. "I'm in the midst of a delicate negotiation—"

" 'Twere meet you employ a more respectful tone, Terry," Hoobrik admonished the Ambassador sternly. "Considering whom you're speaking to!"

"Who... whom I'm speaking to?" Clawhammer said in bewilderment. "Whom am I speaking to?"

"Meet Planetary President Dir Tief," Hoobrik said proudly, waving a hand at Retief. "The winner, and new champion!"

10

"Good lord, Retief." Magnan was the first to recover his speech. "When...? How...?"

"What's the meaning of this?" Clawhammer burst out. "Am I being made sport of?"

"Apparently not, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "It seems they put me on the ballot as a dark horse—"

"You'll be a horse of a darker color before I'm through with you!" Clawhammer yelled—and went rigid as twin scimitars flashed, ended with their edges pressed against his neck.

"Bu-but how can a Terran be elected as head of the Tsugg party?" the Political Officer quavered.

"President Tief is no Terry, wittold!" Hoobrik corrected. "He's a Tsugg after my own heart!"

"But—doesn't the President have to be a natural-born citizen?"

"Art suggesting our President is unnatural-born?" Hoobrik grated.

"Why, no—"

" 'Tis well. In that case, best you present your credentials at once, and we can get down to business."

As Clawhammer hesitated, a prod of the blade at his jugular assisted him in finding his tongue.

"Why, ah, Mr. President," he babbled, "er, I have the honor, et cetera, and will Your Excellency kindly tell Your Excellency's thugs to put those horrible-looking knives away?" His voice rose to a whispered shriek on the last words.

"Certainly, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said easily. "Just as soon as we've cleared up a few points in the treaty. I think it would be a good idea if the new Planetary Government has a solemn CDT guarantee of noninterference in elections from now on..."

"Retief—you wouldn't dare—" At a sharp nudge Clawhammer yipped. "I mean, of course, my boy, whatever you say."

"Also, it would be a good idea to strike out those paragraphs dealing with CDT military advisers, technical experts, and fifty-credit-a-day economists. We Oberonians would prefer to work out our own fates."

"Yes—yes—of course, Mr. President! And now—"

"And as to the matter of the one-sided trade agreement: Why don't we just scrap that whole section and substitute a free-commerce clause?"

"Why—if I agree to that, they'll have my scalp, back in the Department!" Clawhammer choked.

"That's better than having it tied to a pole outside my tent," Hoobrik pointed out succinctly.

"On the other hand," Retief said, "I think we Tsuggs can see our way clear to supply a modest security force to ensure that nothing violent happens to the foreign diplomats among us as long as they stick to diplomacy, and leave all ordinary crime to us Oberonians."

"Agreed!" Clawhammer squeaked. "Where's the pen?"

It took a quarter of an hour to delete the offending paragraphs, substitute new wording, and affix signatures to the imposing document establishing formal relations between the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne and the Republic of Oberon. When the last length of red tape had been affixed and the last blob of sealing wax applied, Retief called for attention.

"Now that Terran-Oberonian relations are off on a sound footing," he said, "I feel it's only appropriate that I step down, leaving the field clear for a new election. Accordingly, gentlemen, I hereby resign the office of President in favor of my Vice-president, Hoobrik."

Amid the clamor that broke out, Clawhammer made his way to confront Retief.

"You blundered at last, sir!" he hissed in a voice quiver with rage. "You should have clung to your spurious position long enough to have gotten a head start for the Galactic periphery! I'll see you thrown into a dungeon so deep that your food will have to be lowered to you in pressurized containers! I'll—"

"You'll be on hand to dedicate the statue to our first Ex-President, I ween?"

President Hoobrik addressed the Terran envoy. "I think a hundred-foot monument will be appropriate to express the esteem in which we hold our Tsugg emeritus, Dir Tief, eh?"

"Why, ah—"

"We'll appreciate your accrediting him as permanent Political Adviser to Oberon," Hoobrik continued. "We'll need him handy to pose."

"To be sure," Clawhammer gulped.

"Now I think it's time we betook ourselves off to more private surroundings, Dir Tief," the President said. "We need to plot party strategy for the coming by-election!"

"You're all invited to sample the hospitality of the Plump Sausage," Binkster Druzz spoke up. "Provided I have thy promise there'll be no breaching of walls."

"Done!" Hoobrik cried heartily. "And by the way, Dir Druzz, what wouldst think of the idea of a coalition, eh?"

"Hmm... Twilprit sagacity linked with Tsugg bulk might indeed present a formidable ticket," Binkster concurred.

"Well, Retief," Magnan said as the party streamed toward the gate, "yours was surely the shortest administration in the annals of representational government. Tell me, confidentially: How in the world did you induce that band of thugs to accept you as their nominee?"

"I'm afraid that will have to remain a secret for now," Retief said. "But just wait until I write my memoirs."