

THE GARBAGE INVASION

"I think it's an outrage," said Anne Taylor, who was tall and beautiful and held the title Field Curator of Flora and Fauna, assigned to the unpopulated world, Delicia; she stamped a riding-booted foot soundlessly on the carpet covering the floor of the office of Vice Consul Jame Relief of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne, on detached duty to the Galactic Regional Organization for the Protection of Environments, temporarily also assigned to Delicia as Acting Wildlife Officer.

"It's an outrage," Anne repeated, "that those sticky-fingered little Groaci should have the temerity to even make application to GROPE to have Delicia declared an authorized disposal area."

Relief and Miss Taylor were standing by the wide French doors, which were open to the spring breeze. Below them a sweep of tree-dotted emerald sward stretched away over low hills until it was lost in the deep purple shadows of the forest clothing the slopes of the mountain range rising in the middle distance. Scattered herds of sleek, deerlike ruminants grazed peacefully across the plain; tall, rose-colored birds waded in the shallow lakes that mirrored the morning sun. Here and there, patches of vivid wildflowers added chromatic variety to the scene.

"GROPE hasn't yet OK'd the Groaci request," Relief replied mildly, "so things could be worse."

"Why, when I was first assigned here," Anne Taylor said, "I didn't know a thing in the world about Delicia."

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But it's all so perfectly lovely and unspoiled, it's absolutely captivated my heart. I'd almost go so far as to say it's even prettier than back home on Plantation II. It would be perfectly horrid to spoil it all by turning it into a garbage dump. And you can never tell what those ninnies back at GROPE might do. There are two Groaci on the Interspecies Council, you know. They may get their way yet."

"Still, while the air remains unsullied we may as well breathe a little of it," Relief said. He led the way out onto the small railed balcony outside the third-floor office. They drew a deep breath of the untainted air, scented delicately of magnolia blossoms.

"Don't give up hope, Anne," Relief said. "The Terran proposal that Delicia be declared a galactic park is still pending. It may win through in spite of Groaci opposition. Mr. Magnan will no doubt bring news on that point when he arrives this afternoon."

"Now just why is this Mr. Magnan coming here?" Anne inquired. "I know he's another diplomat like you, only higher-ranking, but why is he interested in an out-of-the-way place like Delicia? I thought I was doing a pretty good job here all by myself with just my half-dozen rangers to do the heavy work. And now all a sudden I've got CDT types dropping in to take over. Not that you aren't welcome, Jame. Of course, you're a perfectly charming gentleman. But I don't know about this Mr. Magnan. What kind of fellow is

he?"

"Mr. Magnan is a seasoned diplomat," Relief said. "He tends to be a bit jumpy at times-but his instincts are basically sound."

"Why is he coming here?" Anne asked. "Nobody's visited me since that bunch of GROPE busybodies, last year."

"Just a routine observational visit, I suppose," Relief said. "I think you'll find that Mr. Magnan will be happy to just sightsee and leave the responsibility to you. As for myself, I have no intention of taking over."

"Well, that's a relief," Anne said. "After two years

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on Delicia, I've almost come to feel as though it's my private property, and I hate to think of anyone changing things." Miss Taylor extended her arms in a stretch. She was a slender girl, with a trim yet curvaceous figure, an aristocratically pretty face and luxuriant auburn hair. She was dressed in gray whipcord jodhpurs, a starched white blouse, and a fringed suede vest of Lincoln green. Her hair was tied back with a red ribbon. The silence of the sunny morning was broken by a distant dull rumble.

"Oh, dear," Anne said, "I hope it isn't going to rain. I've been thinking we might take a stroll before lunch."

"That's not thunder," Relief said. "It sounds like a shuttlecraft cutting atmosphere. I suspect that it's Mr. Magnan arriving right on schedule."

"Well, I hope he has the good taste to land in the parking area and doesn't just drop in here on the grounds of Admin House and tear up the lawn and mash my flower beds," Anne said.

A moment later it was apparent that her wish was to be fulfilled, as a small, squat, bottle-shaped landing craft appeared over the foothills, descending slowly, supported by the glowing purple column of a gravitic drive. The grazing herds of wild animals scattered as the craft descended amid a muted rumbling and a shrill whine. It came to rest squarely in the center of the triangular landing pad and the glare of its drive faded to a dull pink and winked out.

Relief and Anne left the office and rode the escalator down to the lobby, a spacious room bright with sunlight tinged green by the broad fronds of the potted plants arrayed before the wide windows. Outside, Relief pressed the button of his pocket signaler, which caused an automated two-man carrier to back from the garage behind the tall jade-green building, and scoot smoothly around the circular drive to brake to a halt beside them, open its hatch, and wait, balanced on its two soft-tired wheels, its turbine-driven gyros humming softly.

Relief assisted the girl into the forward of the two

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contoured seats, and climbed in after her. The interior of the vehicle

smelled faintly of new paint and tump-leather. He turned the gnarled knob which reduced the scale of the map displayed on the location screen, so that it showed in detail an area of roughly one square mile, centered on the Admin complex. The newly arrived vessel was indicated by a point of green light approximately a quarter mile distant. Retief noted the coordinates and punched them into the guidance console, then pressed the ACTIVATE button. The hatch closed silently; the air blowers started up with a rhythmic whirr. The vehicle rolled forward a few feet on the paved drive, then executed a neat turn to the left, hopped a foot into the air, and scooted smoothly forward on a direct course for the gray vessel squatting incongruously beyond the row of heo trees that lined the landing pad. Anne activated the car's tape systeirt and a Puccini aria emanated from the quad speakers. The car shot through an opening between two trees, circled the base of the newly arrived shuttlecraft, came to a halt, and sank down onto its wheels with a soft whoosh! of released air cushion. Retief poked a button and the transparent clamshell hatch opened. A moment later a ladder deployed from the side of the spacecraft looming above. A rectangular port opened at its upper end and a thin, narrow-shouldered man in an impecca-bly cut gray executive coverall with a CDT pocket patch appeared. He waved jauntily, turned and started down the ladder.

"Gracious, Retief," he called over his shoulder, "I do hope my visit hasn't interrupted any important undertaking here on the local scene."

"I'm afraid not," Retief said. "Miss Taylor and I are still at the formal stage." He smiled at the girl. She grinned cheerfully at him in return.

Retief climbed down out of the car.

"Miss Taylor," he said formally, "may I present Career Minister Magnan of the CDT. Mr. Magnan," he addressed the senior diplomat, "you'll see many beauti-

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ful sights here on Delicia, none more delightful than the person of Miss Anne Taylor, who is Field Curator of Flora and Fauna, the sole and highest-ranking official on the entire planet, a position, I'm sure you realize, of considerable responsibility and one which Miss Taylor has fulfilled with commendable efficiency for the past year."

"I'm enchanted to make your acquaintance, Miss Taylor," Magnan said, bowing from the waist as elegantly as could be managed while clinging to a ladder. "Goodness me, haven't you found it desperate-ly lonely being the only rational creature on an entire world?"

"I have a half a dozen rangers," Anne said, "several of whom are quite rational when they haven't had too much Alpha Pale ale."

"Of course," Magnan said, and managed a faint blush. "I meant to cast no aspersions on your col-leagues, no matter how humble their station. I merely had reference to the curious fact that Delicia, while ideally suited for organic life as we know it, supports no indigenous form more highly evolved than a grazing ruminant."

"Don't worry, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, "the combined heights of those six rangers is thirty-nine feet, but I won't tell them what you said."

"Retief, I'm here with news of some importance, and quite frankly, I wish your advice. I trust you're not going to be difficult," Magnan said with some asperity.

"That depends on what you want me to do," Retief said. "If you'd like me to stay here for another six months on full per diem allowance, I'll go along with the idea with no complaints." He turned to the girl: "Why don't you take the car back, Anne? I'll escort Mr. Magnan over and we'll meet you at the office. It will give you time to mix us a couple of tall cool ones, and to punch in a nice dinner to celebrate Mr. Magnan's visit."

"How does fried chicken Sanders sound?" she asked.

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"Oh, nothing overly exotic, please," Magnan protested. "Simple hearty fare suits me very well. In fact I've been known to spend an entire afternoon munching contentedly on a Hebrew National salami-on-rye, while a state banquet proceeded in an adjoining room."

"Sorry, my culinator's not programmed for any of those unchristian vittles," Anne demurred. "I had a team of inspectors in here from someplace called Pakistan a few months back. Up till then I always thought curry was something you did to horses."

"Please, no apologies, my dear," Magnan said, and almost slipped off his rung, attempting a curtsy. "Come, Retief," he said, casting a regretful glance after the girl as the car moved off. "It's a perfect morning for a stroll. Quite an attractive, though undeveloped world," he said, looking around at the parklike lawn scattered with wildflowers. "Rather 'a pity, actually, that it will not long remain so."

"You mentioned some important news, Mr. Magnan," Retief said.

"Ah, of course. You'll recall that I have for some months been acting as CDT liaison officer to GROPE. We're faced with a deeply perplexing problem at the moment. It's necessary that I find a solution to the Basuran question at once or forever disappoint Mother's hopes for a great career for me."

"Is that the news that you hurried out to Delicia to pass along to me?"

"Don't make light of the problem, Retief. We're discussing the imminent prospect of the utter extinction of an entire intelligent species, due to the fact that they've overfed their range to such an extreme degree that, although their metabolisms are such that they can sustain themselves on a diet of raw metals and silicon if necessary-there remains not an assimilable molecule on their entire planet, which as you know, lies only a parsec distant from Delicia."

"And you still consider them an intelligent species?" Retief commented.

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"Such situations are not uncommon," Magnan re-minded Retief. "Think for a moment of the fate of the Mainland Chinese, back on Terra, six centuries ago. By the way, I've often wondered why they were called Mainland Chinese-also Red Chinese? The few persons of Chinese ancestry I've met have had rather sallow, yellowish complexions, not red at all."

"Surely there's more news to come," Retief said.

"By all means," Magnan replied. "Unhappily, at the time of my departure, the GROPE docket was crammed with over one hundred urgent appeals from member worlds facing ecological breakdown due to the accretion of waste products both biological and industrial. For some curious reason Chief Ecological Coordinator Crodfoller allocated seventy-nine of these applications to me for solution, a task approximately equivalent in complexity to rescoring an equal number of Groaci nose-flute cadenzas for a steel band, Jew's harp and comb. When I sought counsel of Director of Ecological Affairs Straphanger, far from interceding to effect a more equitable distribution of workload, or even commiserating, he assigned me additional duty as project officer for facilitation of the Terran resolution anent designation of Delicia as a galactic park."

"What are the prospects for GROPE adoption of the resolution?" Retief asked.

"Dim, I should say," Magnan replied. "Shortly before my departure, I conferred with Ambassa'dor Fiss, head of the Groaci delegation to GROPE, and he was quite adamant. He insisted it was his government's unalterable position that the provision of suitable offworld dumping grounds was a matter of far greater import than the perpetuation of primitive natural conditions on Delicia as a recreational habitat pleasing to the unformed esthetic instincts of lesser species. Alas," Magnan sighed eyeing the unspoiled landscape, "I fear that unless Fiss can be placated, all this is doomed. Fiss, as you know, is a formidable negotiator, and I fear that he has secured the support of a number

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of the other worlds faced with similar disposal problems. But let us not dwell on such depressing prospects. I intend to carry on with my planning on the off-chance that the park scheme should win through. Gracious, I'm all abubble with plans," he went on, rubbing his hands together. "Two hundred million square miles of unsullied meadows, uplands, hills, valleys, lakes, seas, islands-all waiting the creative hand of the landscape architects."

"What's wrong with leaving it as it is?" Relief suggested.

"Mmm. It has a certain bucolic charm, of course," Magnan conceded. "But I can hardly accrue mana ER-wise by resting on my oars. No, I picture a planetwide complex of miniature golf courses, roadside zoos, artificial rock gardens, and chlorinated swimming pools, all linked by a network of ten-lane superhigh-' ways, with adequate paved parking, of course; plus the necessary motels, service stations, beauty emporia and souvenir shops to convert the wilderness into a true, unspoiled garden spot. Why, the

concessions alone will net enough income to finance a planetwide system of forty-foot billboards advertising the beauty of the place!"

"A prospect to set the heart of any conservationist to beating, if not into fibrillation," Relief commented.

"Here, what's that?" Magnan pointed a well-manicured finger at a scrap of paper blowing across the lawn on the spring breeze.

"Litterbugs?" he exclaimed in an anguished tone.

"Maybe one of the rangers tossed it down, doubtless in defiance of Miss Taylor's instructions," Relief suggested.

"If so, I'll have him transferred to the Icebox System and assigned to snow-worm tally!" Magnan retorted. "Come along, Relief!" Magnan pounced, came up with the offending object, a plastic bag lettered KRISPY KRUNCHY KORN-KURLS.

Relief sloped, caught up a second paper as it

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tumbled past. "Sulf-R Smoked Gribble-Grubs," he read.

"Gribble-grubs?" Magnan queried. "That's a Groaci export item."

More papers came sailing across the grass: candy wrappers, dope-stick sleeves, a large pink newspaper printed in unfamiliar characters. Magnan darted after them, uttering sharp cries of indignation as more and more waxed sandwich bags and crumpled paper napkins whirled toward them from upwind, driven by the rising breeze.

"Let us investigate the source," Magnan suggested, planting a foot on a gallon-sized potato-chip bag. "They're gaining on us."

"It's coming from over that line of hills," Relief said.

"Let's hurry; I want to catch the vandals in the act!" Magnan said.

"I suggest we check with Miss Taylor first," Relief demurred. "She may know what's going on."

Relief and Magnan entered the Admin building, rode the escalator to the third floor, and went along the corridor to Relief's office. Anne Taylor stood by the window staring out in the direction of the landing pad. A flurry of white paper scraps came drifting across the grass, accompanied by a straggle of small objects that rolled, wind-driven, scattering out to mar the smooth-mowed turf.

"What in the world is that?" she cried, and whirled to face the two diplomats. "Did y'all see that bunch of garbage blowing around the lawn?"

"We saw it," Relief said, "and thought perhaps it was something you had authorized."

"Never! I don't allow my rangers to so much as spit on the grass, if y'all will

pardon the expression."

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At that moment, the large Navy issue communicator panel set amid the bookshelves on the right wall of the office crackled and lit up, displaying a round Terran face of a mottled mauve hue that wore an expression suggesting an acute dyspeptic attack.

"Why, it's Director Straphanger," Magnan cried, in a tone of patently artificial delight. "Why, hi, there, Mr. Director! I'm here on Delicia as you see, and I have matters well under control."

"Have you indeed?" Straphanger inquired in a voice suggesting the premonitory rumblings of a volcano on the brink of eruption. "That's gratifying news, I'm sure, inasmuch as everything here at Sector has been deteriorating toward full disaster status with a speed which would be incredible to one unfamiliar with bureaucratic life."

Magnan cleared his throat delicately. "If you'll recall, Mr. Director," he said, "I predicted that my departure at this time would have unfortunate reper-cussions efficiencywise in the progress of our pro-grams."

"No man is indispensable, Magnan, least of all you," Straphanger bellowed. "The dire straits in which I find myself are, luckily for your future, only peripherally related to your singular lack of effectiveness in developing a solution to the disposal problem. The immediate cause for my call is an untoward development in re the Basuran question. As you know, an emergency pro-gram was initiated by GROPE last year, and large shipments of foodstuffs were transported to Basur. But even with this dietary supplement, they continued heedlessly with the destruction of their habitat, and since they find both igneous and sedimentary rocks quite palatable, they have now consumed the northern half of their main continent, including a number of their largest cities, thus compounding their problem. Driven to desperation and energized, perhaps, by this remarkable piece of gluttony, they have now burst forth from their system with a gigantic fleet of surplus

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war vessels which were donated by Boge as emergency rations, and have unabashedly announced their intention to invade whatever hapless worlds lie in their path, in quest of food. It appears that unless firm steps are taken at once, they will come sweeping up through the Eastern Arm, like a horde of all-devouring locusts, stripping every world in their path bare to the magma. Even now these voracious gluttons are approaching Delicia."

"In spite of the heavy pressure of my duties," Straphanger pointed out, "I have taken time to notify you of their impending arrival, although making this call has cut seriously into my lunch hour, thus affording you an opportunity to make good your escape."

Magnan bobbed his head at the fading image on the screen. "Most thoughtful of you, Mr. Director," he said fervently. "There, Relief," he continued, turning to the younger man, "you've just overheard a most

heartwarming example of the esprit which informs the Corps from the highest echelons to the lowest."

"The man's all heart," Retief agreed. "But there's still garbage blowing across the garden."

"Quite," Magnan said briskly. "You may as well step along now and put an end to the nuisance."

"You don't have a gun, do you, Anne?" Retief inquired of the girl.

"I surely do," she replied. "No real lady would allow herself to be found alone on a planet with six big old rangers with no means of defending her honor." With a deft motion, she extracted a slim-barreled 2mm needier from her dÉcolletage and handed it over.

"Amazing," Retief said. "I wouldn't have thought

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there was room in there for anything else." He tucked the gun into his belt.

"Retief! Whatever are you thinking of?" Magnan squeaked.

"I'm thinking of how surprised those picnickers or whatever will be when I don't simply appeal to their better natures."

"Heavens, Retief, every situation can be dealt with by use of appropriate words," Magnan reproved. "That's the basic tenet of diplomacy as we know it."

"Maybe that's what's wrong with diplomacy as we know it," Retief said.

Outside, Retief noted that the quantity of scrap paper and plastic blowing over the grass had, if anything, increased in the last five minutes. He stooped to pick up one of the solid objects included in the drift of rubbish invading the lawn. There were hundreds of identical six-inch cylinders, of a porous texture, a dull gray-and-tan color. They rolled easily, pushed by the breeze. The object in Reliefs hand was feather-light, with the feel of foam plastic. On close scrutiny he recognized it as a compacted cylinder of shredded gribble-grub husk, a by-product of the Groaci snack industry. More and more of the cylinders rolled down the slope, spreading out across the close-cropped verdant sward. Retief walked toward the point of origin, a saddle-shaped notch in the grassy ridge a few hundred yards west of Admin House. More and more debris came swirling downwind. Retief reached the crest of the rise, looked down at the long narrow valley which extended southward, rimmed on both sides by wooded slopes. The floor of the valley was* a level grassland dotted with crimson-foliaged trees. A spar-

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ling stream wound along the center of the valley, fed by a picturesque waterfall tumbling down over the rocks at Relief's right and feeding into a lake at the far end of the valley, which reflected the blue sky and bits of whipped-cream cloud. Halfway down the length of the valley, a mile and a half from Relief's vantage point, a space-scarred space-yacht of

unmistakable Groaci design rested on its side beside the stream. Around it, half a dozen Groaci stood, apparently admiring the view. Immediately beyond the spacecraft lay the first of a string of a dozen immense gray sausagelike barges, each with an identical symbol blazoned on its prow: a group of alien characters which appeared to spell out eggnog. Each of the big gray cylinders had opened a set of doors which ran nearly the length of its hull and was busily discharging raw garbage in giant windrows, from which the breeze was snatching away papers and bits of other light debris, sending them rolling up the slope, through the notch, and down across the Admin House grounds.

As Relief started down the slope, he heard a sharp cry from behind him and turned to see Magnan struggling over the hilltop clutching his beret against the wind's efforts to send it skittering after the waste paper.

"Here," Magnan shouted, the word almost inaudible over the fluting of the wind and the splashing of the waterfall. "Never mind bothering about these bits of paper and waste. A crisis of far greater magnitude is at hand." He half slid down the steep slope and clutched at Relief's arm just in time to regain his balance.

"They're here," he yelled. "Just as Director Strap-hanger said! The Basuran fleet has taken up orbit a few thousand miles out, and their leader, a ferocious fellow named All Conqueror of Foes Cheese, threatens drastic action if we don't surrender our fleet on the instant."

"What drastic action?" Relief asked.

"AC of F Cheese didn't specify," Magnan said in a choked tone. "But judging from the bellicosity of his attitude, he's ready to stop at nothing."

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"Good," Relief said. "That's about all we've got to stop him with."

"Relief, if we hurry along briskly, we can reach my shuttlecraft before Cheese has landed," Magnan blurted.

"And then what?" Relief inquired.

"Why then we can whisk ourselves off under his very nose and leave him none the wiser."

"What about Miss Taylor?" Relief asked.

"I'm afraid she's in no position to help us, having no transportation at her disposal."

"So you intend to desert her and leave her to her fate?"

"I suppose it does sound just the teensiest bit unchivalrous when you put it that way," Magnan conceded. "However Miss Taylor seems a resourceful young person. I'm sure she'll understand. Besides, no one will know."

"She will," Relief said. "And what about those thirty-nine feet of ranger?"

"Unfortunate, but there's no help for it. They'll simply have to hope for an attitude of clemency on the part of Cheese."

"And just what does this Cheese expect from us?" Retief asked.

"He demands the immediate surrender of our fleet. I told him quite candidly that we had no fleet here, but he openly accused me of perjury, and insisted that he had seen the fleet maneuvering offworld a few hours ago. It was that which attracted his attention. He demands its immediate surrender on pain of drastic reprisals. Goodness me, Retief, whatever shall we do?"

"We'd better surrender the fleet," Retief said.

"Either you haven't been paying attention or that remark is intended as another of your ill-timed japes," Magnan snapped. "I'm going to return to the office and brew a nice pot of sassafras tea. You may join me if you wish."

"Thank you," Retief said. "First I'd like to speak to the gribble-grub lovers."

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Magnan glanced past Retief, saw the grounded garbage scows. "Oh, I see. It's a party of picnickers camped by the stream. I authorize you to speak sharply to them, Retief. It's atrocious the way they're littering their waste about."

"Armed with such instructions, how can I fail?" Retief inquired rhetorically, and turned to continue his descent, as Magnan scrambled back up the path.

"On second thought," Retief called after Magnan, "I haven't had a cup of sassafras tea since the Fustian Ambassador's reception for the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau of Yill, and on that occasion Colonel Underknuckle spiked it with half a gill of Bacchus Black."

"I recall the incident," Magnan said sharply. "Dis-graceful. Ambassador Longspoon, suspecting nothing, downed three cups while having a cozy chat with the Groaci military attache. Alas, far from pumping Gen-eral Shish of the details of the Groaci maneuvers in the Goober cluster, the colonel divulged the details of all Terrestrial peace operations in the Arm for a five»year period, resulting not only in a number of embarrass-ments for Secretary Barnshingle, when nosy parkers poking about in our goodwill convoys uncovered what they claimed to be offensive weapons, but also in Secretary Barnshingle's relegation to the Jaq desk in the department over which he had once towered as chief. Not only that, Retief, but you'll recall I was assigned as catering officer for the affair, and during Colonel Underknuckle's or should I say Corporal Underknuckle's court-martial, certain small-minded individuals went so far as to suggest that a share of the blame should be laid at my door. Thus sassafras tea, while a warmly sustaining beverage, far more suited to the dignity and responsibility of one's role as an officer of the CDT than harsh spiritous distillates of the kind favored by certain rowdies, is not without its melan-choly associations."

"I don't want to precipitate a traumatic emotional

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experience for you, Mr. Magnan," Relief said, "so perhaps we'd better just crack a magnum of Lovenbroy autumn wine."

"As it happens," Magnan called over his shoulder, "I have a dozen of Lovenbroy aboard the lighter, a gift to you from a Mr. Arapoulous, who visited my office at Sector yesterday with an outrageous proposal for CDT sponsorship of some barbaric festival at which he specifically requested your attendance in the capacity of Inspector of Prizes."

"You accepted on my behalf, I hope," Retief said.

"By no means," Magnan said in a tone of sharp rebuke. "I have reason to believe that the prizes to which he alluded are nubile young women selected for pulchritude and but scantily attired. Imagine! Handing out girls to champion grape pickers as if they were hand-knitted tea cosies."

"It's fantastic, isn't it?" Retief said. "With that going on only a few light years away, we're sitting out here planning a sassafras tea party."

"Never mind, Retief. Such depravity does prey on one's mind, but there are reasons to hope that in time these excesses will be halted."

"Let's hope so," Retief said. "In the meantime we can make a start by pouring the sassafras tea into Miss Taylor's potted froom-froom plants."

As the two diplomats entered Retief's office, the communicator screen set in the ornamental bookcase crackled softly. "Ah, there you are, Magnan," a metallic voice said.

Only one familiar with the Basuran physiognomy would have recognized the composition displayed on the picture tube as the face of a living creature. It

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resembled a geometric approximation of a giant clam-shell executed in flat planes of bluish metal.

"Oh, sorry to have kept you waiting, All Conqueror Cheese," Magnan called. "I've just been discussing your proposal with my colleague."

"Perhaps," the Basuran said in a voice like an eight-pound hammer hitting an anvil, "you misunderstood me, Terran. The terms I outlined do not constitute a proposal, but an ultimatum."

"Goodness me, I understand perfectly," Magnan reassured the alien. "Your insistence on my surrender of the Delician war fleet is quite understandable, and I'm doing my best to make the arrangements, so I trust you'll withhold the saturation bombing for a little while."

"I'll give you a few moments longer," Cheese said graciously. "I don't wish it to be said that I was overly harsh in my dealings even with mere

Terrans."

"What's that about the Delician war fleet?" Retief asked.

"We have to surrender it at once," Magnan said, "or Cheese will bomb the planet to a cinder."

"That being the case," Retief said, "we'd better get busy."

"I couldn't agree more heartily," Magnan sighed, "but just how does one go about surrendering one's fleet when one doesn't have a fleet?"

"One does the best one can with what one has," Retief said.

Magnan deftly scaled his beret across the room, scoring a bull's eye on a plaster bust of the long-defunct first Terrestrial Ambassador to an alien species: Fenwick T. Overdog, who, according to a brass

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plate on his chest, was sent out from Terra as Ambassa-dor Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the then newly discovered world Yale in the year 450 A.E. (A.D. 2899), the bright-colored headgear lending an uncharacteristic air of jauntiness to the old diplomat's grim visage. Moments later a bland odor of licorice filled the air. Magnan fussed busily over the dainty cups and saucers he had unpacked from his CDT field kit and soon poured out the steaming pink fluid.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said. "Your present from that bucolic person I told you of." From his briefcase he extracted a foot-long, tapered bundle of dusty tissue paper and handed it over. Retief stripped away the wrappings to expose an age-blackened hand-blown bottle of deep green glass through which the sunlight glowed, eliciting glints of ruby red from the wine the flask contained.

"You said something about a dozen," Retief said. "You haven't got eleven more bottles in that briefcase, have you?"

"Never mind," Magnan said, "I won't trouble you with the rest. You may leave them aboard the lighter. I'll dispose of them somehow. They're all dusty and dirty anyway, as though they'd been cleaned out of some old cellar somewhere. Hardly a tasteful offering even to a mere Third Secretary."

"I'll make room for them somehow," Retief said. He stripped the wire from the bottle, eased the cork out with his thumbs. It popped up with a sharp report, and a rich and fruity aroma at once permeated the room.

"Well, I'll declare!" a feminine voice said from the ^ door. Anne Taylor stood there looking fresh and charming in buckskin skirt and beaded blouse. She sniffed the air.

"What a perfectly heavenly smell," she exclaimed. "It reminds me of the time Uncle Harry, the senator, christened our yacht. Funny thing," she went on "a minute ago, I thought I smelled paregoric or some nasty old machine."

"Tea, Miss Taylor?" Magnan said, proffering a cup.

Relief picked up a Yalcan wine goblet of violet glass from the table at the side of the office, poured it half full of the deep red wine, and offered it to the girl. "Will you join me?" he said, and filled a second goblet, this one of paper-thin crystal-clear glass.

"No thank you, Mr. Magnan," she said with a smile refusing his cup^ and took the purple glass from Relief.

Her eyes strayed across the room to the communica-tor screen on which AC of F Cheese was still gnashing his mandibular plates with a sound like a dishwasher demolishing a platter.

"Well, what in the world is that?" she cried.

"That, my dear," Magnan replied coolly, "is the commanding admiral of a vast fleet of hostile warships which are even now orbiting the planet with the intention of demolishing it utterly unless I perform an act of incredible cleverness at once."

"It looks more like the front end of my li'l bP turbocad-the one with the bad brakes. But you talk as if it was a somebody instead of a something."

"AC of F Cheese is, I fear, legally classified as a somebody-rather an important somebody-and quite capable of carrying out his threat."

"What is this simply incredibly clever thing you're supposed to do, Mr. Magnan? Anything special, or will just any old incredibly clever thing do? I'm dying to hear about it."

"All Conqueror Cheese insists that I surrender the Delician war fleet at once."

"How can you do that?" Anne demanded. "There's no such thing."

"That's what requires the cleverness," Magnan replied tartly.

"So what are you going to do? You've just got to save this sweet li'l ol' planet!"

"I intend," Magnan said grandly, "to deal with the matter in my usual decisive fashion."

"But how?" Anne wailed.

"Retief, kindly advise All Conqueror Cheese of our intentions."

Retief turned to the screen. "Where would you like the fleet delivered?" he asked.

"Oh, never mind about that," Cheese said in a tone as genial as the crunch of a fender. "I'll just swoop down and gather it in where it lies at its

cleverly camouflaged base."

"If it's so cleverly camouflaged, how come you know it's there?" Magnan cried.

"My chief intelligence officer, Intimidator of Mobs Blunge, shrewdly ferreted out its location from a study of various documents of a highly cryptic nature which fell into his hands. For a time, I confess, it appeared we'd be unable to crack your code. Symbol groups such as 'Sulf-R Smoked Gribble-Grubs' were rejected by our computers as utterly devoid of intelligence. Then it occurred to me that it was not necessary to decode the documents; the mere presence of encrypted material was sufficient evidence of military activity. I merely traced them to their source. But enough of these civilities: I must personally inspect my warheads now. Infinite attention to detail is the secret of success in great enterprise."

"But gribble-grubs are a Groaci delicacy," Magnan protested to Retief. "They're not bad, actually; a bit like Quoppina sourballs. But why would the Groaci be carrying out military maneuvers here!"

"Y'all gentlemen better get busy being incredibly clever," Miss Taylor pointed out. "Time's awasting."

"Before we break the news to All Conqueror Cheese that there's no fleet here to conquer," Magnan said, "why don't you just nip over and say a word to those picnickers, Retief? I'd like to turn over the planet in tidy condition."

"An excellent notion, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. He left the office and took the path across the lawn to the vantage point from which he had studied the Groaci garbage barges discharging cargo. The process had

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continued apace during his half-hour absence. A great dike of refuse ran the length of the valley, paralleling the now-empty scows. As Relief descended the hill, a spindle-legged Groaci in a magenta hip cloak of extreme cut emerged from the yacht and came bustling up the slope to meet him, trailed by a pair of Peace Keepers with slung crater guns.

"To recognize one unhappily familiar to me from past encounters," the leading Groaci cried in his breathy voice. "None other than the notorious Relief, I'll hazard, or I am the littermate of nest-fouling drones!"

"To feel like going for a little ride, Shluh?" Relief inquired genially in Groaci.

"To have completed my task here in exemplary fashion, and to be about to enjoy a well-earned siesta," Shluh replied with a contemptuous clack of his nether mandibles. With a wave he dismissed his escort, who hurried back to the nearest scow.

"To request a look at your authorizing order from GROPE permitting you to dump your gribble-grub skins here," Relief said.

"To point out reluctantly that your jokes are as atrocious as your accent, Soft One," Shluh hissed. He turned away.

"To wonder how long it will take you and your boys to load that sluff back aboard the barges," Relief remarked, eyeing the quarter-mile-long, twenty-foot-high heap of refuse now fouling the stream.

"To point out that the tub of hot sand readied for my slumbers is cooling rapidly whilst we natter of these trivia," Shluh whispered. "To hurry away now and leave you to ponder your own inscrutable riddle."

"To suggest a method of discovering the answer empirically," Relief said. "To distribute shovels and tell them to start in."

"Not to be so easily duped, Relief. To realize that so soon as my lads ballen down the last halch your interest in research would stand revealed as ephemeral—a mere

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ploy to accomplish your true aim of negating my achievement. To insure that by your Terran glibness you do not hoax some unfortunate underling of mine into falling in with your scheme, I am lifting my command at once, to return for a second load."

"To offer a suggestion," Retief said gently. "If GROPE hasn't authorized this visit, to consider the possibility that a flock of Peace Enforcers might be here any minute to interfere with your siesta."

"An unlikely eventuality," Shluh breathed airily. "To be as aware as yourself of the fecklessness of that irresolute body known as GROPE, the very name of which is an acronym in the Groaci tongue equivalent in blandness to an un sulphurated gribble-grub."

"To burrow into your hot sand and heap it up over your auditory membranes, while events proceed without you," Retief urged.

"To have no fear, Retief; the nubile Groacian lady who awaits me will doubtless have hollowed out a burrow capacious enough to accommodate us both in cozy juxtaposition. To anticipate no event more exciting than the discovery of an overlooked gribble-grub in a castoff package whilst I take my well-earned ease."

Retief and the Groaci looked up as a shrill sound like a distant siren echoed across the hills, followed by a deep rumble.

"Retief," Shluh said, "a less sophisticated person than myself might take alarm at that sound, imagining hordes of vengeful Terry Peace Enforcers to be swooping down, bent on interfering with my peaceful and legitimate errand. But seasoned veteran of the inter-planetary conference table that I am, I'm fully aware that GROPE's function is a purely conversational one, for all their brave talk of attacking the time-honored institution of environmental pollution and of unnatural interference with inscrutable nature's weeding out of the unfit via ecological pressure, the history of galactic diplomacy assures us that no act so direct and effective as the use of force would be contemplated for a

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moment by that huddle of aging bureaucrats. Accordingly, I remain my usual suave and poised self. To pay no attention to the petite tremor of my lower throat sac which you may observe; it's but symptomatic of a touch of Vrug which is no worse than a bad cold and will clear up spontaneously in a few days. Nonetheless, to be best if my personnel not wander too far afield." Shluh took a small brass whistle from a loop in his belt and blew a piercing blast. A moment later Groaci navvies in baggy ochre coveralls, spotted and stained by their labors in unloading their unsavory cargo, began emerging singly and in twos and threes from shady spots beneath the trees near the river, and hurrying toward their assigned vessels.

Shluh gave a violent start, dislodging two of his plain silver eye shields, as a sonic boom rolled across the valley, followed by a diminishing roar. A scarred and space-burned ship appeared above the hills, rushing straight toward the spot where Retief and Shluh stood. Its lumpy and asymmetrical hull, tumorous with gun emplacements, was obviously that of an elderly Bogan-designed warship, Retief saw at once. Half a dozen others followed in line astern. Their trajectory brought them in a low pass over the grounded garbage fleet. The air blast of their passage sent a shower of papers and plastic and light metal containers tumbling from the crest of the gigantic garbage heap, to be caught by the wind and swept up over the hilltop and out of sight.

"Mere sightseers, joyriding, doubtless in defiance of regulations," Shluh commented. "But youth must have its fling. These are perhaps a group of cadets from the Groaci Space Institute trying their figurative wings. Mere high spirits; there's no harm in them." As the Groaci bent over to recover his fallen eye shields from the grass, there was a sharp report and a gout of yellow fire erupted from the stern emplacement of the last vessel in line. Shluh straightened and whirled in time to see a twenty-foot crater appear adjacent to the prow of the converted yacht which served as his flagship,

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attended by a geyser of mud and garbage which clattered down, with a long, drawn-out drumming sound, along the dorsal keel of the ornate vessel. Rich purple-black mud, not unmixed with fruit rinds, glimp eggshells and chicory grounds flowed down over the highly polished bright-plating and colored porcelain inlay work.

"Poor, dear, fragile Lady Tish!" Shluh groaned. "To have been terrified by the blast, poor innocent, having no way of recognizing it as a boyish prank."

"To better duck before this next prank takes your head off," Relief said. He threw himself flat, pulling the Groaci down with him. Accompanied by a long drawn-out screeching sound, an arrow of fire was arcing toward them from the direction in which the six warships had disappeared.

"A toy rocket!" Shluh cried, springing up; "No doubt an RC scale model of a Dumbo-class luxury liner of early Concordiat times. To capture it in midflight before it sustains damage on striking the ground! My nephew, young Pilf, will be delighted with the trophy! Zounds!" he continued, grabbing at his remaining eye shields as a violent involuntary twitch of his eyestalks dislodged them, "there's another." He pointed. "And another!"

"And four more," Retief put in. "Are you sure they're just scale models of antique ships? If they were late-model Bogan warheads, they'd have us nicely bracketed."

"To be beyond a doubt, " Shluh said. "Drat! To have tarried too long. The Dumbo model is about to strike!"

The slim, yard-long missile slammed into the turf and detonated with a deafening report, sending clayey soil fountaining to patter down around Retief and the Groaci official. In swift succession six more explosions racketed across the valley. Retief got to his feet to see seven fresh craters neatly ringing his position.

"To look into this matter," Shluh shrilled, and dashed away downslope toward his mud-splattered yacht.

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"I have a sudden craving for sassafras tea," Relief commented aloud. "The party's getting rough."

"Alas!" Shluh keened, slowing to a mock-casual saunter. "To sense, somehow, that all is not as it should be. Doubtless a mere touch of nervousness on my part, arising from the well-known Groacian sensitivity to subtleties of mood."

"To not ignore your hunch," Retief advised. "That stick of bombs was enough to make a Fustian elder start tearing a hanky to shreds."

"To ignore the sly intimation implicit in your choice of terms, Retief," Shluh whispered. "To have safely brought my command through parsecs of hostile space, safe to the designated destination, and to have dis-charged my cargo with exemplary promptitude, not intimidated by your hints of impending bureaucratic vengeance. Not to panic now."

"To admire your savoir-faire," Retief called after the Groaci. "Most people would think seven near-misses to be a sufficient hint that the hinting was over."

"At what do you hint now, unspeakable Soft One?" Shluh paused to hiss.

"To look for yourself," Retief said and pointed. Shluh hesitated, then whirled so quickly that all his eye shields once more fell to the grass. The blunt prow of one of the black-hulled warships was just nosing back into view over the rim of the hills, supported silently on beams of mauve light. It advanced, flattening the tall grass in a wide swathe as it glided downslope toward the river, followed by its six sister ships. The guns bristling from the vessels' turrets traversed restlessly, but did not open fire.

"To not believe a word of it," Shluh whispered a bit hoarsely over his shoulder. "GROPE wouldn't dare!"

"To point out that you're up against hardware, not conversation," Retief said. "A battle cruiser speaks for itself."

With a sudden growl of atmospheric engines, the menacing ships deployed

to ring in the grounded Groaci barges in a semicircle, and came gently to rest.

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"You there!" a harsh PA-amplified voice boomed from the lead ship and echoed across the valley.

"There-there! Stand fast-ast! One move and I clear the dust out of every gun in my fleet!"

"To protest!" Shluh wailed in a halfhearted tone. "To consider this an outright act of war!"

"By your own Cadet Corps?" Relief asked.

"To possibly have mistaken the identity of the culprits," Shluh said faintly.

"Then who are we going to blame?" Retief inquired.

"Who else but the perfidious warmongers and prova-cateurs of GROPE?" Shluh wailed.

"To have agreed GROPE is all talk and no action," Retief reminded the Groaci.

"To now reconsider my earlier position." Shluh groaned. "In light of late developments."

"To mean you agree to load up now and haul your garbage elsewhere?" Retief persisted.

"To see no other choice in the face of such brutal-ity," Shluh whispered. "And now to hurry back to Lady Tish and my waiting bath.", He scuttled off toward the yacht.

Retief retrieved the Groaci's forgotten eye shields from the grass. As he dropped them in his pocket, a single sharp report rang out and a gout of turf exploded from the hillside a few yards behind Shluh, who accelerated his pace to a knock-kneed sprint. A second shot scored the ground directly in his path. He nimbly leapt the furrow thus created, and dashed madly for the shelter of the yacht.

"The shots had come from the leading ship. It did not fire again, but ascended abruptly to treetop level and cruised slowly along the length of the garbage heap, turned, and came back. A hundred yards from Retief it settled to the ground.

"Make no further move to escape!" the metallic voice boomed out from the ship. "You and all your minions are my prisoners! I observed your crews hurrying to man their guns, and but now observed your second-in-command rushing for his post, doubtless to

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convey your 'open fire' order. I suggest you repair at once to your flagship

and countermand any such rash instructions. Your fleet, though of formidable bulk, lies under my guns, and exists at my sufferance! Be warned, small creature!"

Retief drew his pistol and assumed a firing-range stance, left fist on hip, right arm, with gun, extended, and took careful aim at the point of the grounded ship's hull which, he knew, indicated the location of the periscope lens. At his shot, a loudly amplified yelp erupted from the ship. At once, gun muzzles depressed until Retief could see several meters into their polished bores. He took out his pocket signaler and punched in the call-code for the ground-car. Moments later, its arrival was signaled by a sudden jump in the direction of aim of the guns. Retief looked behind him. The small, highly polished official vehicle, poised daintily on its fore-and-aft wheels, sat on the ridge, silhouetted against the sky, now turning a soft violet with the onset of twilight. A split second later, gunfire roared out from the valley, and the car seemed to leap straight up, disintegrating at the top of its trajectory. Pieces rained down. A pneumatic wheel fell to the ground at Retief's feet. Landing flat, it rebounded a few inches, and fell back.

"A pity you forced me to destroy your accomplices," the PA voice announced. "But you should not have fired at my ship-though of course your toy weapon caused me no damage. Now, throw it aside and advance, slowly. I will meet you."

As Retief ostentatiously tucked the gun back in his pocket, a second wheel from the car came rolling past him, continued downslope, bounding high as it encountered obstacles in its path. White fire lanced from a secondary turret of the grounded warship, scoring a gouge in the soil a foot to the right of the rolling wheel, which spun on, straight toward the vessel. A second shot missed by a wide margin.

"So-you attempt to take advantage of my good

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nature by dispatching missiles at me!" the voice roared out. A third shot blasted rock harmlessly, wide of the mark.

"Wait there!" the PA commanded.

Relief halted, watched as a small personnel hatch opened just aft of the ship's blunt prow. A large and ungainly three-legged creature clambered out, resembling an assemblage of old plumber's pipe and battered sheet metal. Faint clanging sounds came to Relief's ears as the creature descended the curved side of the ship via a series of rungs. It dropped the last few feet, turned, shied as the runaway wheel hurtled past, then started determinedly up toward Relief.

At a distance of ten feet the newcomer still resembled a hasty construction of scrap metal, but Relief recognized the arrangement of plates at the upper end as the visage of All Conqueror of Foes Cheese.

"That's close enough, Cheese," the Terran said.

The Basuran halted, his facial plates meshing restlessly.

"I see your spies have been busy," he said. "Fretting out my identity."

"Your Excellency is too modest," Relief said. "Everyone on this planet knows by now of All Conqueror of Foes Cheese."

"Remarkable!" Cheese snorted. "But you presume too far, fellow, attempting to order me to halt, as if I were some common Maker of Threatening Gestures, First Class. I shall approach as closely as I desire." He took another step. Relief took the gun from his pocket, fired a blast into the dirt at Cheese's feet, sending a shower of gravel to rattle against the armored shins of the alien, who uttered a raucous cry and backed away.

"That is as close as I desire to come," he stated rather primly, turned and marched back downhill toward his ship. He had gone only a few steps when he stopped, turned, and made a sweeping gesture with a pipe-like arm.

"By the way, Admiral, I hereby notify you, just as a

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professional courtesy, that you may now consider your fleet and personnel captives of war. Also, this continent is now under Basuran occupation and rule. You may return to your king, or Principal Pacemaker, or whatever, and inform him of the new status of affairs."

"Wrong," Relief said. "It's you and your collection of junkies that are prisoners of war."

"What war?" Cheese demanded indignantly. "Insofar as I know, no war has been declared."

"Well, I'll declare," Relief said. "An oversight, no doubt. But ever since you violated Delician space, a state of war has existed between us."

"My, who'd have thought you'd be so touchy? And anyway, this planet was listed as 'uninhabited' in my handbook. But that's the way the egg cracks, eh?" Cheese whirled suddenly and set off at a run toward his ship.

"If you want to claim capture of an AC of F," he called over his shoulder, "you'll have to catch me first."

Relief fired a shot which exploded a small boulder to the right of the fleeing Basuran's line of retreat. The latter shied violently and skidded to a halt.

"Anybody can shoot an AC of F in the back," he said in a shrill voice. "But only a live captive will win you a million green stamps toward a Grand Cordon of the Legion de Cosme." He turned and resumed his descent at a more moderate pace.

"I should warn you, I took the precaution of aligning and locking a battery of antipersonnel rifles on you before leaving my ship," Cheese called out. "I have in my hand the remote control unit which will activate them."

Retief took several steps sideways. As he did, a cluster of slim gun barrels projecting from a blister at the prow of the Basuran ship traversed smoothly to follow him. Cheese gave a triumphant cry and pointed, then turned and continued on his way.

A wheel from the destroyed ground-car lay at

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Retief's feet. He picked it up, took aim, and sent it rolling downhill after the Basuran, who paused for a moment, with his head cocked as if listening, then proceeded on his way.

"I am not so callow as to be distracted by your ruse," he called. "You make furtive sounds, suggesting that you are creeping up on me from behind, in the hope that I will abort the firing of my armaments, lest I myself be caught in their withering blasts."

"A good point," Retief responded. "All I have to do is stay close to you and your automatics are neutralized." At that moment, fire spouted from the guns, accompanied by a sharp, multiple report which racketed back and forth across the valley. Retief felt the airblast as the covey of projectiles rushed past him to smack the slope behind him and erupt thunderously, sending high a shower of dirt and stones. Cheese turned quickly to observe the effects of his attack. His facial plates slid over each other and came to rest slackly, expressing astonishment as clearly as a dropped jaw and raised eyebrows. "Impossible!" he gasped. "My aim was true, my guns accurate to the millimeter!"

"Right," Retief nodded agreement. "But there's no rule that says I can't duck."

"Perhaps I underestimated the speed of your reflexes, Terran," Cheese concluded. "It seems my intelligence reports, if not my guns, were inaccurate."

"Those, and a few other things," Retief agreed.

The Basuran turned aside to catch up one of the tin-can-sized pellets of compressed grub-husk that littered the meadow. He studied it carefully, turning it over and over; then suddenly he thrust it into an orifice at the base of his short, thick neck. There was a crunching sound, like a pebble being pulverized between heavy gears. Cheese tossed aside the husk of the pellet, from which a large bite was now missing. "Not at all bad," he commented. "I must concede your rations are superior to those issued in the Basuran

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Navy." He glanced around at the hundreds of similar cylinders strewn around him. "But I must say your chaps are careless in their handling of such precious cargo."

"I've already spoken sharply to them about that," Retief said. The Basuran jumped suddenly aside as the wheel which had been rolling steadily toward

him whizzed past, narrowly missing his shins.

"Missed me," Cheese cried, and scooped up a second garbage pellet. As he munched contentedly, the wheel rolled down across the last few yards of open ground and struck the side of his ship with a dull impact. Cheese whirled alertly. "A dud," he exulted, and turned back to face Retief. The wheel, rebounding in a high arc, struck the ground behind Cheese and came rolling swiftly upslope. The Basuran leapt aside- too late. The wheel caught him squarely, full in the back, and sent him sprawling, face-down among the wildflowers and litter.

"Cleverly done," came a faint cry from the back-ground. The spindle-legged figure of Shluh emerged from the shadows in the lee of his mud-splattered yacht. He paused, turned to speak to someone out of sight behind him. "All is well, my dear," he whispered. "It's as I said; the situation is well in hand." A slight figure, even more spindle-legged than Shluh, and otherwise very similar, except for its garb, which consisted of a short, ribless hip cloak, came forth to stand beside him. Fine silver-gray sand was trickling down from the folds in their garments, Retief saw as they came forward.

"My dear Lady Tish," Shluh piped. "To allow me to present a longtime associate, Mr. Retief, of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne, of whom you have doubt-less heard me speak, if not flatteringly, at least with

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feeling." Shluh turned to Relief. "Have I exaggerated the charms of my fair companion?" he inquired rhetorically.

"Confidentially," Retief said quietly, "I'll have to admit she's stacked up like a sheet-metal toolshed."

"We sophisticated cosmopolitan beings-of-the-galaxy have much in common, eh, Retief?" Shluh whispered. "In spite of our occasional differences arising from our naturally divergent viewpoints as representatives of competing species."

"Lady Tish," Retief addressed the female Groaci, "to have the honor to present All Conqueror of Foes Cheese, who's here on a little job of fleet-capturing."

"To feel a trifle faint," Lady Tish said, graciously offering a grasping member to the Basuran.

"Charmed," the latter grated, in heavily accented Terran. "What's a nice-looking kid like you doing in the company of this pair of sharpers?"

"See here, Retief," Shluh broke in. "So much for the social amenities. But we have important business outstanding. Now, what about this foolishness of GROPE allegedly trying to throw its weight around by interfering in legitimate Groacian operations?"

"You're surrounded," Retief pointed out. "Better give up."

"Eh?" Shluh barked, eyeing Cheese. "Who is this fellow Cheese, anyway? He, or it, looks to me like one of those feckless Basurans who've eaten

themselves out of burrow and home. At my last briefing, they were reported begging us at GROPE for relief. Now it seems this was a mere ruse, to allow you unprincipled Terries to enslave yet another hapless breed and set them to doing your dirty work-in this case manning your illegal vigilante force."

"Wrong, you five-eyed pipsqueak," Cheese cut in harshly. "In the first place we Basurans don't beg, we take, and in the second we don't stooge for any bunch of Terries. We operate our own vigilante service. That's how come I caught you and your raiders flatfooted on the ground."

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"Raiders, indeed!" Shluh hissed. "The vessels of my command with which you have so rashly interfered, to your eventual sorrow, are units of the Groacian Merchant Navy, bound on a peaceful errand."

"Oh, yeah?" Cheese responded airily. "I'll just take a look. Care to go along, cutie?" He offered an arm to Lady Tish, to whom he had addressed the invitation. She took it shyly, and they strolled off toward the nearest barge, stepping over the drifts of overspill from the garbage heap.

"The miscreant comports himself with an arrogance incompatible with his role as supplicant for GROPE alms," Shluh snorted. "And I suggest that now, whilst he's out of earshot, it would be as well if we concluded some agreement between ourselves in consonance with the dignity and integrity of the Groacian state."

"Agreement as to what?" Retief asked.

"As to the precise status of my little convoy of utility vessels, vis-d-vis your rather abrupt proposals of few minutes since."

"To make a suggestion," Retief said. "If an alternative dumping-ground was made available to you . . ."

"In that case to willingly make use of it in future," Shluh breathed. "To assume, of course, adequate capacity for the volumes of debris generated by the vigorous Groacian way of life. Hark! to note the approach of the fellow Cheese."

The Basuran, with Lady Tish on his arm, was sauntering toward them from the direction of Shluh's yacht.

"It seems," he called, "my G-2 chaps made a slight error in their identification of the precise nature of your convoy. Instead of war-hulls bristling with armaments, I find empty shells, unequipped even with individual guidance systems-mere stripped hulks. This is rather awkward for me, since I've already alerted High Command of my feat in neutralizing a major enemy force."

"To point out, initially," Shluh said, "that no state of official war has existed between our respective govern-

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ments, prior, that is, to your audacious meddling here. Secondly, by intruding unbidden within the sacrosanct precincts of units of the Grecian Navy, you offer irremediable provocation."

"Looks like point number two takes care of techni-cality number one," Cheese responded cheerfully. "So now we're at war, OK, pal?" He paused to pat the hand of Lady Tish. "But that doesn't include you, doll, just these feckless fellows here."

Shluh seized Tish's hand and stalked away.

"If you hurry, maybe you can amend that report before it gets to the top," Retief suggested to the Basuran. "If I know my bureaucrats, this would be a good time for you to do a little emergency career salvage."

"Not to worry," Cheese said airily. "In light of the present logistical situation at home, my capture of a provision convoy and a major supply dump will go far to console High Command for the absence of a captive task force."

"You can make it better than that," Retief said. "Suppose you reported no need to launch and provision an invasion fleet, because you've arranged for delivery to your door of enough imported delicacies to keep Basur eating gourmet style for at least a Galactic year?"

"Ah, the vistas such a coup would open up are bright indeed, Terran. Kindly fill in the details of your capitulation offer. You know how headquarters types love statistics."

"What about a firm commitment of immediate shipments from seventy-nine worlds," Retief proposed.

"Sounds good-but quality has to be up to the standard of this sample." Cheese took another bite from the half-consumed cylinder of compressed gribble-grub husk in his hand and chewed noisily.

"Certainly," Retief assured him.

"But just a minute," Cheese said suspiciously. "What are you asking in return? I seem to recall that you had, by treachery, momentarily gotten the drop on

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me when your colleague appeared. That means dictating the settlement is your prerogative." , "Just load up your captured goodies and haul keel out of here," Relief said. "Tell your bosses the invasion plans are off-one sneaky move and the relief ship-ments are cancelled."

"You surprise me, Terry. I didn't anticipate such generosity."

"Just be sure your boys police the area thoroughly before you seal hatches," Relief admonished the Basuran. "And you can call on Admiral Shluh's crews for help loading up."

"Exceptional," Cheese commented. "I see this mo-ment as the beginning of

a cordial entente between Basur and Terra. A splendid footnote to Galactic history, showing how beings of good will can iron out differences to their mutual benefit-though I confess I feel a bit abashed at having conceded so little in return for your unexampled magnanimity. Are you quite sure your government will sustain you in this beau geste?"

"Oh, I think they'll be satisfied," Relief said. "Mr. Magnan might even make Career Ambassador out of it."

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Back at the office, Relief found Magnan slumped in a chair beside the windows commanding the view across the west lawn.

"Ah, there you are, Relief," The Career Minister sighed. "I've been at sixes and sevens as to just how to extricate myself from this miserable contretemps. As you know, I'm no whiner, but it seems to me Sector has heaped more on my plate than any mere mortal can deal with. Doubtless Director Sraphanger will be back on to me at any moment, demanding impossible results. Why, I've no idea what to say to placate him for

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the moment. And while I wrestled alone here with the Herculean labors assigned me by heedless Sector taskmasters, you absented yourself, doubtless enjoying a halcyon stroll in some sylvan dell."

"Didn't you notice the invasion?" Relief asked.

Magnan made choking sounds. Miss Taylor, seated across the room, sprang to her feet, an expression of alarm on her pert features.

"Whatever do you mean?" she cried. "Invasion?"

"The seven ships must have come directly over this building," Relief said. "Didn't you hear the shooting?"

"Shooting? Heavens!" Magnan yelled. "At whom? And by whom are we invaded?"

"This is no time for grammar," Miss Taylor said sharply. "Who in hell's butting in now to spoil Delicia?"

"All Conqueror of Foes Cheese," Relief said. "You'll recall he gave us fair warning."

"True enough," Magnan sighed. "I suppose we may as well accept the inevitable."

"Certainly," Miss Taylor sighed, "just so all those nasty creatures go away."

"Alas, I see they're already taking an owner's pride in their new acquisition," Magnan remarked, glancing out of the window. Below, a loosely organized line of Basurans and Groaci were moving steadily across the lawn, stooping to pick up each offending scrap of paper or rubbish.

"O-ho!" Magnan cried. "Unless my vision fails me, those are Groaci, working cheek by jowl with the Basurans. I might have known that upstart AC of F Cheese wouldn't have dared such insolence unless with powerful backing." He whirled on Retief. "It's as I suspected from the beginning: Groaci participation in GROPE was a mere gambit to infiltrate the organization and subvert its noble purpose."

At that moment the screen went/wig/ and lit up. The face of Director Straphanger appeared, wearing an expression of grim disapproval.

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"Ah, well," Magnan sighed, his narrow shoulders drooping despondently. "As well to put a good face on the matter . . ." He approached the screen, adjusting a look of pleased surprise on his face.

"Why, Mr. Director, how flattering to receive another call so soon," he gushed. "I have matters well in hand, of course, and expect to report a complete solution to the Delician problem very soon. Over-and-out."

"Gracious, Mr. Magnan," Miss Taylor cried. "I'm just positively busting with curiosity. Just how are you going to clear up all our problems here so quick, when Mr. Retief just said now we've got an invasion on top of all that trash out there?"

"Quite simply, my dear," Magnan said. "The Corps rids itself of the Delician problem by ridding itself of the source: Delicia. I intend to recommend that the planet be declared outside the Terran sphere of interest. Let the Basurans have it and welcome!"

"Why, you awful little man!" Anne cried, and swung the heavy leather purse she was holding by its foot-long straps. The bag, bulging with tight-packed contents, caught the slightly built diplomat on the side of the head and sent him reeling back against the desk, at which he grabbed ineffectually before sliding down to sprawl across it. .

Retief stepped in and relieved the girl of the bag. Hefting it, he estimated its weight at ten pounds. He thumbed back Magnan's eyelid.

"Slight concussion, maybe," he said. "I don't think I need to return your gun, Anne. You don't need it."

Once again the screen emitted its tone and glowed into life. Barnshingle glared out at Retief.

"Mr. Director," Retief said, "Mr. Magnan hadn't quite finished his status report when he signed off last time. You'll be interested to know ..." Retief briefly outlined the agreements with Shluh and Cheese.

"Bully for Magnan," Straphanger declared. "I think that clears his docket nicely, and clarifies a number of other matters which had been troubling us here at Sector as well. I think the way is cleared now for the

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immediate passage of the resolution declaring Delicia a Galactic park." His eyes cut to Magnan's limp form.

"Poor Ben," he rumbled. "Savaged by the Basurans, I assume?"

"Not quite, Mr. Director," Retief said. "You might say he was struck by the wild beauty of the place."