

## Mechanical Advantage

1

"Twenty thousand years ago," said Cultural Attache Pennyfool, "this, unless I miss my guess, was the capital city of a thriving alien culture."

The half-dozen Terrans—members of a Field Expeditionary Group of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne—stood in the center of a narrow strip of turquoise-colored sward that wound between weathered slabs of porous, orange masonry, rusting spires of twisted metal to which a few bits of colored tile still clung, and anonymous mounds in which wildflowers nodded alien petals under the light of a swollen orange sun.

"Imagine," Consul Magnan said in an awed tone, as the party strolled on through a crumbling arcade and across a sand-drifted square. "At a time when we were still living in caves, these creatures had already developed automats and traffic jams." He sighed. "And now they're utterly extinct. The survey's life detectors didn't so much as quiver."

"They seem to have progressed from neon to nuclear annihilation in record time," Second Secretary Retief commented. "But I think we have a good chance of bettering their track record."

"Think of it, gentlemen," Pennyfool called, pausing at the base of a capless pylon and rubbing his hands together with a sound like a cicada grooming its wing cases. "An entire city in pristine condition—nay, more, a whole continent, a complete planet! It's an archaeologist's dream come true! Picture the treasures to be found: the stone axes and telly sets, the implements of bone and plastic, the artifacts of home, school, and office, the tin cans, the beer bottles, the bones—oh, my, the bones, gentlemen! Emerging into the light of day after all these centuries to tell us their tales of the life and demise of a culture!"

"If they've been dead for twenty thousand years, what's the point in digging around in their garbage dumps?" an Assistant Military Attache inquired sotto voce. "I say Corps funds would be-better spent running a little nose-to-ground reconnaissance of Boge, or keeping an eye on the Groaci."

"Tsk, Major," Magnan said. "Such comments merely serve to reinforce the popular stereotype of the crassness of the military mind."

"Who's so crass about keeping abreast of the opposition?" the officer protested. "It might be a nice change if we hit them first, for once, instead of getting clobbered on the ground."

"Sir"—Magnan tugged at the iridium-braided lapels of his liver-colored informal field coverall—"would you fly in the face of six hundred years of tradition?"

"Now, gentlemen," Pennyfool was saying, "we're not here to carry out a full-scale dig, of course, merely to conduct a preliminary survey. But I see no reason why we shouldn't wet a line, so to speak. Magnan, suppose you just take one of these spades and we'll poke about a bit. But carefully,

mind you. We wouldn't want to damage an irreplaceable art treasure."

"Heavens, I'd love to," Magnan said as his superior offered him the shovel. "What perfectly vile luck that I happen to have a rare joint condition known as motorman's arm—"

"A diplomat who can't bend his elbow?" the other replied briskly. "Nonsense." He thrust the implement at Magnan.

"Outrageous," the latter muttered as his superior moved out of earshot, scanning the area for a likely spot to commence. "I thought I was volunteering for a relaxing junket, not being dragooned to serve as a navy."

"Your experience in digging through Central Files should serve you in good stead, sir," Second Secretary Retief said. "Let's just pretend we're after evidence of a political prediction that didn't pan out by someone just above you on the promotion list."

"I resent the implication that I would stoop to such tactics," Magnan said loftily, "in any case, only an idiot would go on record with guesswork." He eyed Retief obliquely. "I, ah, don't suppose you know of any such idiot?"

"I did," Retief said. "But he just made Ambassador."

"Aha!" Pennyfool caroled from a heavily silted doorway flanked by a pair of glassless openings. "A well-nigh intact structure, quite possibly a museum. Suppose we just take a peek." The diplomats trailed their enthusiastic leader as he scrambled through into a roofless chamber with an uneven, dirt-drifted floor and bare walls from which the plaster had long since disappeared. Along one side of the room a flat-topped ridge projected a foot above the ground. Pennyfool poked a finger at a small mound atop it, exposing a lumpy object.

"Eureka!" he cried, brushing dirt away from his find. "You see, gentlemen? I've already turned up a masterpiece of the Late Meretricious!"

"I say, sir," a plump Third Secretary addressed the expedition's leader, "since Verdigris is a virgin world, and we're the first beings to set foot here since its discovery, how does it happen the era already has a name?"

"Simple, my boy," Pennyfool snapped. "I just named it."

"Look here, sir," an eager Information Agency man who had been poking at the find said, "I think there's been an error. This place isn't a museum; it's a lunch counter. And the masterpiece is a plate of petrified mashed potatoes and mummified peas."

"By Jove, I think you've got something there, Quagmire," a portly Admin Officer said. "Looks just like the stuff they served at the Testimonial Dinner for Ambassador Clawhammer—"

"He's right," Magnan announced from his position farther down the line. "Here's a side order of French fries—"

"Dunderheads!" Pennyfool snapped. "I'm not in need of uninformed

conjectures by amateurs in order to properly classify priceless antiquities. Kindly leave such matters to experts. Now, come along. There seems to be an adjoining room with an intact roof—a room unvisited for twenty centuries! I'll wager my figleaf cluster to my Grand Cordon of the Légion d'Cosme that a thrilling discovery awaits us there!" His staff followed him past the edge of a metal door standing half open, into a dark chamber. The next moment, pale yellowish light flooded the room.

"To stop where you are," a weak voice hissed the words in a breathy alien tongue from behind the delegation. "To raise your digital members above your cephalic nodules, or to be incinerated on the spot!"

2

A spindle-legged creature in a flaring helmet and sequined greaves emerged from the deep shadow of the door, aiming a scattergun carelessly at Magnan's knees.

"What's this?" Pennyfool's voice cracked on the words. "Groaci? Here?"

"Indeed, Soft One," the alien confirmed. "To comply at once with my instructions or to add your osseous components to those already interred here!"

Other gun-toting creatures appeared from alcoves and behind columns, closed in, clacking horny mandibles threateningly.

"See here, Captain," Pennyfool said in a high, nervous voice to a larger than average Groaci in jeweled eyeshields who carried no weapon but an ornamental side arm. "What's the meaning of this unwarranted interference with a peaceful party of duly authorized official personnel of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne?"

"The meaning, Mr. Pennyfool," the officer replied in accent-free Terran, "is that you are anticipated, forestalled, preceded." He casually waved a dope stick in a foot-long ivory holder. "You are interlopers, trespassers on Groacian real estate; you note that out of delicacy I refrain from use of the term 'invaders.' "

"Invaders? We're scientists—art lovers—and—"

"To be sure," the captain cut him off curtly. "However, it will be necessary for you to indulge these fancies elsewhere. Verdigris, as an unoccupied planet, has been claimed by my government. Unfortunately, we are at present unable to issue tourist visas to the curious. You will therefore repair at once to your vessel, pay the accumulated landing fees, demurrage, fines for illegal parking, and lift tax, and be on your way—"

"This is an outrage, you five-eyed bandit!" the Assistant Military Attache yelled, thrusting to the fore. "This planet was discovered by a Corps scouting vessel! It belongs to us!"

"I shall overlook your tone, Major," the Groaci whispered acidly, "induced no doubt by envy at my race's superior optical endowments, and simply inquire whether any Terran claim to the world was ever registered with the

appropriate tribunals?"

"Of course not," Pennyfool snapped. "We didn't want every claim-jumping Tom, Dick, and Irving in this end of the Arm swarming in here to see what they could loot!"

"An unfortunate oversight, Mr. Pennyfool—"

"But the Survey boat planted a claim beacon. You must have seen it—"

"Dear me, now that you mention it, I seem to recall my chaps vaporizing some sort of electronic noise-maker which was interfering with radio reception. Too bad that not a trace remains."

"That's a gross violation of Interplanetary Rules!"

"So? Possession is nine points of the law, Mr. Pennyfool. But enough of these pleasantries; at the moment, the matter of accounts receivable requires our attention. I'm sure you're eager to clear up the trifling indebtedness and be about your no doubt legitimate activities elsewhere."

"How... how much," Pennyfool asked, "is this going to cost us?"

"If one of you will hand over twenty-two thousand six hundred and four galactic credits, cash, no checks, please, you can be on your way."

"Twenty-two thousand!" Pennyfool choked on the words. "That's highway robbery!"

"Plus an additional thousand penalty fee for each insult," the captain added in an ominous whisper. "And of course I need not remind you that the demurrage charges are piling up minute by minute."

"That's out of the question," Pennyfool gasped. "I have no such amount in my possession! We're a scientific expedition, not a party of bank messengers!"

"Too bad," the captain whispered. "In that case..." He made a curt gesture; armed troops stepped forward, guns at the ready.

"Stop!" Magnan yelled. "You can't just shoot diplomats down in cold blood!"

"Since higher organisms such as myself employ no vascular fluids, I am under no such restraint," the captain pointed out. "However, I agree it would be less than couth to fail to observe the forms. Accordingly, I shall refer the matter to my chief." He murmured a word to a soldier, who slung his weapon and hurried away. The captain sauntered off, humming a gay little tune to himself.

"Verdigris was supposed to be the best-kept secret of the year," Pennyfool muttered brokenly to Magnan. "Who would have dreamed the Groaci would be here ahead of us...?"

"They couldn't have found it by accident," the Information Agency man said glumly. "Coincidences like that don't happen."

"You're right, Crouchwell," Pennyfool said, staring around at his staff. "Gentlemen—somebody leaked!"

"Well, gracious, don't look at me, sir," Magnan said, an indignant expression pinching his narrow features. "I hardly breathed a word, except to a few highly respected colleagues."

"Colleagues?" Pennyfool raised a pale eyebrow.

"Fellow diplomats; high-type chaps like Ambassador P'Yim-Yim of Yill, and Slunk, the Fustian Minister, and... and..."

"And?" Pennyfool prompted.

"And Consul General Shilth," Magnan finished weakly.

"Planetary Director Shilth, if you don't mind," an alien voice spoke behind him. There was a stir among the troops ringing in the Terrans. A tall Groaci in an elaborately ribbed hip-cloak strolled forward, waved jauntily at Magnan, nodded to Pennyfool.

"Well, gentlemen, good of you to pay a courtesy call," he said smoothly.

"Mr. Consul General," Magnan said in a hurt tone. "I never dreamed you'd be so uncouth as to betray a confidence."

Shilth frowned, an expression he achieved by crossing two pairs of eyes. "No?" he said in a surprised tone. "Why not?" He vibrated his throat sac in a manner analogous to throat-clearing. "By the way, Pennyfool, just what was it you expected to find here?" His whisper was elaborately casual.

"You're standing in the center of a treasure house," Pennyfool said sourly, "and you have the confounded gall to ask me that?"

"My chaps have devoted the better part of the past ten hours to fruitless scrabbling in these ruins," Shilth hissed. "They've turned up nothing of the remotest utility."

"You've allowed your troops to dig here at random?" Pennyfool yelled.

"Aha!" Shilth wagged an accusatory tentacle. "In spite of your subtle dissembling, your reaction proves that treasures do indeed lie beneath this wilderness." His tone became crisp. "Kindly specify precisely what it is we're looking for, and I might—might, mind you—find a way to reduce your port fees."

"You... you assassin!" Pennyfool yelled. "You have no right to so much as set foot on this hallowed ground!"

"Still I am here," Shilth said blandly. "And I see nothing in these rubble heaps to excite CDT interest." He stirred a heap of potsherds, bottle caps, and broken phonograph records with a horny foot. "Ergo, there must be a subtler prize awaiting the lucky finder."

"Shilth, you Vandal!" Pennyfool yelled. "Have you no reverence for anything?"

"Try me with gold," the Groaci said succinctly.

"You're out of your mind, you Philistine! I've told you I don't have any cash on hand!"

"You refuse to speak?" Shilth turned to the captain. "Thish, I tire of the Soft One's lies and his insults. Take him out and execute him." Pennyfool squealed as the guards laid hold of him.

"Execute him?" Magnan bleated. "Couldn't you just strike him off the invitation list for cocktail parties or something?"

"If it's gold you're interested in," Retief suggested, "I'm sure CDT Sector HQ will come through with a tidy sum in return for Mr. Pennyfool's hide, unbroken."

"Splendid notion," a member from the Commercial Section piped up. "I'm sure the ransom money—that is to say, the port fees—will be forthcoming the minute they see us all back at Sector HQ, safe and sound."

"Indeed?" Shilth said in a bored tone. "And if I allowed you to depart, what surety would I then have that the just indemnities will be paid?"

"You have the word of a diplomat," Magnan said promptly.

"I admire your coolness Magnan," Shilth said with a little bow, "assaying jests at such a moment."

"I suppose I might consent to go along," Pennyfool said, blinking his eyes rapidly. "Although of course I'd prefer to stay on as hostage myself, my rank will undoubtedly be helpful in expediting payment."

"One may go," Shilth said in a chilling whisper. "That one." He pointed at Retief. Thish stepped forward, pointing his overdecorated handgun at the victim.

"Watch him closely. Captain," Shilth admonished. "He has a reputation as a troublemaker; as well have him off our hands—"

As Thish, close beside Retief, waved the gun toward the entrance, Retief, with a swift motion, swept the weapon from the other's grip, took a step, caught Shilth by the neck, and backed him against the wall, the muzzle of the pistol pressed against the hostage's ventral carapace.

"Tell your boys to stand fast," he said in a conversational tone as the Groaci official writhed and kicked futilely while the soldiers looked on as if paralyzed. "Mr. Pennyfool, if you're ready to board ship, I don't think Planetary Director Shilth will voice any objection."

"My soldiers will shoot you down like nesting nidfowls!" Shilth hissed.

"In which case, I'd be forced to pump your thorax full of soft-nosed slugs," Retief said. "I've heard they penetrate the exo-skeleton and then just ricochet around inside until they lose momentum. Be interesting to find out if it's true."

"I remind you, Pennyfool—" Shilth cocked his oculars at the Terran, who had not moved—"my lads' scatter-guns are highly disruptive to flimsy organisms such as yourselves. Disarm your misguided colleague, and spare the CDT the expense of a mass funeral, no less costly for lack of any identifiable remains!"

"Better get moving, sir, before some bright lad gets ideas," Retief suggested.

"They... we... I...", Pennyfool gasped.

"By no means," Retief said soothingly. "They hold Shilth in far too high esteem to see him converted into a boiled pudding on the half shell."

Cautiously, the Terrans sidled toward the door. Pennyfool went through in a scrambling leap, followed closely by his associates.

"Retief," Magnan, at the rear of the party, said, "how are you going to get clear? If one of them gets behind you—"

"Better get aboard, Mr. Magnan," Retief cut in. "I have an idea Mr. Pennyfool won't dawdle around waiting for stragglers."

"But—but—"

"Captain Thish, perhaps you'd be kind enough to act as escort," Retief said, "just in case any of the boys on the outside leap to conclusions."

"To comply," Shilth whispered in Groaci as the officer hesitated. "Later, to visit this miscreant's crimes upon him in a fashion devised at leisure—our leisure, that is."

Magnan made a gobbling sound and disappeared, Thish at his heels. Shilth had stopped struggling. The Groaci soldiery stood in attitudes of alert paralysis, watching for an opening. It was ten minutes before the sound of the Corps vessel's drive rumbled briefly, faded, and was gone.

"And now?" Shilth inquired. "If you contemplate a contest of endurance, I remind you that we Groaci can carry on for upwards of ten standard days without so much as nictating a membrane."

"Send them outside," Retief said.

Shilth remonstrated, but complied. A moment later, a shrill but unmistakably human yelp sounded from beyond the door. Magnan appeared in the entry, his arms gripped by a pair of Groaci while a third held a scatter-gun to his head.

"They... they didn't wait," the diplomat wailed.

"Release me!" Shilth hissed. "Or would you prefer to wait until after my lads have blown your superior's head off?"

"Sounds like an even trade," Retief said. Magnan gasped and swallowed.

"Much as I should dislike to see the Planetary Director's internal

arrangements hashed in the manner you so vividly described," Thish said from behind Magnan, "I assure you I would make the sacrifice in the interest of the Groaci national honor."

"In the interest of his next promotion, he means," Shilth hissed. "What does he care if I'm diced in the process?"

Retief thrust Shilth away, tossed the gun on the floor. "If I didn't know you wanted both of us alive, I'd have called your bluff, Thish," he said.

"Oh? And do I want you alive, Soft One?" Thish took aim with a borrowed rifle—"Of course you do, littermate of genetic inferiors!" Shilth snapped, massaging the point on his back where the gun muzzle had dug in. "At least until they divulge the secret of what they sought here!" He turned to Retief. "And now let us to business, eh?"

Retief plucked a cigar from his breast pocket, puffed it alight, blew scented smoke past the alien's olfactory orifices, which cinched up tight at the aroma of Virginia leaf.

"Certainly, Shilth. Who's for sale now?"

"You are, my dear Terry," the Groaci said ominously. "The price of your life is a complete description of the nature and location of the riches hidden here."

Retief waved the stogie at the blotched walls, the dirt-drifted corners, the broken tilework. "You're looking at them."

"Ah, so we are to have the pleasure of assisting you in developing a more cooperative attitude, eh? Capital. Easy babblers are such bores."

"You wouldn't dare torture us," Magnan said in a squeaky tone. "Our colleagues know where we are. If we aren't returned unharmed, they'll extract a terrible vengeance!"

"A sharp note to the Ambassador, no doubt," Shilth said, with an amused snap of the mandibles. "Still, there are subtler methods of persuasion than living dismemberment. Now, we Groaci are quite at home in enclosed spaces; but you Terries, it is rumored, are claustrophobes, an allegation I've often yearned to test. And I know just the setting in which to conduct the experiment." He gestured to Thish, who urged the two Terrans at gunpoint along a wide passage to a metal door. Two soldiers came forward to wrestle the heavy panel aside, exposing a tiny chamber no more than six feet on a side, windowless, unfurnished.

"Gentlemen, your cell. A trifle cramped, perhaps, but well protected from excessive wind and rain, eh?"

Retief and Magnan stepped inside. The two soldiers forced the heavy sliding door shut.

In the total darkness, a dim spot of light glowed on one wall. Retief reached out and pressed a thumb against it.

With a grinding of ancient gears, a groaning of antique cables, the elevator



started down.

3

Magnan emitted a shrill cry and attempted to climb the wall. "Retief! What's happening?"

"No, no, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "Your line is, 'Ah, just as I planned.' That's the way reputations for forethought are built."

"Shilth was quite right about the claustrophobia," Magnan said in a choked voice. "I feel that the walls are going to close in on me!"

"Just close your eyes and pretend you're at a Tuesday morning Staff Meeting. The relief when you find yourself here should carry you through anything short of utter catastrophe."

With a shudder and a clank, the car came to a halt.

"N-now what?" Magnan said in a small voice. Retief felt over the door, found the stub of a lever. He gripped it and pulled. Reluctantly, the door slid aside on a large, column-filled room faintly lit by strips of dimly glowing material still adhering to ceiling and walls, adorned with murals depicting grotesque figures engaged in obscure rites.

"Tomb paintings," Magnan said in a hushed voice. "We're in the catacombs. The place is probably full of bones, not that I actually believe in the curses of dead kings or anything."

"The curses of live Ambassadors are far more potent, I suspect," Retief said, leading the way across the room and into one of the many passages debouching from the chamber. Here more cabalistic scenes were etched in still-bright colors against the ancient walls. Cryptic legends in an unknown script were blazoned across many of them.

"They're probably quotations from the local version of the Book of the Dead," Magnan hazarded, his eye caught by a vividly pigmented representation of a large alien being making what seemed to be a threatening gesture at a second alien from whose ears wisps of mist coiled.

"This one, for example," he said, "no doubt shows us the God of the Underworld judging a soul and finding it wanting."

"Either that, or it's a NO SMOKING sign," Retief agreed.

The passage turned, branched. The left branch dead-ended at an ominous-looking sump half-filled with a glistening black fluid.

"The sacrificial well," Magnon said with a shudder. "I daresay the bottom—goodness knows how far down that is—is covered with the remains of youths and maidens offered to the gods."

Retief sniffed. "It smells like drained crank-case oil."

They skirted the pit, came into a wide room crowded with massive, complex shapes of corroded metal, ranked in rows in the deep gloom.

"And these are the alien idols," Magnan whispered. "Gad, they have a look of the, most frightful ferocity about them..."

"That one"—Retief indicated a tall, many-armed monster looming before him—"bears a remarkable resemblance to a hay-baler."

"Mind your tongue, Retief!" Magnan said sharply. "It's not that I imagine they can hear us, of course, but why tempt fate?"

There was a sharp click!, a whirring and clattering, a stir of massive forms all across the gloomy chamber. Magnan yipped and leaped back as a construct the size of a fork-lift stirred into motion, turned, creaking, and surveyed him with a pair of what were indisputably glowing amber eyes.

"We're surrounded," Magnan chirped faintly. "And they told us the planet was uninhabited!"

"It is," Retief said, as more giant shapes moved forward, accompanied by the squeak of unlubricated metal.

"Then what are these?" Magnan came back sharply. "Oversized spooks?"

"Close, but no kewpie doll," Retief said. "This is the city garage, and these are maintenance robots."

"R-r-robots?"

"Our coming in must have triggered them to come to alert status." They moved along the row of giant machines, each equipped with a variety of limbs, organs, and sensors.

"Then... then they're probably waiting for us to give them orders," Magnan said with returning confidence. "Retief! Don't you see what this means? We can tell them to jump in the lift and ride up and scare the nether garments off that sticky little Shilth and his army—or we could have done," he added, "if they understood Terran."

"Terran understood," a scratchy bass voice rasped from a point just opposite Magnan's ear. He leaped and whirled, banging a shin smartly.

"Retief! They understand us! We're saved! Good lord, when I first planned our escape via the lift, I never dreamed we'd have such a stroke of luck!"

"Now you're getting the idea," Retief said admiringly. "But why not just add that extra touch of savoir faire by pretending you'd deduced the whole thing, robots and all, from a cryptic squiggle on the contact party's scopegram?"

"Don't be crude, Retief," Magnan said loftily. "I fully intend to share the credit for the coup. In my report I'll mention that you pushed the lift button with no more than a hint from me."

"Maybe you'd better not write up that report just yet," Retief said, as a robot directly before them shifted position with a dry squeal of rusty bearing to squarely block their advance. Others closed in on either side; they turned to find retreat similarly cut off.

"My, see how eager they are, Retief," Magnan said in a comfortable tone. "There, there, just stand aside like a good, er, fellow."

The machine failed to move. Frowning, Magnan started around it, was cut off by a smaller automaton—this one no bigger than a commercial sausage grinder, and adorned with a similar set of blades visible inside a gaping metallic maw.

"Well! I see they're in need of reprograming," Magnan said sharply. "It's all very well to fawn a little, but—"

"I'm not sure they're fawning," Retief said.

"Then—what in the world are they doing?"

"Terran are surrounded," a voice like broken glass stated from behind the encircled diplomats.

"We are judging Terran," an unvoiced tenor stated from the rear rank, "and finding you wanting."

"Frightful oversized robots will jump on your smoking remains," chimed in a third voice, reminiscent of a file on steel.

"We are eager for crude contact," Broken Glass agreed.

"They have a curious mode of expressing themselves," Magnan said nervously. "I seem to detect an almost ominous note in their singular choice of words."

"I think they're picking up their vocabulary from us," Retief said.

"Retief—if it wasn't so silly, I'd think that one intended us bodily harm," Magnan said in a tone of forced jocularly, as a ponderous assemblage of sharp edges came forward, rumbling.

"We intend you bodily harm," File-on-steel said, advancing from the left.

"But—but you can't attack us," Magnan protested.

"You're just machines! We're alive! We're your rightful masters!"

"Masters are better than robots," Broken Glass stated. "You are not better than us. You are not masters. We will certainly harm you."

"You will not escape," a red-eyed monster added.

"Retief—I suspect we've made a blunder," Magnan said in a wavering tone. "We were better off at the tender mercies of the Groaci!"

"What's it all about, boys?" Retief called over the gathering creak and clank as the machines closed in.

"This planet is not your world. We are programmed to give no mercies to you."

"Just a minute," Magnan protested. "We're just harmless diplomats. Can't

we all be friends or something?"

"Who gave you your order?" Retief asked.

"Our masters," replied a voice like a sand-filled gearbox.

"That was a long time ago," Retief said. "Matters have changed somewhat—"

"Yes, indeed," Magnan chimed in. "You see, now that your old masters are all dead, we're taking over their duties—"

"Our duties are to see you dead," Red-eye boomed, raising a pair of yard-long cleavers.

"Help!" Magnan yelled.

"We wouldn't want to stand in the way of duty," Retief said, watching the poised cutting edges, "but suppose we turned out to be your masters, after all? I'm sure you wouldn't want to make the mistake of slicing up your legitimate owners."

"You see, we took over where they left off," Magnan said hastily. "We're, ah, looking after all their affairs for them, carrying out their wishes as we understand them, tidying up—"

"There is no mistake, Terran. You are not our masters."

"You said masters are better than robots," Retief reminded the machine. "If we can prove our superiority, will you concede the point?"

Silence fell, broken only by the whirr and hum of robotic metabolisms.

"If you could so prove, we will certainly concede your status as our masters," Sand-in-the-gears said at last.

"Gracious, I should think so!" Magnan jerked his rumpled lapels into line. "For a moment, Retief, I confess I was beginning to feel just the teeniest bit apprehensive—"

"You have one minute to, prove your superiority," Broken Glass said flatly.

"Well, I should think it was obvious," Magnan sniffed. "Just look at us."

"Indeed, we've done so. We find you little, silly, crude, tender, apprehensive, and harmless."

"You mean—?"

"It means we'll have to do something even more impressive than standing around radiating righteous indignation, Mr. Magnan."

"Well, for heaven's sake," Magnan sniffed. "I never thought I'd see the day when I had to prove the obvious ascendancy of a diplomat over a donkey engine."

"We are waiting," File-on-steel said.

"Well, what do they expect?" Magnan yelled. "It's true they're bigger, stronger, faster, longer-lived, and cheaper to operate; and of course they have vast memory banks and can do lightning calculations and tricks of that sort— which, however, can hardly compare with our unique human ability to, ah, do what we do," he finished in a subdued tone.

"What do you do?" Red-eye demanded.

"Why, we, ah, demonstrate moral superiority," Magnan said brightly.

"Shilth was right about your sense of humor," Retief said admiringly. "But I think we'd better defer the subtle jests until we discover whether we're going to survive to enjoy the laugh."

"Well, for heaven's sake, do something, Retief," Magnan whispered, "before they make a terrible blunder." He rolled his eyes sideways at a scythe-like implement hovering as if ready to shear at any instant through the volume of space he occupied.

"Time is up," Broken Glass said. The machines surged forward. The scythe, sweeping horizontally, clanged against the descending cleavers as Retief and Magnan jumped aside from the rush of a low-slung tree mower with chattering blades. The latter swerved, collided with a massive punch press, one of whose piston-like members stabbed through the side of a ponderous masonry-wrecker. It wobbled, did a sharp right turn, and slammed into the cast-concrete wall, which cracked and leaned, allowing a massive beam to drop free at one end, narrowly missing Magnan as he rebounded from the flank of a charging garbage-shredder. The falling girder crashed across the midsection of the latter machine with a decisive crunch!, pinning the hapless apparatus to the spot. It clashed its treads futilely, sending up a shower of concrete chips. The other machines clustered around it in attitudes of concern, the Terrans for the moment forgotten.

"Hsst! Retief! This is our chance to beat a strategic withdrawal!" Magnan stage-whispered. "If we can just make it back to the elevator—"

"We'll find Shilth waiting at the top," Retief said. "Mr. Magnan, suppose you find a comfortable spot behind a packing case somewhere. I'm not quite ready to leave yet."

"Are you insane? These bloodthirsty bags of bolts are ready to pound us to putty!"

"They seem to be fully occupied with another problem at the moment," Retief pointed out, nodding toward a posthole digger which was fruitlessly poking at the end of the beam which had trapped its fellow. The scythe-armed robot was as busily scraping at the massive member, without result. The ranks parted to let a heavy-duty paint-chipper through; but it merely clattered its chisel tips vainly against the impervious material. And all the while, the pinioned machine groaned lugubriously, sparks flying from its commutator box as it threshed vainly to pull free.

Retief stepped forward; Red-eye swiveled on him, raising a large mallet apparently designed for pounding heavy posts into hard ground.

"Before you drive home your argument," Retief said, "I have a proposal."

"What proposal?"

"You don't seem to be having much luck extricating your colleague from under the beam. Suppose I try—"

"One minute. I will lift the beam," a deep voice boomed. A massively built loading robot trundled forward, maneuvered deftly into position, secured a grip on the concrete member with its single huge arm, and heaved. For a moment, nothing happened; then there was a sharp clonk! and a broken duralloy torque rod dangled from the lifter's forged-steel biceps. The girder had not stirred.

"Tough luck, old fellow," Retief said. "My turn."

"Good heavens, Retief, if that cast-iron Hercules couldn't do it, how can you hope to succeed?" Magnan squeaked from his corner.

"You have the ability to help our colleague?" Broken Glass demanded.

"If I do, will you follow my orders?"

"If you can do that which we cannot do, your superiority is obvious."

"In that case, just pull that bar out of there, will you?" Retief pointed to a four-inch-diameter steel rod, twenty feet long, part of a roller assembly presumably once used in loading operations. A stacking machine gripped the rod and gave it a firm pull, ripping it free from its mountings.

"Stick one end under the edge of the beam, like a good fellow," Retief said. "You there, jackhammer: Push that anvil under the rod, eh?" The machines complied with his requests with brisk efficiency, adjusting the lever as directed, with the fulcrum as close as possible to the weight to be lifted.

"Retief—if you couldn't even lift the lever, how are you going to..." Magnan's voice faded as Retief stepped up on the tread-skirt of a sandblaster and put a foot on the upangled long arm of the jury-rigged prybar. Steadying himself, he let his full weight onto the rod. Instantly, it sank gracefully down, lifting the multi-ton beam a full half inch from the depression it had imprinted in the garbage-shredder. The latter made a clanking sound, attempted to move, emitted a cascade of electrical sputterings, and subsided.

"He's ruptured himself!" Magnan gasped. "Poor thing. Still, we've done our part."

The other machines were maneuvering, making way for a squat cargo-tug, which backed up to the victim but was unable to get in position to attach its tow cable. A dirt-pusher with a wide blade tried next, but in the close quarters failed to get within six feet of the disabled machine. The others had no better luck.

"Mr. Magnan, find a length of cable," Retief called. Magnan rummaged, turned up a rusting coil of braided wire.

"One of you robots with digits, tie one end of the cable to the patient," Retief said. "Cinch the other up to something that won't give."

Two minutes later the cable was stretched drum-tight from a massive stanchion to the cripple, running between closely spaced paired columns.

"Next, we apply a transverse pull to the center of the cable," Retief directed.

"They can't," Magnan wailed. "There's no room!"

"In that case, Mr. Magnan, perhaps you'd be good enough to perform the office."

"I?" Magnan's eyebrows went up. "Perhaps you've forgotten my motorman's arm."

"Use the other one."

"You expect me, one-handed, to budge that ten-ton hulk?"

"Better hurry up, sir. I feel my foot slipping."

"This is madness," Magnan exclaimed, but he stepped to the cable, gripped it at midpoint, and tugged. With a harsh squeak of metal, the damaged machine moved forward half an inch.

"Why—why, that's positively astonishing!" Magnan said with a pleased look.

"Tighten the cable and do it again!" Retief said quickly. The machines hurried to take up the slack. Magnan, with an amazed expression, applied a second pull. The wreck moved another centimeter. After three more nibbles, the tug was able to hook on and drag its fellow clear. Retief jumped down, letting the beam drop with a floor-shaking boom!

"Heavens!" Magnan found his voice. "I never imagined I was such a brute! After all, the diplomatic life is somewhat sedentary..." He flexed a thin arm, fingering it in search of a biceps.

"Wrestling with the conscience is excellent exercise," Retief pointed out. "And you've held up your end of some rather weighty conversations in your time."

"Jape if you must," Magnan said coolly. "But you can't deny I did free the creature—er, machine, that is."

"You have freed our colleague," Sand-in-the-gears said to Magnan. "We are waiting for your orders, Master."

"To be sure." Magnan placed his fingertips together and pursed his lips. "You won't fit into the lift," he said judiciously, looking over his new subjects. "Is there another way up?"

"To be sure, Master."

"Excellent. I want all of you to ascend to the surface at once, round up and disarm every Groaci on the planet, and lock them up. And see that you

don't squash the one called Shilth in the process. I have a little gloating to do."

4

On a newly excavated terrace under a romantically crumbling wall of pink brick, Magnan and Retief sat with Shilth, the latter wearing a crestfallen expression involving quivering anterior mandibles and drooping eye-stalks. His elaborate cloak of office was gone, and there were smudges of axle grease on his once-polished thorax.

"Dirty pool, Magnan," the Groaci said, his breathy voice fainter than ever. "I was in line for the Order of the Rubber Calipers, Second Class, at the very least, and you spoiled it all with your perambulating junkyard. Who would have dreamed you'd been so sly as to secretly conceal a host of war machines? I suspect you did it merely to embarrass me."

"Actually," Magnan began, and paused. "Actually, it was quite shrewd of me, now that you mention it."

"I think you overdid the camouflage, however," Shilth said acidly as a street broom whiffled past, casting a shower of dust over the party. "The confounded things don't appear to be aware that the coup is over. They're still carrying on the charade."

"I like to keep my lads occupied," Magnan said briskly, nodding grandly at a hauler trundling past along the newly cleaned avenue with a load of newly uprooted brush. "Helps to keep them in trim in case they're needed suddenly to quell any disturbances."

"Never fear. I've impressed on Thish that he will not long survive any threat to my well-being."

"Company coming," Retief said, gesturing toward a descending point of sun-bright blue light. They watched the ship settle into a landing a quarter of a mile distant, then rose and strolled over to greet the emerging passengers.

"Why, it's Mr. Pennyfool," Magnan said. "I knew he'd be along to rescue us. Yoo-hoo, Mr. Pennyfool..."

"That's Mr. Ambassador, Magnan," Pennyfool corrected sharply. "Kindly step aside. You're interfering with a delicate negotiation." The little man marched past Retief without a glance, halted before Shilth, offering a wide smile and a limp hand. The Groaci studied the latter, turned it over gingerly and examined the back, then dropped it.

"Liver spots," he said. "How unaesthetic."

"Now, Planetary Director Shilth, we're prepared to offer a handsome fee in return for exploratory rights here on Verdigris." Pennyfool restored his smile with an effort. "Of course, anything we find will be turned over to you at once—"

"Oh, ah, Mr. Ambassador," Magnan hazarded.



"We Groaci," Shilth said sourly, "are not subject to such pigmentational disorders. We remain a uniform, soothing puce at all times."

"Sir," Magnan piped up, "I'd just like—"

"Now, naturally, we're prepared to underwrite a generous program of planetary development to assist your people in settling in," Pennyfool hurried on. "I had in mind about half a billion to start..." He paused to gauge reaction. "Per year, of course," he amended, judging the omens, "with adequate bonuses for special projects, naturally. Now, I'd say a staff of, say, two hundred to begin with...?"

"Pennyfool, I have a dreadful node-ache," Shilth hissed. "Why don't you go jump down an elevator shaft?" He patted back a counterfeit yawn and stalked away.

"Well, I can see that this is going to be a challenge," Pennyfool said, staring after the alien. "The tricky fellow is going to hold out for two billion, no doubt."

"Mr. Ambassador, I have good news," Magnan said hastily. "We can save the taxpayers those billions. Verdigris belongs to me!"

"See here, Magnan, the privation can't have scrambled your meager wits already! You've only been here seventy-two hours!"

"But, sir—there's no need to promise Shilth the moon—"

"Aha! So that's what he's holding out for. Well, I see no reason the negotiation should founder over a mere satellite—" Pennyfool turned to pursue Shilth.

"No, no, you don't quite grasp my meaning," Magnan yipped, grabbing at his superior's sleeve.

"Unhand me, Magnan!" Pennyfool roared. "I'll see to your release after other, more vital matters are dealt with. In the meantime, I suggest you set a good example by cobbling a record number of shoes, or whatever task they've set you—"

"Master, is this person troubling you?" a torn-metal voice inquired. Magnan and Pennyfool whirled to see a rust-covered hedge clipper looming over them, four-foot clippers at the ready.

"No, that's quite all right, Albert," Magnan said acidly. "I like being bullied."

"You're quite certain you don't wish him trimmed to a uniform height?"

"No—I just want him to listen to what I have to say."

Albert clacked the shears together with a nerve-shredding sound.

"I—I'd love to listen to you, my dear Magnan," Pennyfool said rapidly.

Magnan delivered a brief account of his capture of the planet. "So you see, sir," he concluded, "the whole thing is Terran property."

"Magnan!" Pennyfool roared, then with a glance at Albert, lowered his voice to a whisper. "Do you realize what this means? When I reported the Groaci here ahead of us, I was appointed as Terran Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the confounded place! If we own it, then pfft! There goes my appointment!"

"Great heavens, sir"—Magnan paled at the announcement—"I had no idea..."

"Look here, do you suppose we could get them to take it back?"

"What, stay here, surrounded by these mobile, moldy monstrosities?" Shilth, who had returned silently, hissed. "Never! I demand repatriation!"

Retief caught Magnan's eye as Pennyfool turned to soothe the Groaci.

"What is it, Retief? Can't you see I'm at a critical point, careerwise?"

"I have a suggestion," Retief said.

As Magnan rejoined Pennyfool, Shilth was still hissing imprecations.

"Master, what say I prune this fellow a bit," Albert proposed. "He seems to have sprouted too many eyes."

"Not unless he says another word," Magnan said. He turned to Pennyfool with a thoughtful look. "I say, sir, suppose I should come up with a scheme which will insure your confirmation, and which will at the same time reflect favorably on the Terran image: you know, the kindly, selfless, helping-hand sort of thing...?"

"Yes, yes?"

"I daresay, once established here, you'd want to surround yourself with a staff widely versed in local problems—"

"Naturally. There are plenty of reliable team men available doing Underground research work in subterranean libraries back at Sector. Get on with it, Magnan."

"I want the Counselorship," Magnan said crisply.

"You, number two man in my Embassy? Ridiculous! I'd have to jump you over the heads of men with vast experience under their belts!"

"Most of my experience has been at a somewhat higher level," Magnan said loftily. "No Counselorship, no scheme."

"What's this, Magnan, blackmail?" Pennyfool gasped.

"Precisely," Magnan said.

Pennyfool opened his mouth to yell, then closed it and nodded.

"Magnan, it's apparent you're more familiar with the techniques of diplomacy than I suspected. I accept. Now, just what do you have in mind...?"

"It's a bit unusual," Ambassador Pennyfool said complacently, glancing out the window of his freshly refurbished office on the top floor of a newly excavated tower of green anodized aluminum serving as CDT Chancery. "But on the other hand, its uniqueness offers a certain challenge."

"Gracious yes," Counselor Magnan said, nodding. "The first Terran envoy to present credentials to a mechanical Head of State."

"I don't know," the Military Attache said darkly. "Freeing these inanimate objects and letting them set up in business for themselves may create a dangerous precedent. What if cybernetic military equipment, for example, should start getting ideas about pensions and promotions?"

"And office machines," the Budget and Fiscal Officer said worriedly. "If my bookkeeping computers took it into their transistors to start agitating for civil rights, I shudder to contemplate the consequences in terms of, say, late paychecks."

"I'm already having trouble with my Motor Pool picking up liberal ideas," the Admin Officer wagged his head, frowning. "I've had to enact strict rules against fraternization with the natives."

There was a musical chime from the desk screen. The square-cornered sense-organ panel of Planetary President Albert Sand-in-the-gears appeared.

"Ah, there, Pennyfool," the robotic Chief of State said in a tone as genial as his vocal equipment would allow, "I hoped I'd find you in. I was just ringing up to ask whether you'd care to join me on the links this afternoon for a few holes of ballistic golf."

"I'm sorry, Mr. President," the Terran said shortly. "A game in which one is required to score eight holes-in-one out of ten from a tee seven miles from the green is not my strong suit."

"Of course. I keep forgetting you're not equipped with telescopic sights. A pity." The President sighed, a sound like tearing steel. "It was difficult enough grasping the idea of the superiority of my inferiors; trying to behave as equals is even more trying—no offense intended, of course."

"Mr. President—who's that sitting behind you?" Pennyfool asked sharply.

"Ah, forgive me. This is Special Trade Representative Shilth, of Groac. His government has sent him along to assist in getting the Verdigran economy rolling."

"How long has he been here?"

"Long enough to demonstrate my indispensability." Shilth leaned forward to leer at the Terrans. "I've already concluded trade agreements with a number of hard-currency markets for export of Verdigran antiquities—"

"You didn't!" Pennyfool gasped.

"Oh, have no fear; they're not the real thing." Shilth wagged an eye at Magnan, who pretended not to notice. "Tho' we let it be noised about that they're all bootleg national treasures."

"Oh, I see. Reproductions." Pennyfool grunted. "Just so you don't ship any irreplaceable objects d'art off-planet."

"We won't. We require them as patterns for the matter duplicators."

"Eh?"

"The locals are digging them out by the truckload; they sort them, discard the rejects—broken pots and the like—then scrub up the choice items and send them along to the duplication centers. We already have a dozen plants in full swing. Our ceramic fingering knobs are already a sensation with the cultured set. In a year, Verdigris will be known as the antique capital of the Eastern Arm."

"Matter duplicators? You're flooding the Galaxy with bogus antiques?"

"Bogus? They're identical with the real thing, to the last molecule."

"Hah! The genuine articles are priceless examples of Verdigrarian art; the copies are just so much junk!"

"But, my dear Pennyfool—if one can't distinguish a masterpiece from a piece of junk...?"

"I can detect the genuine at a glance!"

"Show me," the Groaci said, and whipped out a pair of seemingly identical shapes of lumpy blue-glazed clay the size and approximate shape of stunted rutabagas.

"...but, unfortunately, I have something in my eye." Pennyfool subsided, poking at the offending organ.

"A pity. I would have enjoyed a demonstration of your expertise," Shilth cooed.

"Well, gentlemen, that tears it," the Ambassador said to his staff after the screen had blanked. "After all my delicate maneuvering to secure self-determination for these unfortunate relics of a bygone age, and to place the CDT in a position of paternal influence vis-a-vis their emergent nation, the infernal Groaci have stolen a march on us again. Fake antiques, indeed!"

"Goodness, I see what you mean, Mr. Ambassador," Magnan said sympathetically. "Why didn't we think of doing that?"

6

In the Chancery corridor ten minutes later, Magnan mopped at his thin neck with a large floral-patterned tissue.

"Heavens, who'd have thought he'd fly into such a passion?" he inquired of

Retief. "After all, it isn't as if those silly little gobs of mud possessed any intrinsic merit."

"Oh, I don't know," Retief said. "They're not bad, considering that the locals have to mass-produce them and bury them at night when nobody's looking."

"Retief!" Magnan stopped dead. "You don't mean...?"

"It seemed like a good idea to sidetrack the Groaci away from the genuine stuff," Retief pointed out. "Just in case any of it had any sentimental value."

"Fake fakes," Magnan murmured. "The concept has a certain euphony."

They paused beside a pair of double glass doors opening onto an airy balcony two hundred feet above the freshly scrubbed city. As they stepped out, a small copter with a saddle and handlebars came winging in across the park to hover just beyond the balustrade.

"Hop aboard, Retief, we're late," the machine called in a cheerful baritone.

"Retief, where are you going?" Magnan barked as the latter swung over the rail. "You have the quarterly Report of Redundant Reports to compile, to say nothing of the redundant reports themselves...!"

"Duty calls, Mr. Magnan," Retief said soothingly. "I'm off to a game of sky polo with a couple of Cabinet Ministers." He waved and set spurs to his mount, which launched itself with a bound into the wide green sky.