

Internal Affair

1

"The Terran Ambassador to Quahogg," said the Undersecretary solemnly, "has disappeared."

Career Minister Magnan, seated opposite his chief across the wide, gold-plated Category 2-b VIP desk, cocked his narrow head in a look of alert incomprehension.

"For a moment, sir," he said, "I thought you said the Terran Ambassador had, ha-ha, disappeared."

"Of course I said he's disappeared," the Undersecretary barked. "Vanished. Dropped from sight!"

"But that's impossible," Magnan said reasonably.

"Are you calling me a liar, or an idiot, you idiot?" the senior bureaucrat roared.

"Mr. Magnan is merely expressing his astonishment, Mr. Undersecretary," First Secretary Retief said in a calming tone. "Perhaps if you'd give us a little more background it would help lower his credulity threshold."

"What background? Ambassador Wrothwax was dispatched a week ago at the head of a small mission accredited to the Supreme Fulguration of Quahogg. The party reported landing on bare rock in a violent whirlwind, finding no signs of the local culture, no vegetation, not even a building, or the ruins of one. They took shelter in a cave, after being threatened by immense meat-eating worms. At that point Wrothwax's absence was noted. Frankly, we're mystified as to what went awry." The Undersecretary looked challengingly at Magnan.

"Gracious—" Magnan put a finger to his cheek. "You don't suppose the Quaswine—?"

"Quahoggians, if you don't mind, Magnan! No, out of the question. His Supremacy was most cordial during our chats via telelink, though a trifle shy. Never showed his face, possibly underestimating our sophistication, imagining we might find his alien appearance off-putting. He welcomed the establishment of diplomatic relations, gave us landing coordinates, assured us he was laying on a gala welcoming celebration." The Undersecretary handed over a rather blurry color photo of a vast, baroquely ornamented chamber apparently upholstered in pink satin.

"The audience chamber in His Supremacy's palace; splendid, eh, in a barbaric fashion? We lifted the image from the TL screen."

"Stunning," Magnan gasped. "Just look at all those swags!"

"Any exterior shots?" Retief inquired.

"It appears climatic peculiarities render open-air photography somewhat impractical on Quahogg."

"What does His Supremacy have to say about our man's disappearance?" Magnan wondered aloud.

"Unfortunately, our communications link is temporarily off the air, due to atmospheric disturbances. However, my guess is that the mission missed their landing point and came to rest in a patch of desert rather than the magnificent city pictured there."

"Well, I'm sure we'll all miss His Excellency," Magnan said, looking politely grieved. "I trust the remainder of the party escaped unharmed. Gracious, it must have been quite a harrowing experience for them."

"It still is," the Undersecretary said grimly. "According to their last transmission, before we lost contact, they're still holed up in the cave, subsisting on their representation rations."

"Six days on domestic champagne and mummified hors d'oeuvres?" Magnan shuddered.

"These are the hazards a diplomat faces in the field," the Undersecretary said sternly.

"The loss of Ambassador Wrothwax is a grave blow to the Corps," Magnan said. "I wonder who could possibly fill his slot in the Table of Organization...?" He pinched his lower lip and gazed ceilingward.

"Actually, Magnan, your name has been mentioned."

"What, me, sir? To be promoted to Career Ambassador? Why, I really don't deserve—"

"That's what we thought. That's why we're merely naming you as Charge d'Affaires, until Wrothwax is found."

"Charge?" Magnan shifted in his chair. "At Quahogg? My feeling, sir, is why send good men after bad—not that I mean to imply anything, of course—"

"Someone has to go in there and find Wrothwax, Magnan! We can't just drop an Ambassador from the records as if he were so much broken crockery!"

"No doubt, sir. I was just thinking of this condition of mine. My doctor says it's the most unusual case of aggravated diplomat's elbow he's ever encountered—"

"See here, Magnan—if you have any reservations about this assignment—any reservations at all—I'm sure your resignation will be philosophically accepted."

"Oh, no indeed sir! Heavens, I couldn't be more enthusiastic! Why, who needs vegetation? It just requires a lot of mowing and trimming—and I've always loved all sorts of creepy, crawly creatures. Ah... you did say chased by giant worms?"

"Forty-footers. There seem to be a couple of other life forms as well, referred to by the landing party as, let me see, oh yes: slugs, and

superslugs.* According to the report, they're limbless, featureless, boneless, without sensory organs, and of the approximate shape and consistency of bagged oatmeal—cooked."

[* Ref CDT Image Guideline No Y-897-b-34 (Par 2c) Epithets, Unflattering, Use of. The terms Deosseomolluscoid, Vermiformoid, and Megadeosseomolluscoid (abbr. DOM, VF, and MDOM, respectively) are preferred in all official contexts.]

"Cooked?" Magnan croaked.

"I understand they have hooks on their undersides to help them hang on when the breeze gets over a hundred and ninety knots," the Undersecretary amplified.

"I have a capital idea, Mr. Undersecretary," Magnan said brightly. "Why don't we just skip on past Quahogg and try our luck elsewhere—say, on a nice, comfortable planet inhabited by nothing more ferocious than a few colorful lichens?"

"Don't talk nonsense, Magnan! Quahogg happens to be the sole planet of the Verman system, which lies squarely athwart the Groaci direction of creep into Terran spheres of influence!"

Magnan looked bewildered.

"You're looking bewildered, Magnan!" the senior diplomat barked. "It should be perfectly plain to you that we must get a foothold on Quahogg before those sneaky rascals steal a march on us!"

"Maybe they'll just... go around Quahogg..."

"What—and lose points in the game? Don't be naive, Magnan. You know how important points are to the Groaci."

"I've got it sir! Why don't we pretend to be bighearted and just let them have it?"

"Then we'd lose points. Besides which," he added, "His Supremacy is something of an unknown quantity; we don't know what the beggar's up to." The Undersecretary frowned. "I'll be candid with you: There seems to be some possibility that he has imperialistic ambitions. Wrothwax went in with a full Mark XL Undercover kit, and instructions to poke about. From the promptness with which he vanished, I suspect His Supremacy wasn't fooled for a moment."

"About that resignation," Magnan said thoughtfully. "Would I be able to get a lump-sum settlement from the Retirement Fund?"

"Negative!" The Undersecretary barked. "Look here, Magnan, this could be a millstone in your career. A milestone, that is to say."

"Tsk," Magnan said. "How true. What a pity I never learned the language—"

"Eh? According to your 201-X file, you brain-taped both Sluggish and Worman back when you were angling for the assignment."

"Ah—unfortunately, I only mastered Old Low Worman, an obscure dialect—"

"Bah, Magnan! You're hedging! I want you to go in there and come out covered with glory!"

"But—what about this Supreme Fulguration? How do I find him, among all these... these oversized Annelids?"

"That's your problem, Magnan. Now, you and Retief had better step smartly. The personnel ferry lifts in less than six hours."

"I say, sir," Magnan quavered, "I don't suppose you'd like to send a couple of gunboats in ahead of us to, er, worm the place a trifle...?"

"Nonsense, your job is to find out what happened to Wrothwax, not to become entangled with the wildlife." The Undersecretary fixed the new appointee with a penetrating eye. "We're counting on you, gentlemen. And remember the Corps motto: Come back with your briefcases, or on them!"

In the corridor, Magnan looked despairingly at Retief.

"It simply doesn't pay to be outstanding," he mourned. "My reward for years of dazzling efficiency: exile to a worm ranch!"

"Cheer up, Mr. Magnan," Retief consoled. "I'm sure you'll find the experience exhilarating, once you get the hang of gripping bare rock in a hurricane while conducting a high-level negotiation with deaf mutes."

"There's one consolation," Magnan said, perking up a little. "As Charge, I'll rate a salute of seventeen and a half guns."

"Impressive," Retief said. "Let's hope they're not aimed in our direction."

2

In Retief's cramped cabin aboard the Corps ferry Circumspect, the intercom crackled and spoke: "Better get set, Retief," a casual voice said. "We'll be hitting atmosphere in a couple of minutes, and I do mean hitting. If you see Nervous Nellie, pass the word. He doesn't answer in his hutch."

"Nellie?" Magnan frowned. "Is there another passenger aboard?"

"Just a little personal code the Captain likes to use," Retief clarified. "I think it's time to strap into the drop-capsule."

"Gracious, now that the moment arrives, I'm all atwitter," Magnan said as they made their way along the narrow access shaft to the tiny compartment in which they would descend to the surface. "To think that I'll soon be presenting my credentials to His Supreme Fulguration as Principal officer!"

"A solemn moment, Mr. Magnan."

"Garbwise, I'm prescribing full Late-mid-afternoon, Top-formal cutaways, with chrome-plated dickeys, silver-lace cuff-cascades, plus medals and orders. First impressions are so important, I always say."

"I'd suggest you amend that to read full environmental suits, plus deflector

fields and traction boots," Retief said. He waved a hand at the small screen on which a cloud-mottled planetary surface was slowly swelling. "There seems to be a dozen or so hurricanes, typhoons, and tornadoes blowing simultaneously down there at the moment."

Magnan stared at the view in dismay. "We're supposed to land in that?"

"Actually, this is almost a lull, by Quahoggian standards."

"You speak as though you knew it would be like this."

"The Post Report the Preliminary Survey Team compiled mentioned a certain amount of turbulence in the atmosphere," Retief conceded.

"Why didn't you warn me? I could have wriggled out—I mean, my peculiar qualifications could have netted us a six-month TDY jaunt doing a Tourist Facility Survey on Beachromp, on full per diem allowances!"

"Don't tell me that a campaigner of your experience forgot to do his background research?"

"Of course not! That's how I knew about the seventeen and a half guns!"

"We're in for a bumpy ride," Retief said. "Maybe you'd better not try to land all that booze you had loaded in the cargo well."

"Medical supplies," Magnan said crisply. "As you know, I disapprove of stimulants except in emergencies."

"I suppose the fellows in the cave could use a snort, at that."

"Um. Foolish of them to have landed off-target."

"That part puzzles me," Retief said. "The controls in these landing bugs are preset, you know."

"Possibly some malfunction," Magnan said absently. "Now, I'll want you to observe my technique, Retief; as Chief of Mission, I'll be moving in the highest levels of the local society, hobnobbing with bigwigs, attending a gay round of routs and balls. Tedious, of course, but one must accept these trifling inconveniences as part of the burden of leadership."

"What about finding the missing Ambassador? Will you be handling that before or after the gay round—I mean the trifling inconveniences?"

"Frankly, Retief," Magnan said in a confidential tone, "I imagine we'll find His Excellency holed up in the native quarter with a pair of local houris. We'll hush up the affair, as is usual in such cases, and—"

"Ready for drop," the Captain's voice rasped in the diplomats' earphones. "Happy landings, gents—and look out for falling cargo." With a lurch, as though kicked by a giant boot, the capsule leaped free of the mother ship and arrowed downward through the murky atmosphere of Quahogg.

3

"Great heavens. Retief," Magnan said, over the shriek of the wind, peering

out through the armorglass panel set in the steel bulkhead of the tiny landing pod, moments after the cushioned impact on the surface. "There's nothing out there but a lot of worn-down stone and flying dust, unless you want to count those ugly-looking black clouds scudding overhead. What's happened to the palace of His Supreme Fulguration?"

"The welcoming committee seems to be late, too," Retief pointed out.

"Good lord—you don't suppose we blundered, coordinate-wise, and missed the drop area, like that last pack of nitwits?"

"If so, we missed it the same distance they did. Look over there."

Magnan eek!ed sharply. "Why—it's a CDT landing pod just like ours!"

"Except that the wind has peeled most of the plating off it," Retief agreed. "Well, let's get started, Mr. Magnan. We don't want to keep His Supremacy waiting."

Magnan assumed a determined expression. "I see we're up against some unexpected obstacles," he said firmly. "However, a diplomat's primary skill is adaptability."

"How true, Mr. Magnan. What do you plan to do?"

"Resign, effective last Tuesday, pension or no. Just thumb that intercom and tell the Captain to pick me up at once, will you?"

"One-way link, Mr. Magnan, remember? I'm afraid we're stuck."

"You mean...?"

Retief nodded. "We may as well disembark and find out if that report of a forty-foot worm was an exaggeration."

Magnan groaned. "Maybe, if we're lucky, we can find the cave. I hope those gluttons haven't eaten all the antipasto."

4

Awkward in their bulky protective suits, the two diplomats cycled open the exit hatch. At once a violent blast of air seized them, spun them along across a stretch of eroded stone, to lodge with a thunderous impact against a low, stony ridge.

"So far so good," Retief said. "At least the weather reports were accurate."

"A scant consolation for being marooned in a maelstrom," Magnan's voice crackled in Retief's helmet.

"Still, you only have to hold the job down for thirty days to qualify for full Chief of Mission pay."

"If I live that long!"

"Our first move had better be to plant a tracer beam to mark ground zero, before they dump any more welcomees off-target," Retief suggested.

"Leaving clues to ease the burden of my successor interests me far less than preserving a whole skin," Magnan snapped. "I mean Ambassador Wrothwax's skin, of course," he added quickly. "Gracious, I'm only too glad to hurl myself to destruction if it will help implement Corps policy."

"That's all right, my suit recorder's not on," Retief said. "And Wrothwax will be thinking of your skin—in strips—if you hurl yourself to destruction before you've found him."

Magnan, only dimly visible six feet away, struggled to a sitting position. At that precise moment there was a descending whistle, followed by a resounding thump a few yards distant in the gloom.

"That would be your medical supplies, right on schedule," Retief said. He got to his feet, forced his way forward into the gale. "That's a lot of medicine, Mr. Magnan," he said admiringly. "How did you sneak it past Supply Control?"

"Heavens, I hope the bottles aren't broken," Magnan offered.

"No bottles," Retief said. "Steel drums, fifty-five-gallon size. Lots of 'em."

Assisted by his suit's servo-boosters, Magnan waded forward to peer at the heaped containers deposited on the rock. There was lettering of their sides: TINCTURE IODINE—.01%; SULPHURIC ETHER, USP; WHITE PETROLEUM OIL-HEAVY.

"You had me fooled," Retief said. "I thought you were just kidding about the medical kit."

"Whom, I?" Magnan said weakly. "Jest about a subject so essential to diplomacy?"

"Well, we're prepared for a variety of emergencies," Retief observed. "And I think I see the first one coming now." Magnan looked in the direction Retief was pointing. From the swirling cloud of windborne dust, a two-ton mass of leathery, dun-colored gelatin loomed mist-shrouded, humping itself relentlessly toward the Terrans on blunt pseudopodia.

"You see? I knew they were exaggerating," Magnan babbled, backing away. "It's hardly more than eight feet long, or possibly twelve, and it's not even a worm, it's more of a slug, and—"

"Let's hope it's a superslug—MDOM, for short," Retief said. "If not, I foresee a dim future for Terry-Quahogg relations."

Retief stepped aside as a long, tentaclelike member formed itself at the fore end of the amorphous creature and groped toward him. Thwarted, it shifted direction, snatched at Magnan, who leaped away, was caught by the wind and bowled along head over heels into the murk. Retief went after him, brought him down with a flying tackle at the edge of a precipitous gully. For a moment, the two suited figures teetered at the lip of the ravine; then a vicious gust caught them, tumbled them over. Giant hammer blows slammed at Retief through his protective suit as he careened downward, bouncing from ledge to ledge to fetch up hard at the bottom. A

moment later, Magnan came skidding down, helmet-first, amid a clatter of dislodged stones. Relief caught him by the shoulders, dragged him back into the meager shelter of the overhanging lip of a wind-carved cavern.

"Well, thank goodness you're here at last," a petulant voice chirped in his earphones. "We're almost out of anchovies!"

5

"But this is insane," the slight, paunchy diplomat shivering in a use-stained environment suit repeated for the fourth time in three minutes. "It's obvious we're the victims of some grotesque hoax!"

"Possibly if you'd seen fit to confide a trifle more detail in your report, Thrashwelt, we'd all have been spared no little inconvenience," Magnan said acidly, holding out his glass.

"I did," Mr. Magnan, I assure you! I TWXed all the details to Sector, with particular emphasis on my allergy problem. And instead of a rescue team, they send us two more thirsts to quench—not that you're not welcome, of course," he added with a strained smile as he poured pink champagne into Magnan's sniffer. "We're down to the forty-four now, very poor year: miserable bouquet and an appalling traveler."

The diplomats were seated on spindly folding chairs grouped around a collapsible table with integral lace napery and bud vase, crowded with dainty glasses, crumb-covered plates, open tins, and crumpled paper napkins. In one corner of the cave were heaped a pile of ornately labeled empties, garnished with zwieback crusts, corks, and olive pits.

"Still, things could be worse," a silvery-haired Press Attache contributed in a tone of halfhearted optimism. "I recall hearing of a Cultural Mission marooned in the Belt for three weeks with nothing but a regulation multid denominational chapel kit to sustain them. Twenty-one days on Mogen David and sacrificial wafers..." He wagged his head in commiseration as the little group observed a moment of sympathetic silence.

"If only we could find the palace of His Supremacy," Magnan said dolefully. "Suppose we sent out search parties in various directions to comb the countryside—"

"No use," Colonel Wince, the Military Attache, stated solemnly. "Already done it. Boxed the compass. Nothing. Bare rock, slugs, drifted dust, worms, ravines, superslugs. Range of worn-down mountains in the distance. Filthy great clouds, dust up the kazoo—"

"Now, now, no defeatism. Colonel." Magnan wagged a finger. "We're just not looking in the right places. Thinking caps, everyone! Where haven't we looked?"

"Up the kazoo, I say," The Colonel muttered. "Give a man an enemy he can come to grips with, not this confounded smog bank inhabited by invertebrate appetites."

"With the exception of His Excellency the Ambassador, all personnel seem

to be present or accounted for," Retief said. "What makes you think the wildlife is carnivorous?"

"Why, the instant they sight us, they come charging down, figurative jaws agape," Thrashwelt said indignantly.

"I didn't see any eyes," Retief said. "How do they sight us?"

"Suppose we leave the zoological musings until later, Retief," Magnan said sharply. "At the moment the problem is how to disinsinuate ourselves from this dismal fiasco without further abrasions to hides, egos, and effectiveness reports. Now, I propose that we make one more try via telelink, hoping for a break in the weather—" He broke off as the dim light filtering around the curve of the grotto faded suddenly to near total darkness in which the folding emergency chandelier suspended from a convenient stalactite shed a wan glow on anxious faces.

"What in the world—?"

"It's them," Thrashwelt gibbered, leaping up. "They're making another try!"

"Into the back room, men!" Colonel Wince shouted. "Man the barricades!"

"Here—what's going on?" Magnan yelled.

"Every so often one of those great horrid monsters comes poking and probing in here," a grasshoppery little clerk said breathlessly. "They squoosh themselves out thin and come groping in the dark, feeling for victims!" He dashed away, scrambling through the narrow opening into the next cavern.

Looking in the direction from which the attack was expected, Retief saw a bulge of darkness intrude into the chamber; a foot-thick finger patted the walls and floor like a hand feeling inside a pocket.

"Come along, Retief," Magnan cried. "Do you want to be crushed to mincemeat?"

"It seems to be feeling its way rather delicately," Retief pointed out. "As if it was being careful not to break anything."

"Maybe it just doesn't like pate," Magnan croaked, backing away.

"Retief—look out!"

As the Charge shouted his warning, the leathery probe suddenly elongated, thinned, shot out to within a foot of Retief's knee.

"Easy Mr. Magnan," he called, standing fast. "The suit will take plenty of strain."

Gingerly, the pseudopod advanced, hovered, then, with a soft smacking sound, plastered itself against Retief's shin.

"At last, a contact!" a mellow voice boomed inside Retief's brain. "We were beginning to think you fellows didn't want to talk!"

"It seems to be some sort of telepathic inductance," Retief said. "He has to make physical contact to transmit."

"Precisely," the soundless voice agreed. "By the way, my name is Sloonge, Minister of Internal Affairs to His Supreme Fulguration. Ever since the arrival of Ambassador Wrothwax, His Supremacy has been anxious to meet the remainder of the Mission."

Retief passed the message along.

"Then Wrothwax reached him, after all," Magnan blurted.

"Indeed, yes," Sloonge confirmed. "He was perceptive enough to lie down when the others departed so precipitously. He wriggled a bit when I greeted him, but as soon as he completed his ceremonial arrival song I was able to convey His Supremacy's invitation. At least I assume it was a ceremonial arrival song: a series of strident yelps in the audible range... ."

"We diplomats frequently burst into yelps on emotional occasions," Retief assured the alien. "I take it, after the ceremonies His Excellency went along to meet His Supremacy?"

"Quite so. I hope you'll also favor him with a visit...?"

"Retief—what's going on?" Magnan demanded. "Why is it fingering your knee?"

"It seems Wrothwax fell down and perforce enjoyed a nice chat with Minister Sloonge here, who conducted him to an audience with his boss. We're invited to join the party."

"D-do you suppose it's safe?"

"It's what we came for."

"True," Magnan conceded. "But Retief—do you suppose His Supremacy is of the same species as this, er, Megadeosseomolluscoid?"

"I heard, I heard," Sloonge transmitted a chuckle-equivalent. "His Supremacy, a superslug? That's quite amusing, actually. His Supremacy will enjoy the jape. And now, shall we be going?"

"Very well. Just a moment while I summon my staff." Magnan went to the rear of the cave and halooed. The response was a strident "Shhhh!"

"You'll tip off our hideaway!" Thrashwelt's voice added.

"You presume to shush your immediate supervisor?" Magnan said sharply. "Come out at once and join my retinue. We're paying a call on His Supremacy."

"Sorry, sir. My job description doesn't say a thing about exotic forms of suicide."

"What's this?" Magnan choked. "Mutiny? Cowardice in the social arena?"

"Concern for Corps property," Thrashwelt corrected. "I wouldn't want to lose a valuable environmental suit containing an expensively trained bureaucrat, namely myself."

"Very well," Magnan said coolly, "I suggest you while away the time until your arrest in composing a letter of resignation."

"Better composing than decomposing," Thrashwelt said tartly.

"Come, Retief," Magnan sniffed. "Since you were the only one cool-headed enough to join me in my decision to out-face the monster, we'll carry on unaided."

With their helmets in place and servos creaking, they followed the giant courtier out into the howling gale.

7

"Nothing like a bracing stroll in the open air to make one appreciate a little shelter," Sloonge commented as the little party slogged ahead, the two diplomats sheltered in the lee of their guide, who slithered along beside them like a bus molded in gray Jell-O. Communication was maintained via a pair of subway-strap-shaped extrusions which the Terrans gripped.

"Curious," Magnan said, bucking the headwind, "I see no signs whatever of civilization: no roads, no fences, no structures of any sort."

"Oh, erecting anything out here on the tundra would be a waste of time," Sloonge commented. "This is just a pleasant zephyr, of course; but when the wind starts to blow in earnest, it's a different matter."

"Underground shelters?" Magnan inquired.

"What—caverns large enough to shelter the entire population—cut into solid rock?" Sloonge sounded surprised. "Quite beyond the scope of our technology, I'm afraid."

The party topped a rise; through a momentary break in the pall of rolling dust, a featureless plain was visible, stretching to a row of humpbacked hills.

"Still nothing," Magnan complained, his voice barely audible over the keening of the wind. "How much farther are we expected to wade through this Niagara of emery dust?"

"Not far," Sloonge said. "We're almost there."

"I suppose the palace is nestled in the hills," Magnan muttered doubtfully as they forged ahead.

Ten minutes later, after mounting a slope of drifted dust in the lee of a rounded promontory, they reached a sheltered furrow in the lumpy ground.

"Ah, here we are," Sloonge telepathed, angling toward a lightless fold in the landscape.

"I still don't see anything," Magnan said.

"We Quahoggians don't lavish much effort on externals," Sloonge explained. "Why bother, when the sand would flay a coat of paint off in twelve seconds by the clock?"

The giant creature extended an improvised digit the size of a prize-winning watermelon to thumb a spot on the featureless gray wall. At once, a crack appeared, valved open on a brilliantly lit passage wide enough to admit a brace of dire-beasts in tandem harness.

"Breathtaking!" Magnan gasped as they stepped inside the rose-colored passage. The howl of the wind died as the entry closed behind them, to be replaced by the soothing strains of a Strauss waltz; liveried amoeboids of medium size sprang forward to attend the newcomers.

"You may remove your helmets, gentlemen," Sloonge announced. "You'll find the air here tailored to your specifications, as suggested by Ambassador Wrothwax."

"Why, Retief, I don't believe I've ever seen anything so lavish in scale and decor," Magnan said as they proceeded along a lofty hall paved in red carpeting and draped in iridescent scarlet silk shot through with bluish traceries. "No wonder they don't bother fancying up the external facades, with all this in store!"

"I'm exceedingly pleased you find the surroundings acceptable," a deep, soundless voice seemed to boom through Retief's brain.

"Good lord! What was that?" Magnan quavered.

"Gentlemen, permit me to introduce His Supreme Fulguration," Sloonge spoke up smoothly. "Your Supremacy, the newly arrived members of the Terran delegation."

"A pleasure," the vast voice rumbled. "Sloonge will show you to your quarters. Just ask for whatever you'd like. As for myself, I'll have to ask you to excuse me for the present. A touch of dyspepsia, I fear."

Magnan was fingering his skull as if exploring for cracks. "I understood you to say contact was necessary!" he said. "How is it we can hear His Supremacy when he's not even here?"

"Not here? Surely you jest, Magnan," Sloonge said jovially. "Of course he's here!"

Magnan looked around. "Where?"

"Don't you know where you are?" Sloonge's mental tone was somewhat amused.

"Of course—we're inside His Supremacy's palace..."

"Close," Retief said. "But I think 'inside His Supremacy' would be closer; about fifty yards along the pharynx, on the threshold of the cardiac orifice, to be precise."

"You—you don't mean we've been eaten alive?" Magnan gobbled feebly.

"Eaten?" Sloonge laughed a hearty telepathic laugh. "My dear sir, you'd hardly constitute a crumb for His Supremacy—even if he was capable of subsisting on carbon compounds."

"Then... what...?"

"I think I'm beginning to get the idea, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "The external environment here on Quahogg made development in that direction pretty difficult; so they turned to the inner man, so to speak."

"Well put, Retief," Sloonge said. "I think you'll find we live very well here under the protection of His Supremacy."

"But—inside a living creature! It's fantastic!"

"As I understand human physiology, you maintain a sizable internal population of your own," Sloonge said somewhat tartly.

"Yes—but those are merely intestinal parasites. We diplomats are a different type of parasite entirely!"

"I hope sir," Sloonge said with a noticeable chill in his tone, "that you harbor no groundless prejudice toward honest intestinal fauna?"

"Gracious, no," Magnan said hastily. "Actually, I couldn't get along without them."

"To be sure. Well, then, may I show you around? Ahead are the fundus and pylorus; on my left, the arcade leading to the pancreas and spleen; I believe we're having a modest chamber-music concert there this evening. There'll be a few tables of bridge in the jejunum, and roulette in the ileum for the more adventurous souls."

"Retief, it's amazing," Magnan murmured as they proceeded. "The hangings, the carpeting, the furnishings—they're magnificent. Whoever would have thought tripe could be so glamorous?"

"Your quarters, gentlemen," Sloonge announced, ushering them through an arched opening into an anteroom done in a rather sour yellow.

"Unfortunately, the colors are a bit liverish at the moment, but the decor will improve as soon as His Supremacy is feeling better." He opened wide doors on a spacious room complete with flowery wallpaper, luxurious beds, pictures on the walls, capacious closets containing complete wardrobes, and an adjoining chamber a-twinkle with ceramics and bright metal fittings.

Magnan thumped the bed; the mattress seemed to be a high-quality innerspring; the sheets were of pink silk, the blanket a light-weight violet wool.

"Am I to understand His Supremacy provides all this himself?" he inquired in an awed tone.

"Why not? Once complete control of the metabolic processes is established, the rest is easy. After all, silk, wool, leather, ivory—are all animal products. His Supremacy simply manufactures them in the required sizes and shapes. He can, of course, duplicate any artifact."

"Great heavens, Retief—there are even nymphs disporting themselves on the shower curtain," Magnan marveled. "How in the world do they—I mean does he do it?"

"It's really quite simple," Sloonge said. "Over the ages, you Terrans have learned to manipulate externals. His Supremacy has merely concentrated on the internal environment."

"Marvelous," Magnan ooh-ed. "I can't wait to see the rest!"

"A word of caution," Sloonge said. "Certain areas are off limits to guests for reasons of internal security. You'd find conditions beyond the pyloric orifice most uncomfortable; and I'd recommend avoiding the trachea and bronchial passages. Some of our people sometimes go slumming in the quaint little bronchioles over that way, but they run the risk of having some unsavory character jump out of a dark alveolus at them. Kindly limit your explorations to the Upper tract."

Magnan looked suddenly thoughtful. "Ah... what happens when His Supremacy has his dinner?"

Sloonge chuckled heartily. "I suppose you're picturing yourself swept downstream by a sudden avalanche of appetizers, eh, Magnan? Have no fear. The living quarters have been evolved as a quite separate complex in the anterior wall of the gut, well out of traffic. In any event, His Supremacy only ingests at intervals of several centuries. Just between us," he added, "he sometimes nibbles between meals; thus his present indisposition, no doubt. However, gluttony is its own punishment, as I've so often reminded him."

"Can't he hear you?" Magnan inquired nervously, glancing at the ceiling.

"His Supremacy would never think of eavesdropping," Sloonge said. "And if he did, he'd soon be looking for a new staff. We treasure our privacy."

"What part do we parasites play in the internal economy?" Retief asked.

"Why, we man posts in every department from liver to lights. We keep tabs on the basal metabolism, monitor gland secretions, control the PH, take care of custodial services—oh, a host of items. Without us, His Supremacy would soon grind to a halt."

"He seems so self-sufficient—with your help, of course," Magnan said, "I'm a little surprised he even consented to receive a diplomatic mission."

"Frankly, His Supremacy is thinking of emigrating," Sloonge said.

"Emigrating? Why?"

"Depletion of natural resources. At the present rate of consumption, Quahogg will be entirely consumed in another two millenia."

"Ah—I take it you mean the food supply will be consumed?" Magnan queried.

"A distinction without a difference, my dear Magnan. His Supremacy eats rock. Now, no doubt, you'll want to get out of those bulky suits and freshen up. There'll be a reception in your honor in half an hour in the duodenum."

"You noted how skillfully I drew him out, Retief," Magnan said as their host withdrew. "Why, he was practically babbling his life secrets to me."

"You got everything except the dinner menu," Retief said admiringly. "And of course the whereabouts of Ambassador Wrothwax."

"Doubtless we'll be accepting His Excellency's congratulations in person shortly," Magnan said as he opened the closet door. He clucked and lifted out a scarlet-and-gold creation heavy with braids, loops, knots, buttons, lapels, aiglettes, and epaulettes.

"Amazing," he said. "Regulation Corps Late Early-evening hemi-demi-semi-informals—and they even got the decorations right. Copied from Ambassador Wrothwax's, no doubt."

"I didn't know you had a figleaf cluster to your Doublecross of the Order of St. Ignatz," Retief commented. "Congratulations, Mr. Magnan. That's only awarded for hairsplitting at the conference table above and beyond the call of protocol, as I recall."

"I was able to do a trifling service for a certain prince, who proved not ungrateful," Magnan said modestly. "I held out for six-legged barstools and a hundred-foot mink-lined double-decker pool table in the Welfare Center we gave his world. Since His Highness' uncle was in the custom-furnishings line, the family turned a tidy profit on the affair."

"May I?" Retief examined the sparkling gold-and-enamel decoration closely. He pressed a hidden catch and the central jewel sprang open, revealing a tiny compartment filled with a fine brown powder.

"Interesting," Retief said. "His Supremacy must scan the items he duplicates molecule by molecule, including any Groaci allergy dust that's incidentally included."

"Heavens, close it at once, Retief! One grain of that, and my sinuses will burst into flame!"

"I'd like to borrow this, Mr. Magnan."

"Take it and welcome!"

"To fill the gap, I'll trade you my plastic-and-diamond Sunburst for a perfect Staff Meeting attendance record."

"You made every meeting?" Magnan asked as he switched medals.

"Nope, missed them all."

"One day, Retief, you're going to miss something important that way,"

Magnan said sharply.

"Perhaps, Mr. Magnan. But I still like the odds."

9

A horde of gaily caparisoned Quahoggians thronged the gaudily decorated duodenum when the Terrans arrived. For the occasion, their hosts had squeezed themselves into vaguely humanoid shapes so as to fit inside variations of Terran diplomatic garb. Soft music oozed from the walls; silent-pseudopoded servitors passed among the guests with trays of glasses. Sloonge came forward to meet them, unrecognizable in a vast purple suit which threatened to burst at every seam.

"Ah, there you are," he cried, gripping his guests' hands with large, jelly-soft members extruded for the purpose. "Well, how do you like our little gathering? Rather gay, eh?"

"It's so... so silent," Magnan said. "A whole roomful of people, and not a word being said."

"Ah, an oversight, easily corrected! We'll whip up some vocal cords in a trice!" Sloonge's imitation eyes—large, pale-violet spots on the blob he used for a head—blurred and ran together as he concentrated silently.

"I've seen noses running," Magnan whispered to Retief as that member slowly flowed out across the Quahoggian's face. "But not like that!"

From a nearby group, a babble of conversation started up, at a barely subintelligible level. Others joined in; in half a minute a high-pitched roar filled the great chamber like a Niagara of small talk.

"Ah, that's more like it, eh?" Sloonge verbalized in a voice like boiling tar. "Nothing like a few tribal background phenomena to put a being at ease, I always say."

"Remarkable," Magnan said, accepting a proffered cocktail. "By the way, I haven't yet laid eyes on Ambassador Wrothwax..." He craned his neck to see over the crowd; noticing what he was doing, the crowd instantly shrank by a head—in many cases, literally.

"And now," Sloonge said hurriedly, "may I present a member of His Supremacy's court? They're thrilled at the prospect of meeting you, and—"

"Delighted," Magnan said. "By the way—where is His Excellency?"

"Where is he, you say?" Sloonge repeated. "Yes, well, as to that—to be perfectly candid—not that I haven't been perfectly candid all along—but what I mean is, now I'm going to be even more candid—"

"Yes, yes?"

"Candidly, as I say—no one seems to know."

"You mean—he stepped out and didn't leave word?"

"Worse than that, Mr. Magnan. He was last seen two days ago. He's gone—vanished—disappeared!"

"What again?" Magnan's voice broke. "But—look here! You can't just go around losing Terran Ambassadors!"

"Shhh! Not so loud! His Supremacy doesn't know yet!"

Magnan drew himself up stiffly. "Then, sir, it is time he be notified!"

"Impossible! It would throw him into a case of the sulks, and you know what that means."

"As it happens, I do not," Magnan said frostily.

Sloonge threw out his temporary arms. "He turns blue; the walls get clammy; utilities are shot to hell; and the food---" The Minister shuddered, an effect like a ripple in a bathtub full of guava jelly. "No, no, far better we simply carry on quietly; he'll never know the difference."

"Impossible, Mr. Minister," Magnan said firmly. "I must request the use of your facilities to notify the Undersecretary at once."

"Unfortunately," Sloonge said, "that will not be possible."

"I wonder at the rather curious failure of communications due to a storm which, it now appears, is actually a spell of mild weather," Magnan snapped. "Very well; my associate and I shall be forced to adopt sterner measures!"

"Why not accept the situation, gentlemen? His Excellency is missing, alas. But that's no reason we shouldn't continue on amicable terms—"

"We are leaving," Magnan said, "at once!"

"Au contraire," Sloonge said. He had absentmindedly slumped halfway back to his normal proportions, and now resembled a gaudily dressed, two-armed giant squid. "You musn't think of venturing forth in such weather."

"Is that a threat?" Magnan choked.

"By no means, Mr. Magnan. A simple statement of fact. It might lead to all manner of complications interplanetary accordwise if you rushed back to your superiors with the report that His Supremacy has misplaced an Ambassador. Ergo—you remain. Now, let us be happy, let us be gay. You may as well; unless His Excellency turns up, you'll spend the rest of your natural lives here."

10

"Retief, this is fantastic," Magnan said as soon as Sloonge had flowed and wobbled out of earshot. "How could Wrothwax have vanished without leaving a trace? He had full XL gear, dye markers, radioactive tracers, gamma-ray projectors, supersonic and infrared signal projectors—everything."

"Unless Sloonge can lie telepathically, he's just as puzzled as we are," Retief said.

Magnan mopped at his forehead with a scented tissue. "Heavens, I must be running a fever. I wonder how His Supremacy is at synthesizing antibiotics?"

"It's not a fever," Retief said. "It's getting warm in here. Must be close to ninety."

All around, the restive crowd—which had diplomatically kept its distance since the exchange with Sloonge—were showing signs of distress, shedding bulky costumes as their quasihuman forms wavered and slumped.

"You don't suppose this is a scheme for getting rid of us by cooking us to death?" Magnan panted, fanning himself with a hand.

"They don't seem to like it any better than we do," Retief pointed out. "They're spreading themselves thin for maximum radiating surface."

Sloonge pushed through the increasingly amorphous crowd; only the big blue eyes remained of the courtesy shape he had assumed. Two small, leathery-looking Quahoggians were at his heels.

"What's going on here, Sloonge?" Magnan demanded before the official could speak. "It's like a hothouse in here!"

"What's going on is that the temperature is zooming toward a record high," Sloonge replied somewhat hysterically. "His Supremacy's taken a turn for the worse. He's running a fever, and if a miracle doesn't happen, we'll all be dead by the time we wake up in the morning!"

Magnan grabbed Retief's arm. "We've got to get out of here at once!"

"Nothing has changed," Sloonge spoke up quickly. "I still can't permit you to leave." He motioned with a formless arm to his enforcers. "Take them to their quarters," he ordered in a blurry telepathic voice. "Leave that they don't see. I mean, see that they don't see. I mean, see that they don't leave. Or is that what I mean...?"

"Retief," Magnan said in a stage whisper, "you take the one on the left and the one on the right, and I'll go for help."

One of the small beings produced a chrome-plated power-gun, identical with Terran Navy issue.

"Better play it smart, big boy," he telepathed. "I been wanting to see how this worked."

Flanked by their escort, the Terrans made their way across the wide floor—which was now an unflattering shade of puce, and tended to ripple underfoot—and along the somewhat shrunken corridor to their quarters. The wallpaper, formerly a gay pattern of daffodils on a field vert, was now a rancid orange against faded olive-drab. The shine was gone from the fixtures. The heat was intense.

"Even the mattress sags," Magnan said. "Good lord, Retief, are we doomed to spend our remaining hours in a third-rate hotel room?"

Retief was watching the two guards whose shapes were wavering like dying flames. He stepped in suddenly, plucked the gun from flaccid fingers, which had sagged to a length of eighteen inches under the weight of the weapon. The former owner made a weak grab.

"Don't try it," Retief advised. "It shoots fire. A short burst into the floor is guaranteed to give His Supremacy instant ulcers."

"Why didn't you warn a fellow?" the Quahoggian said. "I might've shot at you and missed and got in a lot of trouble."

"Before you go," Retief said, "where is the little round Terry who arrived last week?"

"Beats me. I ain't seen him since—" He caught himself, but the faint thought leaked through—since I caught him tryinna sneak past post number 802...

"Where's post 802?"

"I ain't saying," the guard said. He was in obvious distress from the heat; it was apparent that only will power kept his lumpy body from flowing out into a thin film.

"Let's get outa here, Whump," his comrade proposed. "Maybe if we beat it out into the exoderm we can cool off."

"Yeah, but we got orders—"

"It's every phogocyte for hisself," the first guard said, and fled, closely followed by his partner.

"Heavens," Magnan sniffed, "one encounters them everywhere nowadays—" He broke off as Retief pocketed the gun and headed for the door.

"Let's go hunt up Sloonge," Retief said. "Maybe now he'll be in a mood to negotiate."

11

They found the Interior Minister slumped quivering in a corner of the ilium like a truckload of pale liver on which two large eyes floated like blue fried eggs.

"What, still alive?" he telepathed weakly as he caught sight of the Terrans. "A pity, all this. Never intended it to end this way. His Supremacy is done for... temperature up to a hundred and ten and rising. It's the end—for all of us..."

"Maybe not," Retief said. "What's the quickest way out?"

"No use. His Supremacy has slid into rigor vitalis; every sphincter's locked tight. We're trapped."

"You intend to just lie there supinely and let it happen?" Magnan yelled...

"It's as good a place to lie supinely as any," Sloonge pointed out.

"You say His Supremacy is doomed," Retief said. "Are you willing to take extreme measures on the off chance of saving him?"

"W-what do you have in mind?"

"Can you lead the way to the olfactory cavity?"

"I suppose so—but—"

"No time to talk now," Retief said. "Let's get going."

Sloonge pulled himself together. "I suppose it's worth a try. The olfactory cavity, you say? Not that it will do any good. You can't get out that way; nostrils are closed tight, as I said, and..." His thoughts trailed off as he devoted total effort to wobbling across the now patchy-looking floor.

Unconscious Quahoggians lay everywhere; the few who retained consciousness lay quivering, their color like unbaked dough. The party made their way along the deserted pharynx, turned left into the nasal passage, a poorly lighted corridor decorated with NO SMOKING signs and enlarged photos of glamorous bacteria torn from foreign magazines.

"Little... cooler here," Sloonge puffed. "But... no difference in the end. Trapped. Sorry about this, gentlemen. Should have... let you save yourselves..."

They emerged into a high-domed chamber almost filled with banks of leathery curtains which hung in rows, quivering faintly.

"The olfactory membranes?" Retief asked.

"Correct. As you see, everything's shut tight. Nothing can get through; dustproof, windproof—"

"Unless we can persuade His Supremacy to open up," Retief said.

"I tried," Sloonge said, collapsing into a rubbery heap. "But he's delirious. Thinks he's a mere grub again, and is being roasted and dipped into molten chocolate for the exotic tidbits trade."

"For sale to the CDT catering service, no doubt," Magnan groaned. "Hurry up, Retief—burn a hole through to the outer air before my bodily juices coagulate!"

"Retief—you wouldn't...!" Sloonge made a convulsive grab for the Terran, who stepped back out of range.

"Not unless I have to."

"You tricked me," Sloonge wailed. "Alas, that I should play a part in torturing His Supremacy in his last moments!"

"Listen, Sloonge, I need your help," Retief said. "How far above ground

level are we here?"

"Mmm. About fifty feet, I should say. But—"

"Can you elongate to that length?"

"Easily. But—"

"You'll need a solid anchor at this end. How about grabbing a few of those..." He pointed to a stand of wrist-thick sensory spines lining the central aisle.

"Why should I?"

"Because if you don't I'll have to burn our way out."

"Well..." Sloonge followed instructions, coiled himself like a pale fire-hose, gripping the support.

"Lie flat and hang on, Mr. Magnan," Retief instructed his colleague, positioning him astraddle the Quahoggian.

"What are you going to do?"

"Trigger a reflex—I hope," Retief said. "Hold your nose." He detached the borrowed medal from his chest, opened it, and emptied the contents in a brownish cloud over the nearest sensitive membrane.

The result was remarkable. The curtainlike tissue turned flaming red, twitched, writhed, sending the powder billowing about among the adjacent sensors, which in turn jerked and blushed. Retief dived for a position just above Magnan as, with a violent spasm, the nostril—a forty-foot vertical slit at the far end of the room—opened to admit a blaze of daylight and a great squall of cold air, snapping shut at once.

"That's one 'ah,' " Retief called. Again the shudder, the quick intake, the snap shut.

"Two."

A third violent inhalation—

"Sloonge—get set...!"

The end wall split. "Go!" Retief called. The aft end of the boa-shaped Quahoggian slithered quickly forward, out, down out of sight.

"Come on!" Retief and Magnan dashed for daylight; without urging, Magnan gripped the leg-thick rope and slid down. Retief followed, was halfway to the windswept rock below when the thunderous Choo! blasted forth like a quarry explosion; he fell the rest of the way, amid coils of rubbery Interior Minister.

12

"We're out," Sloonge groaned, slowly dragging himself back into his normal superslug form. "But to what end? With His Supremacy gone, we few

survivors will be back to scratching at rocks for a living. Think of it: a million years of evolution shot overnight."

"We're not through yet, Sloonge," Retief said. "Can you lead the way back to where you found us?"

"Abandon His Supreme Fulguration in his dying agonies? Look here, Retief, you said something about trying to save him—"

"That's right. I don't guarantee results, but at this stage it won't hurt to try desperate measures. Let's go."

It took the little party half an hour to grope their way across the plain through the relentless wind to the abandoned landing pod and the heaped drums. At Retief's direction, Sloonge shaped himself into a large, hollow bulb with a slim nozzle at one end. Retief uncapped half a dozen of the containers.

"All right, Sloonge, load up," he directed. The bulky Interior Minister inserted his small end into the nearest drum, with a powerful muscular contraction siphoned out the contents. Quickly, he repeated the performance with the other containers. After the fourth he was swollen to a vast drum-tight bulk.

"Retief," he telepathed faintly. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"I hope so. Let's get started back."

It was a painful progress. Laden with the sloshing bulk cargo, Sloonge moved heavily, clumsily, crawling over each bump and ridge with mute telepathic groans and moans. At last the range of hills that was His Supremacy loomed out of the driven smog.

"Now—one last trick," Retief said. "You'll have to force an entry into the buccal cavity."

"Impossible!" Sloonge expostulated. "How can I open a hurricane-proof mouth?"

"Just far enough to get a finger in," Retief urged.

Sloonge dragged himself across to the sealed, fifty-foot-wide eating mouth, probed fruitlessly at the tight-sealed orifice.

"I'll have to use a touch of the quirt," Retief said. "Get ready." He set the blaster at low heat, aimed it at the monstrous lip, and pressed the stud. For a moment, nothing happened; then the stony-looking hide twitched; for an instant, an opening appeared—

Sloonge plunged his syringe-tip through as the mouth clamped tight again.

"That—that smarts," he said. "Now what?"

"Pump it in, Mr. Minister," Retief said. "Then we'll just stand back and wait."

With a powerful contraction of his versatile body, Sloonge squirted two hundred and twenty gallons of high-grade medicinal mineral oil into the alimentary canal of his mother country.

13

A gala crowd filled the newly decorated ballroom. Sloonge, impeccable in a tent-sized canary-yellow outfit on which the Order of the Purple Kidney—newly awarded for services to the Fatherland—sparkled, waved genially at the Terran Mission as they were announced.

"Ah, there, Mr. Ambassador," he called, hurrying forward to offer impromptu hands to all members of the delegation simultaneously. "You're looking quite your old self again after your ordeal."

"Ordeal? What ordeal?" Wrothwax boomed, deftly lifting a glass from a passing tray. "Nonsense, my boy. I had a capital time exploring the palace catacombs." He snared a slab of pate from another tray. "I must confess I did get a trifle weary of maraschino cherries; had no rations but my emergency cocktail kit, you understand."

"Oh? I had an idea you might have been, er, lost."

"Nothing in it, Sloonge. Jolly interesting place, the catacombs. I was just on the point of deciphering a number of fascinating inscriptions when the earthquake occurred."

"You wouldn't have been snooping just a tiny bit?" Sloonge inquired archly, wagging a limp, cucumber-sized finger at the Terran envoy.

"Scholarly research, my boy, nothing more," Wrothwax reassured his host, signaling for a refill. "Pity to abandon my finds, but I felt I should rush back and see to the safety of my staff."

"In this case," Magnan murmured, "I'm sure excretion was the better part of valor."

"Eh?" Wrothwax said. "For a moment I thought you said—but never mind. Slip of the tongue, eh?"

"No doubt."

"Quite. Pity I never got to meet His Supremacy, Sloonge—but I'm sure you and I can come to an agreement regarding the extensive deposits of pure corundum—rubies and emeralds to you, gentlemen—among which I found myself after the avalanche. Now, I had in mind a barter arrangement under which Corps bottoms haul in Groaci sand, for which you say you have a need, and take away these troublesome gems—waste products, I believe you called them...?" The Ambassador and the Minister strolled off, deep in negotiation.

"Hmmmph," Magnan commented. "Never a word of gratitude to me for arranging his evacuation from the danger zone."

"Still, for once a Terry Ambassador got inside the problem," Retief said.

"And as a result of my efforts—with your assistance, of course. Retief—emerged covered with, if not glory, rubies and emeralds."

"And smelling like a rose," Retief agreed.