

THE NEGOTIATORS

"Oh, Retief!" the reedy voice of First Secretary Magnan called anxiously. Retief turned to see the slight figure of the senior officer hurrying toward him across the slanting expanse of gray-tan rock where the little group of newly arrived Terran diplo-mats waited to be greeted by the appropriate officials of the local government.

"The Ambassador is most eager to have a word with you," Magnan panted, arriving at Retief's side. "Gracious, I've searched all over for you. I shouldn't wonder if this were a crucial point for you, career-developmentwise, Retief. His Excellency and I were chatting at lunch about possible new modes of approach to the problem. In that connection, I was able to bring up your name, quite casually, of course. I had no wish to seem to be thrusting you forward over the heads of senior officers, naturally."

"I'm three questions behind," Retief commented. "You've searched all over what? All there is is this three-fourths of an acre of exposed rock, surrounded by a few million square miles of unexplored ocean."

"To be sure," Magnan replied crisply. "It was this selfsame three-quarters acre of rock which I searched in quest of you."

"I've been luxuriating right here on the site of the future officers' lounge for the last couple of hours," Retief pointed out.

"Oh, indeed?" Magnan looked around with an expression of severity. "It's not like you, Retief, to idle away the working day in a bar, even an imaginary one."

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"That comment has a rather cynical ring to it, Mr. Magnan-how can you term our luxurious facilities imaginary, when you've seen the actual programming documents which call for construction to begin within six months of funding of the project, which will no doubt take place within a year or two of the submission of the CDT construction program, which I'm sure will rank high on Ambassador Fullthrottle's agenda-as soon as he achieves full Embassy status for the Mission here on Sogood."

"Doubtless, Retief, please overlook the lapse. By the way, what have you been doing, here in the imaginary luxury of the hypothetical future club-room?"

"Drinking imaginary booze and watching theoretical bar girls, what else?"

"What else, indeed?" Magnan gazed around with an expression of disapproval at the bleak expanse of seaworn rock and the two dozen forlorn bureaucrats who wandered aimlessly or crouched tensely beside suitcases and crated forms, under the remote T^hue sun of Sogood.-Sofar, the waterworld's sister planet, hung in the sky, a pale gray disc pitted with craters which formed a pattern resembling the leering visage of a plump sexual deviate.

"You said you'd mentioned my name to the Ambassador," Retief prompted. "In connection with new modes of approach, I believe you said. That has an ominous ring."

"Why, au contraire, Retief," Magnan twittered. "It's just that having been dispatched here as Terrestrial emissaries on the basis of exhaustive interstellar dialogues between the Department and the Soggies, with assurances that the latter enjoy a high level of technological competence, it was somewhat unsettling to His Excellency—as to us all—to arrive and find nothing but a bald knob of unadorned rock projecting above the surface of this unending ocean! In the absence of opposition negotiators, normal diplomatic gambitry is rendered nugatory in advance of the initial overture."

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Why, after thirty-six hours of residence, we've not so much as met a representative of the people, to say nothing of members of the government to which we're accredited. It's unheard of, Relief. Something must be done! I suggest you hurry along before the Ambassador has cause to consider you dilatory."

"Sure. Where is he?"

"Why, in the Chancery, of course. The proposed Chancery, that is. But don't make mention of the illusory nature of His Excellency's present accommodations. He is a diplomat of great sensitivity in matters of protocol and RHIP, you know, though a natural democrat at heart. I sense that an effective performance now could well be the making of you, Relief. And in my assessment of His Excellency's present mood, you must recognize I bring to bear an encyclopedic familiarity with his highly complex character. I fancy I enjoy a rather unusual relationship with His Excellency, Relief; indeed, I think I may say that I enjoy the role of special confidant."

"Don't worry, I won't shatter his illusions." Relief went across toward the spot where a cluster of advancement-conscious functionaries surrounded the tall, lean figure of the Terrestrial Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary.

"What do you think, Relief? A hoax staged by the Groaci to make monkeys out of us Terries?" inquired a small, dapper Military Attaché, as Relief paused.

"Aha, got an angle working, eh, boy?" the Press Attache said, falling in step beside Relief. "Let us in on it, huh? Don't hoard the news. What is it, a secret-invasion scheme, dumping us here on this crummy little island to distract 'em, while the Peace Enforcers hit 'em six ways from the ace on the mainland?"

"What mainland?" Relief asked. "This was the only patch of land visible on the screens as we came in."

"Oh, playing 'em close to the gravy slains, eh? OK, be like that." The fat newsman dropped back, muttering.

"Ah, there, my boy," Ambassador Fullthrollle cried

as he noticed Retief. He made shooing motions with his long knobby hands, scattering the other aspirants for ambassadorial attention. "Come right in." He rose from the Hip-U-Matic power swivel chair which had been uncrated for his use, and leaned on the nine-foot iridium desk (Field), Chief of Mission, for the exclusive use of.

"Now, that infernal little favor-carrier, Magnan, was pestering me this morning, as usual," the great man said. "And he hinted that you, Retief, might well be the member of my staff most highly qualified to offer a useful proposal for placing this Mission on a somewhat less farcical footing. Ah, have a chair, my boy."

"There isn't one. OK if I have this rock instead?" Retief seated himself on a low, smoothly-eroded boulder.

"Of course, my boy. Smoke if you got 'em." The Ambassador beamed at Retief. "Now, in essence," he said, "our initial challenge appears to consist in the circumstance that I, we, that is, have been dispatched here, in good faith, to establish diplomatic relations with the local inhabitants—a consummation somewhat impeded by the apparent absence of local inhabitants— a circumstance which, unless nullified, will render impossible the conclusion of advantageous agreements between Terra and Sogood."

"If you mean we can't sell iceboxes to nonexistent Eskimos, I agree with you, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said.

"Just so," Fullthrottle said, placing his fingertips together and assuming a judicious expression. "It would appear to be essential to my career-to protection of Terran interests, that is to say—to turn up some sort of local authorities without further delay."

"What about that bunch of Soggies down on the beach?" Retief inquired, nodding toward a group of perhaps two dozen bulky, shiny-black creatures vaguely resembling flipperless seals slumped at the water's edge a hundred feet distant.

"Nothing doing there," Fullthrottle said, shaking his

head. "I dispatched Colonel Betterpart to open a dialogue with the creatures, and he reported that they seem unable to grasp the most elementary concepts of communication. Even friendly shouting didn't help."

"I wondered what the yelling was all about."

"Yes. So there they sprawl: some twenty gross and torpid creatures innocent of clothing, equipment or adornment, obviously bearing no conceivable relationship to the highly sophisticated biped beings with whom we've been in contact via screen for some months. So-what to do? I for one don't fancy sitting here in my office, waiting, while the initiative slips from my hands. Our handling of this initial contact will doubtless establish the pattern of Terry-Soggy relations for centuries to come.

Ergo-do something, Relief! I have no wish to report to the Department utter failure on the part of my staff in meeting this emergency." The Ambassador leaned back, causing his Hip-U-Malic chair to groan in protest as he braced a foot against the effort of the power swivel attachment to rotate him to one side.

"I quite agree that we can't open peaceful relations with Sogood unless we can find someone to be peaceful with," Relief said. "It seems that bunch down on the beach is the only lead we have, so I'd better give it another try."

"As you will, my boy. If you succeed, I'll be the first to congratulate you. If you fail, I'm sure you won't be so naive as to seek to imply that I authorized you to approach them. It's my personal conviction that these are a group of outcasts from whatever society may exist here-wherever it may be found in this wilderness of seawater."

Relief rose, inquired the way to the theoretical door, and walked down across the slope of rock toward a lone Soggy sprawled somewhat apart from his fellows.

"Heavens, Relief! Let me save you from a horrid blunder, disciplinewise," Magnan cried, hurrying to intercept Relief. "I had assumed you were conversant with the Ambassador's final and final fraternization with

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these casteless rejects. His Excellency has decided these chaps"-Magnan indicated the herd of Soggies at the water's edge-"are defectives or criminals culled from Soggy society and exiled here far from civilization, to die alone. Doubtless, any contact with them would contaminate the contactor with the same social stigma attaching to these unfortunates. A sad-looking lot, eh? Their degeneracy is apparent at a glance, now that Ambassador Fullthrottle has so perceptively pointed it out. Look at that fellow-" Magnan indicated the nearest Soggy, who sprawled some yards apart from the group. "He's apparently in the last stages of a loathsome disease. Note the lesions on his body. Great pustulent buboes at the point of bursting. Faugh!"

Retief glanced at the bulky form slumped on the rock like a mound of inert, shiny-black-skinned jelly. A number of prominent swellings marred the otherwise unadorned expanse of glossy hide. The only other visible surface feature of the creature was a ridiculously small tail into which the smooth curve of the baglike body tapered at one end. Magnan prodded the Soggy with a fastidious toe. "Go on, shoo, you obscene thing," he muttered. "Crawl into the water to die, can't you?"

"Fraid not, chum," a moist voice came from some-where. "And let's watch that footwork. Don't you dried-out foreigners have any respect for youth and beauty, if not for rank and dignity?"

Magnan recoiled, hopping on one foot as if to disassociate himself from the offending member. "Dear me" he choked, "for a moment, Retief, I almost imagined this formless hulk of protoplasm was speaking to us-to you, that is- in a tone of ill-natured reprimand."

"I thought it was you that kicked him," Retief said mildly.

"Hardly a kick, Retief! A mere good-natured prod, if that!"

"I heard Colonel Betterpart reported no luck in communicating with them," Retief said.

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"So he did. Apparently he jumped to an erroneous conclusion."

"If you boys are talking about that little fancy pants in the hat who tried to pump me about Soggy defenses and armament," the wet voice came again from the general direction of the creature before them, "natural-ly I clammed up. I'm not spilling Soggy military secrets to the first clown that comes nosing around-and besides, I don't know what armaments and defenses are, such concepts being alien to the peace-loving and inoffensive nature of us Soggies."

"I see," Magnan sniffeti. "Well, you could have at least answered the colonel when spoken to. Most rude of you to simply ignore him, thereby giving him an erroneous impression of your capabilities."

"It's legitimate technique to lead potential adversar-ies astray, according to a time-honored Soggy lore," the watery voice countered, "or it would be if us guileless natives had any history."

"See here, sir," Magnan said, "just how is it you're able to speak Terran, since I see no evidence of vocal apparatus on your person."

"Let's lay off the personal-type remarks, bud," the Soggy retorted. "You managed to get here from wherever you came from, but I don't see any rockets on you, now that you mention it."

"You would seem to imply, by analogy, that you employ technology to supplement your natural commu-nicative endowments, if any!" Magnan stated with asperity. "However, this still ignores the question as to your knowledge of Terran."

"Easy, Jack. We've been in telecommunication with you Terries for months. If we hadn't doped out your language, that would have been kind of a waste of time, hey?"

"The fellow is insolent," Magnan adjudicated, and turning, strode away toward a gaggle of wide-eyed diplomats observing from a safe distance.

"You'll have to excuse Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "His career hasn't developed quite along the lines he

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dreamed of back in Peoria. It's made him a trifle bitter."

"What's his flavor got to do with it? Is he edible?"

"Only in an emergency."

"It looks like he's in a hurry to report the latest developments."

Relief turned; Magnan was engaged in an arm-waving conversation with half a dozen of his companions, pausing occasionally to point toward Relief and the alien.

"I'll give you odds he's up to no good," the Soggy stated in a voice like an underwater pipe organ. "Oh-oh, here he comes with fire in his eye."

Magnan, wearing an expression of Patience Out-raged (721-b), was striding briskly back toward Relief.

"See here, Relief!" The First Secretary barked as he came up. "On behalf of His Excellency, and in consideration of his strict instructions, and in light of my own exalted position as Chief of The Political Section, I really must protest your hobnobbing with this loathsomely diseased outcast! The least you could do, if you insist on defying policy, is to strike up an acquaintance with those rather more clean-cut-appearing locals yonder."

"By the way, what's your name, chum?" the alien inquired in his gurgling voice. "I'm known as Sloonge to those privileged to address me by name."

"I'm Relief. This is Mr. Magnan."

"Never mind him; I got a feeling him and me will never be close."

"Not if I can avoid it," Magnan snapped, leaping back and flicking imaginary slime from his sleeve. "Very well, Relief, you have been cautioned." Magnan marched away yanking the overlapping lapels of his early midmorning hemi-semi-informal cutaway into line.

"That one is a pain in the third somite," Sloonge commented. "Look, Relief, I got to nip down to the pad to check on a couple of ilems. Want to come along?"

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"Where's your pad located?" Relief asked, gazing out over the restless surface of the sea.

"About a quarter mile east and six hundred feet down."

"I'd like to go," Relief said, "if you'll give me a couple of minutes to make preparation."

"Yeah, sure. I guess your kind of metabolism don't work so hot once you get a few feet under water. Tough, chum, but I guess we all got our, like, draw-backs. No offense." With a rippling of his huge bulk, Sloonge flopped over. For the first time, Relief noted that at the end of the alien's six-foot ovoid body, opposite the undersized tail, there were two small protuberances which might have been eyes, plus a pair of small nostril-like perforations and a mouth as lipless as a saber wound. This, he deduced, represented the alien's face, which was otherwise undifferentiated from the rest of his rubbery bulk. With further ripples, the ungainly creature slithered down the slope of rock and entered the water. Relief walked past the still-gossiping group standing nearby and made his way to a heap of

baggage resting near the center of the island where the landing shuttle had dumped it a day and a half earlier. He lifted aside a large pigskin suitcase and extracted a metal-clad steamer trunk which he hoisted to his shoulder. Carrying the trunk, he went across to an unoccupied spot, lowered the trunk to the ground and opened it. From the items packed in the upper tray, he selected a pair of goggles and a heavy cylinder the size and shape of a beer bottle.

"Jerry, give me a hand will you, please?" he said to a slack-jawed youth passing by.

"Oh, going to break out the Poon gear, huh, Mr. Retief?"

"That's right, Jerry. Looks like everything's here," he added, examining the array of equipment laid out in the trunk.

"Sure, Mr. Retief, I'll help you get the stuff buckled on. Pretty smart bringing it out here, I guess. You going for a swim now, huh?"

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"It looks that way. I was kind of hoping I wouldn't have to use this gear, but it seemed like a good idea to bring it, when I heard that the total visible land mass of Sogood was three-quarters of an acre, on a world bigger than Terra." Retief stripped off his late mid-morning utterly informal coverall, and began donning the gear.

"Lessee," Jerry mumbled, counting on his fingers: "propulsion, communication, lights, breather, emer-gency gear. Want me to help you with the water foils, Mr. Retief?"

"Thanks." Retief closed the trunk and sat on the lid, and the lad fitted large swim fins to his feet. Then he rose while Jerry rummaged in the trunk, then brought out a portable apparatus with a tank, compressor, and hose with a wide nozzle.

"OK, get set and I'll start squirting," Jerry said. He started up the compressor, twiddled the knobs, then directed a heavy spray of viscous gray fluid on Reliefs chest, working it in a pattern that covered him to the knees, front and back; then he shut down and set about changing hoses and tanks.

"How about a special job, my own design, Mr. Retief? I call it a Hungry Jack."

"Better just give me a straight Big Mouth outfit, Jerry. I'm not sure what kind of appetites I might run into down there, and I'd just as soon look as noncom-petitive as possible."

"Right, Mr. Retief." Jerry continued spraying, this time a garish yellow mixture with which he covered Reliefs upper half, topping him off with a peaked crest. The soft, thick layer hardened quickly on his skin, forming a tough, seamless protective covering, with only the clear face mask exposed.

Jerry rummaged again, produced, a light, short-barreled rifle from the

muzzle of which a razor-edged spearhead protruded.

"I hope I don't need it," Retief said, "but I'll take it."

Furtive-eyed diplomats moved aside uneasily as

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Relief, in his baroque costume, made his way through them and down to the water's edge. He slung the rifle on his back, waded out knee-deep, and dived forward into the clear water. A bulbous black shape rose up before him, executed a turn, and darted away toward the depths, propelled by rapid flagellations of its undersized tail. It was Sloonge; Relief recognized the outcast by the four painful-looking swellings marring the contour of his baglike body. In spite of his unwieldy bulk, the alien swam smoothly, propelled by undulations of his body and his inadequate-looking tail. Relief fell in behind him, and followed as they descended into increasingly green and opaque depths. Ahead, a sunken mountain peak loomed through the murk; simultaneously, Relief became aware of a dozen or so bulky, dark shapes rising from the depths to form a rough circle around him and his guide. More of the dark shapes appeared, emerging, Relief saw, from openings in the mountainous obstacle ahead. Sloonge quickened his pace, darting swiftly toward a dark spot in the side of the peak directly ahead, which, Relief saw as they approached, was a large orifice beyond which he could vaguely discern a grotto inside the rocky mass. The encircling forms drew close; Relief saw that they resembled the Soggies he had seen on the beach, except that each possessed four muscular limbs, two of which were arms, terminating in hands, which gripped efficient-looking guns. There was a sudden burst of bubbles from the weapon of the nearest of the ambushers. A two-foot spear with a barbed head emerged from the bubble cloud, lancing toward Sloonge. Relief pulled on a burst of speed, snatched the missile from mid-water, and spun, bringing his gun to bear on the alien who had fired. The latter checked, wriggling frantically, and swam hastily away, paddling with all four limbs. Another alien appeared, holding his gun aimed at Relief, who, without hesitation, shifted aim and fired. The harpoon buried itself in the bulky body; an ochre stain leaked into the water from the wound. The stricken creature sank slowly away out of sight, and the

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others scattered. Relief resumed his previous path, followed Sloonge in through the opening into a spacious, colorfully walled chamber.

"Nice shooting, Relief," Sloonge burred. "That will save the state the cost of tracking the miscreant down and executing him. By the way, how do you like the pad?"

Swimming close to the wall, Relief saw that the interior of the spacious chamber was entirely covered by skillfully executed mosaic murals, done in crystals of sparkling colored minerals. Sloonge moved past Relief to bump against a small white panel set in the wall. At once, soft light sprang up, emanating from the walls. Each point of color was now glowing with an internal illumination. There were a number of door-sized openings in the walls, each leading to an adjoining room. Relief glanced into a couple of

them; each was decorated with glowing wall murals; one room was furnished with what appeared to be a gigantic gold-colored bathtub ornamented with grape-sized green pearls set in intricate patterns.

"Pretty fancy," Relief said.

"Sure, why not?" Sloong replied cheerfully. "After all, it's the imperial palace."

"Maybe we'd better get out of here before the emperor gets back," Relief suggested.

"Oh, didn't I mention? I'm the emperor," Sloong said. "Or I will be, as soon as a couple of minor details are cleared up, like that bunch of anarchists we ran into outside."

"Don't tell me I've stuck my nose into the middle of a revolution?" Relief said.

"Not really. Those guys are just troublemakers," Sloong said. "Nobody can deny I'm the rightful heir, even if I am a little slow getting in shape."

"I take it you're referring to whatever ailment you have that's causing those swellings," Relief commented.

"Yeah, right. You're pretty perceptive for a foreigner." Sloong said, and swam past Relief into the room

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with the golden bathtub into which he settled himself with every appearance of luxurious ease.

"The condition looks highly uncomfortable," Relief said. "Can't anything be done to help it?"

"Just takes time," Sloong said carelessly. Ketiëf approached, studied the swellings nearest him; the glossy skin was bulged up to a height of several inches over an oval area of almost a square foot, and stretched to translucence.

"I'm no doctor," Relief said. "But I think that ought to be opened. It's been my experience that anytime there's a swelling like that, Mother Nature is trying to push something out."

"Maybe you're right," Sloong said indifferently. "But what can I do about it?"

"If you'll hold still a minute, I'll try something," Relief said.

"Sure, go ahead."

Relief took the knife from its sheath at his hip, checked the edge with his thumb, then delicately stroked the keen blade across the bulge of the immense swelling, which instantly burst, releasing pale yellow fluid which quickly dissipated in the surrounding water. Inside the wound thus made

lay a complicated dark shape, that I wrenched, unfolded and thrust out: it was a perfectly formed, muscular, knobby-kneed leg, terminating in a wide webbed foot.

"Say, that's a lot better!" Sloong exclaimed, stretching the member out full length, and admiring the toes. "Pretty neat trick," he added. "The ilch has been driving me balmy, to say nothing about cramps. If I could just get one more unlimbered, I'd be ready to take on that crowd outside, and show 'em who's head Soggy around here."

"Turn over," Relief said.

Ten minutes later, he and Sloong, the latter now swimming briskly with four limbs, emerged into the deep-green gloom and headed for the surface.

"Well, those malcontents won't try anything now," Sloong remarked. "Too bad my particular branch of

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the imperial dynasty is always a little slow in breaking through. I'll bet those deadbeats up on the beach are still lying around like the no-good bums they are, without a limb to show among 'em. Thought they were going to pull something fancy, I'll bet. Will they be surprised when they see me come ankle up the beach."

"Who are they?" Relief asked. "More rebels?"

"Not exactly," Sloong said. "They're a bunch of relatives of mine, cousins and brothers and such. Nobody but the royal family is allowed on Imperial Rock, you know—at least, they weren't until you Terries came along and turned it into a hobo jungle. When I said I was coming up to catch a little air and sunshine, they came along on the pretext of attending to my wants while I waited to break through; but in the six weeks I was there, they never offered me so much as a drink of water. They're going to be a downhearted crowd of would-be usurpers. I guess they were playing the odds that one of them would break through ahead of me and ace me out of the imperial tub."

In shallow water, Relief rose to his feet and walked toward the shore. With a great deal of splashing and gasping, Sloong tottered to his newfound limbs, and after staggering for a few steps, found his stride and walked along steadily at Relief's side, his bulky body balanced rather precariously on his long but skinny legs. At sight of them, the torpid Soggies heaped on the beach became agitated; the gurgling of their excited voices was audible from a hundred yards.

"That was pretty neat how you helped me along," Sloong commented. "You put an end to the political crisis in a hurry."

"Nothing to it," Relief said casually. "Why didn't you arrange to have it done weeks ago, instead of just waiting around for nature to take its course?"

"On account of the, like, concept of the cutting edge is unknown among us

Soggies. But if you'll leave me have that knife, I'll have it consecrated by Bishop Drooze and from now on, it'll be kept guarded, along

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with the imperial crown and other treasures, to be used only for helping a new emperor to break through."

"Ah, there, Retief," Magnan said, falling in step beside him. "I really must caution you against fraterni-zation with the local undesirable element. If you must hobnob with locals, why not pick one of those more clean-cut Soggies yonder?"

"Hey, Retief," Sloonge said, "tell this bird to shove off before he gets my ire working."

"By the way, sir, I meant to ask you," Magnan addressed the local: "You folks don't mind our calling you Soggies, I hope? No offense was intended, of course; it was just a convenient nickname-short for Sogooders-since we don't know your own word for yourselves."

"Heck, no, sport. Matter of fact, I think it's got a nice ring to it: it sounds sort of soft and juicy, you know; but you can call us by our native designation, if you like: Vermin."

"On the whole, I think 'Soggies' has less unfortunate connotations," Magnan said.

As they came up to the group of Soggies lying on the beach, the aliens flopped about, arranging themselves in orderly rows aimed toward Sloonge. Most of them, Retief saw, exhibited the same sort of swellings which Sloonge had had, in varying degrees of development.

Retief drew Magnan aside. "I'd better tip you off," he said. "Sloonge is the emperor of this entire planet."

"Really? Not that I hadn't suspected something of the sort, of course," Magnan replied. "As you know, my knack for instant recognition of natural nobility is one of my most outstanding traits. Sloonge is as different from this crowd of idlers, for example, as I am from a herd of swine."

"They're all members of the imperial family," Retief pointed out.

"Really?" Magnan gasped.

"Yeah, but not a leg in the bunch!" Sloonge com-mented. "Ha! I wonder how they figured on knocking me off."

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"You imply these fellows would have killed you?" Magnan said in a shocked tone.

"Sure. They were banking on breaking through ahead of me and then finishing me off. Of course they'd probably have gotten to squabbling among themselves about who had priority, and maybe only a couple of 'em

would have lived to report my unfortunate demise by accident."

"Do you want me to operate on them?" Retief asked, drawing his knife.

"Cut their throats if you want to; I'll have to have 'em all executed anyway. In a way, it's kind of a shame; my big brother Glorb isn't a bad sort of fellow, and he plays a mean game of boof. I'm going to miss him."

"Then why not let him live?" Retief said in a reasonable tone.

"Nope. Glorb is an ambitious cuss; he'd never stop itching to slip into the imperial tub. He'd be a focal point for malcontents."

"You could turn his ambition to good account," Retief said. "By putting him in charge of your police force, with the job of nipping off revolution in the bud."

"Kind of a wild idea, Retief," Sloonge said. "The ruling emperor having a living relative. It's never been done; maybe I'll give it a try at that. Hey, Glorb! How does 'Field Marshal Prince Glorb' sound to you? I'm thinking about putting you in charge of the imperial security forces, with the job of stamping out treason in the realm."

One of the limbless Soggies, indistinguishable from his fellows, rippled his bulk and flopped forward a yard or two.

"As an alternative to being strangled to death with chuzz-weed, it might be OK," he gurgled. "My first official act will be to order half a ton of chuzz-weed to take care of this bunch of traitors." He nodded toward his former associates.

"Take it easy, Field Marshal," Sloonge said. "You

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might be able to find spots for some of 'em in your organization."

"I'll find spots for 'em all right: I'll cement 'em into abandoned gimp holes at about two thousand fath-oms/'

"Ah, there you are, Retief!" the hearty voice of Ambassador Fullthrottle sounded from behind him. "For a moment I almost didn't recognize you in that outlandish Pupoony getup. Any progress to report on the matter I mentioned to you earlier?"

Retief turned. "I have one or two items of interest," he said.

"Shhh! Not in front of this local." Fullthrottle stared distastefully at Sloonge.

"It looks like a Soggy," he said in a stage whisper, "but where'd he get those limbs?"

"I grew 'em, sport," Sloonge called cheerfully. "Same as you, I guess, except maybe a little suddener. If you boys don't mind my asking, I'm kind of curious about you Terries. Except for Retief here, you aliens don't hardly

look like you're equipped to survive in a normal environment. No gills, no tails, and you look sort of dried out and scratchy, and I haven't seen any of you even stick a toe in the water. Aren't you getting a little dehydrated? If so, you're welcome to jump in my ocean."

"Actually," Fullthrottle said, "on our native world, the majority of higher life forms live their entire lives on dry land."

"Sounds like a weird kind of place," Sloonge said. "Maybe your strange habits are on account of your whole planet is rock, without any ocean such as we Soggies are lucky enough to have covering approxi-mately 99.44 percent of the planet, according to a quick mental calculation I just made."

"Why, no," chirped Magnan, who had come up beside the Ambassador, "as a matter of fact three-quarters of Terra-" He broke off abruptly as Relief trod on his foot.

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"Say," Sloonge mused. "Now that you Terries have familiarized me with the concepts of space travel and alien worlds, and all, the thought comes to me: Maybe us Soggies could do with a little more marine real estate to help out our overpopulation problem. You don't know of a nice planet with plenty of ocean where we could maybe hatch out a few zillion tons of fertilized ova, do you?"

"Ugh!" Magnan cried. "Imagine the Atlantic teem-ing with giant polywogs!"

"See here, Magnan," Fullthrottle said testily, "it's hardly in consonance with the dignity of a Terran Ambassador, or even of you lesser ranks, to stand out in the wind nattering with a low-caste local."

"The wind, sir?" Magnan objected. "Why, we're right here in the handsomely appointed Embassy lounge, as designated by Your Excellency only yester-day."

"To be sure," the Ambassador conceded. "But that's hardly the point. The impudence of this untouchable in addressing me is the issue."

"Oh, didn't I tell you, Mr. Ambassador?" Magnan inquired. "This is His Imperial Highness, the Emperor Sloonge, hereditary sole and absolute ruler of So-good."

"You jape at such a solemn moment as this, Mag-nan?" Fullthrottle responded indignantly. "My ability to instantly recognize true aristocracy is well-nigh a legend in the Corps. This fellow is quite obviously a reject of such primitive society as exists here on this benighted planet."

"Heck, I hate to appear to, like, contradict Your Excellency or anything, but I have it from a usually reliable source," Magnan eyed Relief bleakly, "that Sloonge is, indeed, the emperor."

"What about that, fellow?" Fullthrottle demanded, turning to eye Sloonge dubiously. "Do you have the temerity to put forth such a claim?"

"Them are the facts, sport," Sloonge said airily,

waving a hand to indicate the knob of rock on which they stood. "The whole thing's my realm."

"Well, Your Imperial Majesty," Fullthrottle said in a somewhat choked voice, glancing furtively around at what, to the uninitiated, would have appeared to be three-fourths of an acre of bare rock, "I'm sure that an individual of Your Majesty's sophistication won't take amiss my lighthearted remarks just now." He shot his cuffs and extended his right hand to be shaken.

Sloonge yawned, exposing the intimidating array of sharklike teeth lining his wide mouth.

"No, thanks," he said. "I never snack between meals. By the way, maybe you better present some credentials about now, just to keep matters on a correct footing."

"But of course, Your Majesty; I was about to propose a suitable ceremony as soon as possible."

"Yeah, hand 'em over," Sloonge said. "But don't bother unless you're ready to agree to my modest proposal for using your unused ocean worlds."

"I fear the matter will require study," Fullthrottle hedged.

"You got Terra," Sloonge cried. "Why not let us have the Atlantic?"

"We need it! And the Pacific too, to say nothing of the Indian and Arctic Oceans," Magnan sputtered. "We don't need annual plagues of seven-foot meat-eating Vermin croaking on the shores."

"Let's deal, Relief," Sloonge cried. "Sounds like you got four whole ocean worlds you ain't even using! But I guess you're holding out for an equal swap. How about it. Let's work out a trade: I'll swap you the entire land area of Verm, or Sogood, as you call it, namely Imperial Rock, a very high-class neighborhood, for your oceans. That's a square deal for you Terries and us Vermin, too!"

"I'm afraid we can't get together on that, Sloonge, but how about an alternate proposal? We've been having a little difficulty developing our marine re-

sources, and perhaps instead of just hatchlings, you could supply us with a few thousand skilled craftsmen to build underwater structures, like that palace of yours; very fine workmanship!"

"Sure, I can supply all you need; but a few hundred thousand couldn't hardly build you a first-class privy. How about a couple hundred million to start with?"

"Would these be, er, spawn, or fully developed adults?" Magnan interposed.

"Trained workers, every one," Sloonge reassured him. "All they need is

about a hundred pounds of fresh meat a day apiece."

"Heavens," Magnan cried. "I'm not sure we have enough fish in our seas to supply such a demand."

"No sweat, Mr. Magnan," Sloonge said easily. "They'll catch their own eats-even if they have to forage ashore-just so you got plenty of game on hand."

"Our only surviving land animal is man," Magnan said stiffly.

"OK, we ain't particular-leastways a bunch of hungry hard hats ain't," Sloonge said agreeably.

"Well, let me see," Magnan muttered. "Two hundred million, ah, Vermin-times one hundred pounds, times three hundred sixty-five, for the annual requirement. . . . Hm-m-m, I think perhaps we're on the verge of a solution to our overpopulation problem."

"Ah, Your Imperial Majesty will excuse Magnan for carelessly referring to your people as 'Vermin,' I trust," Fullthrottle put in quickly. "I'll personally see to it that he is appropriately dealt with at Departmental level." He turned to Magnan with a glacial expression. "I must say I'm surprised to hear a diplomat of your experience openly refer to these obnoxious creatures as Vermin," he whispered behind the symbolic privacy of a hand.

"Their own local name for themselves-or so I'm told," Magnan alibied, giving Relief an accusatory look.

"Don't waste a 729-t on me, Mr. Magnan," Relief

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said. "Emperor Sloonge told us so himself, if you recall."

"Ah," Fullthrottle said dubiously to Magnan, "I fear I can never bring myself to openly call these creatures 'Vermin' to their faces, if any."

"Hey-what's wrong with our name?" Sloonge demanded. "I hope you Terries ain't figuring to, like, meddle in Soggy internal affairs and all!"

"Well-as to that," Fullthrottle gasped, "faced with a choice between referring to your people as, ah, 'Soggies' or-alternatively, as 'Vermin,' I'm not quite sure what CDT regs stipulate."

"What's wrong with 'Vermin'?"

"Ah, by a curious coincidence, the term has unfortunate connotations in Terran. It implies a certain lack of fastidiousness as well as various other disgusting traits."

"It figures," Sloonge commented thoughtfully. "Fits most Soggies like a glove. If you knew these no-goods like I do, you wouldn't be quibbling."

"Quite the contrary," the Ambassador objected, facing the Emperor

squarely. "It's a time-honored truism of diplomacy that the most resented epithet is the one most accurately depicting the deficiencies of the recipient. Those who refuse to work, for example, dislike being called 'loafers,' while the industrious would merely be amused by the appellation."

"I get the idea; but I was talking about the lower classes, natch. Vermin they are, by anybody's defini-tion."

"Your proposal for relocation of Soggies on Terra occasions certain grave difficulties, Your Majesty," Fullthrottle commented. "For example, provision for wives and families would constitute a problem. And then the details of vacations, recreational facilities, and pocket money-to say nothing of repatriation at the end of the term of contract."

"Don't sweat it, chum. Do like I do: work 'em till they drop, and if they start bitchin', I'll supply you with plenty of chuzz-weed. And if they don't bitch, give 'em

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the works anyway. And don't worry about returning 'em. I got plenty more; just let the sharks have 'em, if sharks' innards can handle Soggy-meat."

"How unfeeling!" Fullthrottle exclaimed. "Though this practical approach does simplify matters considera-bly. Still," he added, giving Magnan a glum look, "I trust none of my personnel will be so naive as to suggest at any inquiry which might develop in future, that / in any way gave approval to any such scheme!" He walked away without further comment.

"I assume we may safely take that as authorization to go ahead," Magnan said briskly.

"You boys just fix up a title to all Terran oceans, and I'll see to it the work force is on hand for pickup in a week-plus a deed to Imperial Rock, here," Emperor Sloonge said, and headed for the surf.

"Just a minute," Retief demurred. "Before we give away three-fourths of a planet for three-fourths of an acre I think we ought to hold out for more considera-tion accruing to Terra."

"Why," Magnan gasped, "we mustn't appear greedy, Retief."

"Why not? Better greedy than suckers," Retief replied.

"Speaking of suckers, Retief," Sloonge said in a glutinous undertone, pausing beside Retief. "Let's you and me retire to the palace for a couple of quick ones and ditch all these nobodies, Terry and Soggy alike. We can work out a deal that includes some goodies for number one-and you, too."

"I take it that's an imperial command," Retief said, "that a mere bureaucrat has no option on."

"Right. Let's go-before Glorb gets into the act. He's a boy that's always got a hand out, even if he has to grow one special. And from the looks of him, this Mr. Ambassador of yours is the same type. They're both probably figuring an angle to ace you and me out of some legitimate graft-and after

we earned it, too! I'll be expecting you, Retief."

Sloonge waved and waded into the breakers.

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"Ah, excuse my interruption, Retief," Fullthrottle butted in, having reapproached from downwind. "I appreciate the potential benefits to accrue from your establishing a cordial relationship with His Imperial Majesty, by nattering informally of this and that. But, ah. ..." He sidled closer, "Candidly, I was wondering if perhaps you and I might not, ah, draw aside and look more deeply into all aspects of the Terran posture vis-a-vis Sogood at this juncture . . . with a view to the possibility of so influencing the development of affairs as to enhance the professional profiles of those most instrumental in bringing about a Terran-Sogoodian accord. Between ourselves," he added, with a glance at the royal Soggies heaped nearby, "that chap Field Marshal Prince Glorb strikes me as being on the make, to employ the vernacular."

"Emperor Sloonge had the same idea, Mr. Ambassa-dor," Retief said.

At that moment, Magnan tugged at his sleeve. "Er, Retief," he muttered, "if you can spare a moment . . . I've been wondering why you and I should do all the work, as usual, only to have the brass grab all the credit. Accordingly, I suggest we approach Glorb-he seems a reasonable chap-and see if a rapprochement can't be worked out more favorable to the interests of hard-working diplomats of intermediate rank than could be expected if finalization of the treaty and protocols are left to His Excellency and His Majesty."

"Seems like a popular idea," Retief said. "Just a moment, Mr. Magnan. Let's see what the Field Mar-shal has in mind." He nodded toward the Soggy inching his way toward the Terrans, wriggling awkwardly on his limbless torso.

"Look here, you Terries, I got pretty keen hearing- couldn't help overhearing some of your conversation. How about it, Retief?" Glorb said. "Let's get together on the practical end of this deal, what say? I always kind of hankered to get into the construction game; now's the chance to get my feet dry-you Terries will need a knowledgeable contractor to handle your im-

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ported labor. I've got the boys that will shape those loafers up in a hurry."

"Sounds reasonable, Your Imperial Highness," Mag-nan conceded. "How many extra personnel will your supervisory staff consist of?"

"Forget it, chum; just consider 'em as included in the original hundred zillion figure."

"But-I thought we'd agreed on a hundred million," Magnan protested. "We mustn't exceed available trans-port capacity."

"A million, or a zillion, who cares?" Glorb said carelessly. "Let's get to the

meat of the matter. Frankly, where I get well is supplying materials. Masonry specialties, plumbing fixtures-all that."

"Really, I must draw the line!" Magnan declared. "It's apparent, I fear, that Your Imperial Highness has no grasp of interstellar freight rates. Shipping concrete and lead pipes, indeed! Out of the question!" He retired to a distance of ten feet, turning his back, and radiated outrage. "I might have suspected a kickback arrangement," he mused. "Such gall! Retief, come along," he went on in a colorless tone. "Ambassador Fullthrottle will be getting restless unless we reassure him that no irretrievable indiscretions have been committed."

"First I have to make a duty call on the Emperor," Retief demurred.

"Look, Retief," Glorb said in the confidential tone employed by men of the world when discussing matters not understood by non-men of the world. "Your chum don't seem to realize our boys are pretty sensitive artistic types. They got to work in the familiar materials they know and love: gold, emeralds, diamonds, rubies, granite and stuff like that. You Terries need to supply the right stuff, or they go into a premature decline. And I can fix you up with everything you need to keep 'em happy, OK,"

"What kind of payment do you have in mind?" Retief asked.

"Why, Magnan let slip a mention of a minor

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seaworld called Mediterranean," Glorb said. "How's about just deeding it to me as a modest personal estate. ..."

"OK on the gold, diamonds, emeralds and rubies," Relief said. "Hold the granite."

"Say, that's big of you, Retief, accepting the stuff we got a surplus of, and foregoing the rare and expensive granite. I may make a small profit on this deal after all."

"Building materials!" Ambassador Fullthrottle ex-claimed, eyeing Retief with an expression of Incredu-lous Indignation, a variation on the 291-x developed by the Ambassador himself in his youth, when a delegate to a Special Tribunal on Unsavory Prehistoric Events- a group which had been on the verge of a unanimous endorsement of a resolution introduced by young Fullthrottle condemning every mass migration in human prehistory as imperialistic protofascism-had mentioned the invasion of the European continent from Africa by Homo Erectus some 150,000 years B.C., an unfortunate piece of water-muddying which had nipped in the bud what might have been a valuable entry in the Fullthrottle dossier. In spite of this frustration of early hopes, Fullthrottle still looked back with a benign nostalgia on the days of STUPE, his first entry into the large arena of affairs, though he felt a pang of regret as he reflected that but for an unkind quirk of fate, his 291-y would today be officially listed in the CDT Career Officers Guide, with himself credited as originator, his name ranged alongside such giants of interstellar diplomacy as Crodfoiler, Long-spoon, Barnshingle, and Pruffy.

But, he recalled himself, back to the immediate problem.

"Is it possible, Retief," the great man continued, "that you are unaware of the costs of interstellar transport? I assure you there are better uses for Corps bottoms than hauling bricks and lead piping."

"Yes, sir" Retief replied. "But as Field Marshal

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Prince Glorb pointed out, his craftsmen would work much more skillfully in their accustomed media."

"Ah, yes, a significant point, no doubt, my boy. Giving consideration to the personal preferences of these, er, Vermin, will, of course, look good in the 'Empathy and Involvement' column of your next ER, if I should happen to recall the matter when preparing it, which, I may as well point out, is unlikely in view of the sensation your proposal for massive waste of Corps funds will create in the Bureau of the Budget. So resign yourself to the realization that our Soggy labor corps will of necessity learn to lay Terry bricks and install native pipes and fittings, including bathtubs, which, I noted on your proposed schedule of cargoes, were specified most explicitly-as if the place of manufacture of a porcelain bathtub were a matter of vast concern in the conduct of interplanetary affairs!"

"I'm afraid I've committed myself on the tubs," Retief said. "Prince Glorb insisted on it."

"Hm-m-m," Fullthrottle mused. "I wonder just who is finessing whom in this negotiation. It was a most adroit gambit on my, ah, our part, I suppose I should say, to escalate Sloonge's request for breeding grounds into a solution to our marine development problem. But his arrogance in levying demands, bathtubwise, gives me pause. Perhaps there were nuances which I, that is, you and Magnan, missed. Still, I suppose it's too late now to abrogate the treaty of eternal chumship now that the Council has approved it, and made the appropriate notations in my 201 file."

"Too late, or too soon," Retief said. "The first shipload of bathtubs is in parking orbit now."

"So . . . well, matters have ripened somewhat pre-cipitously, Retief. I fear you place me in a delicate position. CDT regs are quite explicit as to the proper handling of the matter, however. Inasmuch as you exceeded your approval authority in okaying these freight charges, I have no choice but to issue a Statement of Charges, permitting you the opportunity to salvage your career by merely paying these charges

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personally. I daresay the sum will be paid off within a few years."

"I understand, Mr. Ambassador. What about the two ships following, loaded to the gunwales with masonry specialties? No granite; I told Glorb he'd have to make do with Terry granite."

"Quite right!" Fullthrottle said firmly. "By the way, in accordance with

Paragraph ninety-seven, Subsection B of the Manual, you'll of course be obligated to take personal title to these unauthorized cargoes. I suggest you make immediate arrangements for disposal to cut down on your demurrage."

"Oh, there you are," Magnan said brightly, peeking in the door at Relief. "Why, hi there, Mr. Ambassa-dor. I just wanted to tip you off, sir; there's a fantastic rumor afoot to the effect that you've stuck poor Retief here with the bill for hauling bricks and,so on all the way from Sogood. I suggest you scotch it, sir, before it goes any further. Just confidentially, sir," Magnan added furtively, "the Corps' image has already had its luster dimmed a trifle just by the terms of the treaty- you know how difficult it is for the public to distinguish between a diplomatic victory and a disaster. And socking it to one of our own will make very bad copy from a PR standpoint-nothing personal, of course-I quite understand that Retief is legally responsible."

"It's quite all right," Retief said. "I'll take my medicine without griping-just let me have it in writing."