

THE TROUBLESHOOTER

"This time, gentlemen, it's full-scale disaster!" Undersecretary Crankhandle pushed back his VIP-model Hip-U-matic conference chair with built-in recording and scrambling equipment, refreshment bar and full-comfort attachment, rose to his full sixty-four inches of well-fleshed height, and directed a complicated glance along the row of tense bureaucratic faces waiting expectantly for details of the rumored disaster which had cast an uneasy pall over CDT Sector HQ all morning.

"Heavens, Relief," Magnan, the Chief of the Groaci Desk, muttered, leaning toward the larger, younger diplomat seated to his left. "It appears matters are more serious even than my usually reliable source had indicated; as you doubtless noted yourself, His Excellency's expression, after beginning as 458-b (Mild Reproof, With Full Cognizance of Extenuating Circumstances), with which he favored Colonel Under-knuckle, at the head of the table, modified through a 65-c (Exhausted Patience) to a full 99-x (Incipient Loss of Self-control) by the time the glance reached us, or me, I should say, inasmuch as you were shielded from the full force of the reproof by the interposition of myself."

"I thought his features were writhing a bit, Mr. Magnan," Relief replied. "But I assumed he was merely having an attack of some kind."

"And now," the great man said in a tone like a falling guillotine, while directing what Relief correctly assessed as a 97-d (Justified Fury Held In Check By Sheer

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Force of Character) on the luckless Magnan, "if you and Relief are quite finished with your chat, Ben, perhaps I'll be permitted to continue now with this conference."

"Gosh, yes, sir, pray continue, Mr. Secretary," Magnan said in a tone of Eager Congratulation (12-b). "Mr. Relief and I were merely comparing notes on matters relevant to Your Excellency's remarks."

"So far, the only remark I've been able to squeeze in is the simple statement that disaster has struck. Inasmuch as I have not yet specified the precise nature of the disaster, I'm frankly puzzled as to how you're able to speak so glibly of relevance."

"Why, ah, sir, a usually reliable source . . ." Magnan began.

"Bah! No offense to the custodial staff intended, of course, but rumors passed along by the janitor hardly qualify as adequate basis for staff planning!"

"To be sure, sir, but George assured me he got his dope direct from Miss Lynchpin's wastebasket."

"Impressive documentation, indeed," Crankhandle conceded. "Still, inasmuch as I am waiting to announce, officially, the precise information on the ferreting out of which you're expending your ingenuity, why not

permit me to get on with it? Unless, of course, this is your method of dramatizing your intention to terminate your career?"

"Why, nothing like that, sir!" Magnan exclaimed. "In fact, I'd imagined my zeal might well produce results of such startling effectiveness that my advance-ment profile might well be enhanced sufficiently to suggest to the board the propriety of a spot on the upcoming promo list."

"Hey, if it's not too much trouble, Mr. Secretary," a plump-faced man in military uniform interjected hesi-tantly, "would somebody let us peasants in on what it's all about? A disaster, you say; maybe we ought to be doing something, instead of sitting here jawing."

"Easy, now Fred," the Undersecretary soothed the colonel. "I should have thought that after Ben's

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disclosure of a shocking security lapse, in the matter of Drusilla Lynchpin's wastebasket, you'd have felt it politic to maintain a low profile for the nonce, security being your personal responsibility."

"Sure, I know all that jazz. But the point is, we got a disaster on our hands; Old Druzies's sloppy disposal habits are old stuff. She'd have been canned long ago if she wouldn't of been so big in the Women's Re-enslavement Movement."

"But to return to the matter of the current disaster," Magnan put in in an ingratiating tone, "if we're faced with the imminent massacre of some unspecified num-ber of Poor Terry Trash out on some frontier world, the name of which escapes me for the moment . . ."

"The threatened planet is none other than Furtheron itself, Magnan," a thin, white-haired, youngish man on the other side of the table said severely. "I'm surprised you could forget a world so important in the annals of peaceful Terran colonization. Furtheron is virtually a showcase example of enlightened Terry colonial prac-tice, being, as it was, a completely uninhabited world to begin with, though of nine-point similarity with Terres-trial standards, thus requiring an absolute minimum of Terraforming, as well as necessitating no thinning out of indigenes, and thus inviting unfortunate commen-tary by second-generation hindsight."

"Of course, Perry; you've no need to deliver a first-grade lecture on the history of extra-solar coloniza-tion," Crankhandle said severely. "Even Ben knows that Furtheron represents all that is dear to the heart of all red blooded Terrans of whatever political stripe; Corn-cap and Libreac alike will rise up in righteous wrath when word of this dastardly attack leaks out." Crankhandle fixed a cold secretarial eye on the Infor-/mation Agency man fidgeting in his hard chair.

"Well, golly," Magnan burst out. "Naturally I know all about the grand story of Furtheron-about the cherry tree and all, and all about the 'one if by rocket and two if by transmitter'; George just didn't happen to

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mention that part. All he said was about some Poor Terry Trash, like I said."

"Look, fellows," Colonel Underknuckle said in a somewhat forced tone of heartiness as he rose, gather-ing up pencils and pad. "I got a hot security meeting to chair, so I guess I better shove off."

"You will 'shove off,' as you phrase it, when I so direct, Colonel, and not before," the Undersecretary said in a glacial voice. "And I'm sure you had no conscious intent of sequestering CDT property to Navy use." He stared pointedly at the pencils in the colonel's hand.

"Right, chief," the latter said crisply and resumed his chair, replacing the pencils. "But how would it be if you came right out and said what's cooking out on Further-on?"

"Unlike you military people," Crankhandle said solemnly, "we of the diplomatic service have learned to consider well before committing ourselves to actual speech, a lesson which might go far in enhancing your own growth-potential curve. The locution, 'Your Ex-cellency,' for example, or at least, 'Mr. Secretary,' might have suggested itself for use in direct address to myself in place of 'chief,' a nominative more appropri-ate to Sitting Bull than to a senior career diplomat, and one, moreover, who will soon be preparing your ER."

"Right on the button, Your Excellency!" Under-knuckle said fervently. "By golly, I guess that puts the monkey on my back." His expression reflected strain, possibly at the burden of the figurative pithecine. He squirmed in his chair. "Well, seeing as Ben, over on the Groaci desk, seems to be in on this, it's not so hard to deduce the Groaci are at it again," he hazarded. "Trying to grab off our best planet, eh? Why, the lousy sticky-fingered little five-eyed thieves. What say I lay an interdictory strike right on Groac City? Nothing heavy enough to disrupt the planetary crust, of course, just a few old-time nukes to remind 'em where the power is."

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"Hot dog!"

"Just what I was going to say!"

"Right on!"

The congratulatory chorus was cut off abruptly by the Undersecretary: "Typical military thinking-not totally inappropriate, perhaps, except for the circum-stance that the Groaci, for once, are in no way involved in the Furtheronian crisis."

"Too bad."

"Let 'em have it anyway, just on general principles."

"A megation of prevention ..."

"Now gentlemen, cool heads must .prevail," Crank-handle chided gently. "Though I can understand a certain zeal for chastisement of the Groaci, we

must take no action which might lay us open to later charges of immoderation."

"Why not?" Colonel Underknuckle spoke up sharp-ly. "What do we care what some do-gooder muckrak-ing historian says a hundred years from now? A good Groaci is a vaporized Groaci."

"Just so, Fred," Crankhandle conceded soothingly. "Still, we mustn't impair other CDT programs such as galaxywide image-building, in the enthusiasm of the moment."

"Sure-but if it's not the Groaci in the woodpile, Who is it?" Underknuckle scratched at his head; the harsh rasping of brittle fingernail against dry scalp made for a show of deep perplexity.

"A group of Basurans, Fred, an element not un-known in the annals of galactic malfeasance."

"Sure-they're the greedy guts that practically ate their home world down to the magma," a tired-looking political officer volunteered.

"Tried to take over a nice piece of ground called Delicia, too," an econ man put in.

They posed a pretty problem for the Galactic Re-gional Office for Preservation of Ecologies," a round-faced fellow spoke up. "For a time, in fact, we at GROPE were well-nigh at our wits ends, but of course an equitable solution was found; I believe you were

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instrumental, Magnan." He nodded his congratulations to the latter.

"Of course. But what are they doing now? George didn't mention-"

"Possibly George failed to examine Miss Lynchpin's rubbish so closely as might be desirable if he is to serve as an official channel of staff information," Crankhan-dle pointed out.

"Ah . . . perhaps. But knowing the Basurans as I do," Magnan hastened to state, "I suspect their voracious appetites are at the bottom of the problem."

"To be sure. They have established a foothold on Continent One, a few miles from the capital, and are openly attacking the inoffensive Terran farmers in the boondocks, while carrying out a massive envelopment of the city itself. They make no bones about the matter; they intend to take the world by force-and to lay it waste as only Basurans can do, ingesting all known forms of matter as nourishment as easily as you and I munch gribble-grubs."

"Urp! Please don't mention gribble-grubs, Your Excellency!" Magnan cried. "Forgive me, but even the thought of them sets my stomach to groaning."

"Forgive me, Ben, we're all aware of the difficult time you had on Groac due to your part in the failure of the Groacian hoob melon crop. Thoughtless of

me to remind you."

"All's well that ends," Magnan commented airily.

"You said these Basurans plan to lay Furtheron waste," a narrow-faced chap with an undernourished moustache said uncertainly. "Now, just how do you mean, sir? Do they openly avow an intention to despoil the crops, that sort of thing?" He shuddered.

"Basur now stands, or rather, orbits its sun, as an object lesson in Basuran techniques, Elmer," Crank-handle said gravely. "The planet has been stripped to bedrock, and, in places, deeper. They now propose to apply the same technique to Furtheron."

"Gracious, that's awful!" said a fellow who looked as if his name should be Melvin.

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"We've got to stop them!" another bureaucrat asserted.

"What are we waiting for?" a youthful diplomat inquired. "Heavens, they'll strip the entire harvest!"

"Harvest, shmarvest!" a plump man cried. "They'll take the crops, then the topsoil and outbuildings and livestock, and finally, the farmhouses with the farmers' families inside! The planet will be decimated!"

"Not if I get the word to stop them in their tracks!" Colonel Underknuckle stated, rising. He gathered in a fistful of pencils, including Magnan's, but under the stern undersecretarial eye, replaced them and wiped the offending hand on his gold-striped trousers. "Just gimme the word is all," he muttered and gazed at the far corner of the room.

"Go get 'em, Tiger," someone said in the pregnant silence.

"Sure, it's time for a little action," another voice confirmed.

"Those Basurans are asking for it--"

"They can't push Terries around!"

"Gentlemen!" Crankhandle called the group to order. "Let us not lose sight of the fact that this is a diplomatic conference, not a war council!"

"Yeah, but ..."

"That will be quite enough, Clarence!" the Under-secretary said sharply to the small man who had begun the protest. "My goodness gracious me, we mustn't fall into the error of precipitate action where deliberate conversation is called for."

"Suppose we sum up," a veteran political officer said crisply. "On the one hand we have the Basurans penetrating Terran space, seizing Terran property, and harassing, if not murdering, Terran nationals. On the other hand we have Terra, or the Corps Diplomatique to be specific ... ah ... how

shall I phrase it . . .?"

"Watching," some suggested.

"Sitting around with its finger up its nose," came another offering.

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"'Doing nothing' covers it nicely, I think," Underknuckle said tartly.

"Nothing, Fred?" Crankhandle echoed in tones of Stern, Yet Kindly Reproof (41-c). "We're discussing the matter. I'd hardly call that 'nothing'!"

"Mmmm," the Information Agency man said, steepling his fingers and leaning forward. "Still, it's hardly a technique likely to influence the course of Basuran aggression, Mr. Secretary."

"Best you inhibit your tendency toward truculence, Wally; some hint of immoderation might inadvertently creep into your press releases."

"Truculence, sir? I merely reminded you that the Basurans are not likely to cease their depredations merely on hearing a rumor that we're talking over the problem."

"You think not? Have you no faith in the hallowed axioms of enlightened diplomacy?"

"Nope, not a bit," Wally said flatly.

In the shocked silence, throats were cleared nervous-ly. Wally extracted a toothpick from his shirt pocket and plied it energetically to his rabbit front teeth, surveying the results critically before tucking it away again.

"Well, gentlemen, the floor is open for constructive suggestions," Crankhandle said in tones of Stoic Mar-tyrdom (29-f). "No hot-headed proposals, now, gentle-men. Nothing which you will not be proud to hear discussed by the personnel actions board next promo-tion season."

"Let's toss it back to the department on Terra," someone proposed brightly.

"How about if we refer the whole file to SCROUNGE?" Clarence put in quickly.

"Indeed, Clarence? You propose this seriously?" Crankhandle said in a tone of Deep Interest, Juniors, for the Encouragement of (238-x), or possibly Ominous Sarcasm (1104-b), Magnan was not sure which. "And in what way, pray, does an alien invasion fall under the

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egis of the Special Council for the Rehabilitation and Overhaul of Underdeveloped Nations' General Econo-mies?" Now Magnan was sure it was an 1104, possibly a w (With Hint of Impending Reprimand, Written).

"Well," Clarence said, clearly unaware of the drastic nature of the reproof he had suffered, "we could take the position that we see it as basically a problem arising from an economic crisis back on Basur, see, so if they'd just

get the lead out and overhaul the system, the Basurans would stay home and we'd all be pals, right?"

"Wrong," Crankhandle said flatly. "Our error was in failing to establish a being-to-being rapport with these creatures on first contact, some decades ago."

"Sure, you mean when they ambushed one of our survey convoys and wiped 'em out to the last man," the Information Agency man said. "Kind of hard to build a big rapport on a deal like that."

"Hard, yes, but not impossible, Wally," Crank-handle chided gently. "A capable negotiator might have offered official apologies at once, hinting at largesse in the offing."

"You mean a Basuran negotiator?"

"Certainly not! Far be it from me to meddle, even theoretically, in a sovereign state's conduct of its affairs."

"Yeah, but, gosh, what did we have to apologize for? They jumped us!"

"To be sure," Crankhandle acknowledged vaguely. "But it might have been a nice gesture to express hope that the survey teams were not unpalatable."

"Retief," Magnan whispered, "we're privileged to hear a master at work. The man has certain irritating mannerisms, perhaps, but what a thinker! Where you, or even I, might have reacted in terms of pique, with a sharp rejoinder, he creates a classic enunciation of the basic diplomatic finesse of oblique sincerity."

"I never understood how oblique sincerity differs from hypocrisy, Mr. Magnan," Retief said.

"Ah, therein lies the subtlety of the technique, Retief. While the opposition is recovering its cool,

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trying to decide whether we're trying to pull a swifty, as Fred would say, we hit them with massive foreign aid and cultural exchange proposals left and right, and zowie! Before you can say 'Jack Dools,' we're staging a good old-fashioned trade fair in their capital. When the downtrodden peasants get a look at those genuine Japanese cameras, and Hoboken Navajo blankets- we're in!"

"I quite understand, Ben," Crankhandle said gently, "that your apparent contempt for the etiquette of staff meeting is no more than a bid for attention, which in turn suggests that you and Relief have a proposal worthy of our time."

"Why, who, me? I mean, Retief? Heck, Mr. Secre-tary, we were just commenting on your inspiring leadership, and perhaps I got a trifle carried away."

As the assembled diplomats squirmed in empathy with the luckless

Magnan, vague thumping sounds were audible in the middle distance, accompanied by a thin screeching, suggestive of sheet metal failing in shear.

"What now?" Cfankhandle inquired rhetorically. "Are our august proceedings to be disturbed by tots at play in the hallowed corridors of Sector HQ?"

"Sir, if I might make a suggestion ..." Magnan said in a frail voice, as all heads turned toward the door beyond which the sounds of a scuffle were audible.

"Indeed, you'd better-" Crankhandle replied.

"I understand, uh, that is, George mentioned that the Basuran Ambassador is visiting HQ just now. Would it not be well to invite His Excellency to participate in our deliberations?"

"I was on the point of designating one of you to hasten to the Basuran legation and extend just such an invitation."

"Gee, sir, sure you were, I just ... I mean . . ."

"That will do, Ben."

"Uh ..."

"Sit down," Retief suggested; Magnan sat.

At once, half a dozen eager functionaries were on their feet vying for the honor of running the errand.

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"Say, chief, I was just going to the John; on the way I could . . ." a junior vice-consul proposed.

"I need the exercise, boss," Clarence offered.

"On the other hand," the Undersecretary said, his voice cutting through the chatter like an edged weapon, "it had occurred to me that to invite a representative of the invading forces to join a Galactic Utter Top Secret conference regarding measures to be employed to deal with the invasion might be interpreted by the uninitiated as in some way a breach of security, or something. In any event, I have given strict instructions that our deliberations are to be interrupted by no one on whatever pretext. We'll have meals sent in."

"Gosh, boss, how could anybody ... I mean, I'll go get him on the QT, OK?" This from Perry, a middle-aged, middle-rank bureaucrat still dreaming of top-echelon favor.

"I think, Perry, I made it quite clear that whatever comes to pass, no Basuran will be permitted ingress to my GUTS priority meeting!"

Crankhandle directed a stern look at the unfortunate, who subsided, mumbling.

"Yeah, but you said . . . and then you said ..."

"Kindly spare the group any out-of-context quotations, Perry. I am, of course, well aware of my own recent remarks."

"Sure you are, chief. I only meant . . ."

"Sit down," Magnan suggested. Perry subsided.

"And, in case I neglected to point it out, I wish to emphasize that I intensely dislike the appellations 'boss' and 'chief.' You may address me simply as 'Mr. Secretary' or 'Your Excellency' '*"

"Sure, chief. Whatever you say. I mean, Mr. Secretary."

There was a faint scratching at the door.

"Magnan, kindly attend to that," the Undersecretary said curtly. Magnan hurried to the door and opened it.

"Say, sir, about that Basuran ambassador," a small man with narrow shoulders and a small paunch said

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brightly. "Maybe I could just scout around the building and round him up."

"It's difficult, Hector, to see just how you could do that without committing an act of gross insubordination, in view of my instructions to the contrary," Crankhandle pronounced.

"Not me, sir, I'd never dream of being insubordinate. Forget it. It was just an idea."

"And a poor one, Hector. However, when the tapes of this meeting are reviewed, I shall attempt to convince Personnel that no actual mutiny was contemplated."

"Gee, that's big of you, sir."

"Is he really here, Mr. Undersecretary?" Magnan inquired.

"'Mr. Secretary' will do, Ben," Crankhandle rebuked gently. "No need to emphasize the prefix 'Under' in that fashion, which you no doubt regard as subtle."

"I only meant ... I mean I didn't mean ... I mean ..."

"Of course, Ben. We all understand." Crankhandle smiled a smile such as a crocodile might have smiled if it had buck teeth, a receding chin, and rimless glasses.

"Maybe I better just go line up this Basuran ambassador, after all," Hector said, edging toward the door. "Hi, George," he said to man lurking there. "Where-at's the Basuran AE and MP?"

"I don't know. Wait'll I check Miss Lynchpin's wastebasket." George hurried

away.

"Now, gentlemen, let us assume an appropriate posture, pending the arrival of this upstart Basuran," the Undersecretary proposed in a tone of Benign Command (4-g). "Our unassailable position is that if we have in any way given offense to Basur, or if any -action or policy of Terra or of individual Terrans appears in any way in conflict with her legitimate aspirations-

"How would you define 'legitimate aspirations'?" Perry inquired in his mild tenor.

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"Why, traditionally, of course-in dealing with inferiors, anything whatsoever they may choose to do-particularly at our expense-is a legitimate aspira-tion."

"I get it," the Information Agency man said, smirk-ing. "It's a joke. He's pulling our leg."

"By no means," Crankhandle put in coldly. "If you had any awareness of history, gentlemen, you would recognize this hallowed principle."

"Then . . ." Perry faltered, "whose side are we on?" He frowned at his ashtray, then jabbed his dope-stick out in it.

"Our own," Crankhandle intoned. "The bureaucrat, like the lawyer, is above petty allegiances. But to return to the germane, let us be quite clear in our minds that we have no intention of adopting a reactionary atti-tude, or indeed, any position which would lay us open to criticism. We shall be above reproach."

"Who are you afraid will criticize us?" asked a youngish fellow recently integrated into CDT from the Terran Civil Service.

"You're new, Harlowe," Crankhandle diagnosed sadly. "Who, indeed? It's traditional with us of the Corps that our posture in all delicate matters must be unassailably correct, punctiliousnesswise."

"Sure, I know all that stuff," the young fellow said, "I was just kind of wondering who in his right mind would criticize us for looking out for ourselves-and why we'd give a hoot if they did. 'Sticks and stones . . .'"

"I appreciate the classic allusion, Harlowe, my lad, but words-now, they're a different matter than mere missiles."

"OK, sir, I get it."

"Splendid. But to return to the point at hand: our position is clear, gentlemen. We will not be stampeded into hasty action by Basur, no matter how provocative her attitude might appear to amateurs."

"You mean they've got a clear ticket to do as they

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like and we do nothing, eh, chief?" Wally asked rhetorically.

"Succinctly phrased, Wally."

"Gosh, in that case I guess we can all go home," commented a plump Budget-and-Fiscal type.

"Not until we've provided Wally with substantive material for an appropriate despatch to the Agency," Crankhandle corrected. "We mustn't lay ourselves open to charges of inactivity, after all."

"Yeah, chief, but we are inactive. You just said ..."

"Please, Bob, let us avoid elementary semantic errors. I Said nothing against carefully thought-out inactivity. It is the reputation for inactivity which poses a threat to time-honored diplomatic processes-and to the careers of those identified therewith."

"Sure, boss, my boner. Won't happen again." Bob

slumped in his chair.

"But we must do something!" Colonel Under-knuckle said faintly, baring his teeth in what he perhaps thought was a fierce expression. "Even if it's wrong, as it probably will be."

There was a thump at the door.

"What's that?" Crankhandle said sharply, staring at the offending portal.

"That's a thump at the door," Magnan volunteered.

"A thump? I recall hearing of no such species having representation here at Sector, Ben."

"You got X-ray vision or something?" Clarence inquired. He went to the door, opened it a few inches.

"Heck, it ain't no thump, it's George," he said.

"Yes, do come in, George," Crankhandle said, using, as Magnan noted, a full 87-b (Effusive Condescending Cordiality). -, -

"Uh, say, Mr. Crankhandle-I mean, Mr. Under-secretary-" George began, as if embarrassed.

"See, George says it, too," Magnan commented sotto voce.

"I mean, well, sir, what I mean is, I got this here Eety wants to see you boys." George stepped back and

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the door was thrust wide by a creature who gave the appearance of a caricature of a broad-shouldered, midget assembled from fragments of

smashed ground-cars. He thrust past George into the room with a metallic clanking and squeaking that heightened the illusion.

"Well," Crankhandle gasped, recoiling. He rose to his feet. "Whom, or what have we here?"

"I'm I of IU Honk," the intruder announced insouciantly in heavily accented Terran. He took out and lit up an eighteen-inch cylinder of dark-brown vegetable matter, drew on it, and emitted a cloud of dense yellowish smoke that smelled very like a metropolitan rubbish incinerator.

"You're a what?" Crankhandle yelped. "What do you mean, fellow, intruding on a top-level diplomatic conference?"

"Modify your tone, fellow. I stated quite clearly, in your own barbarous tongue, that I enjoy the rank of I of IU. Have you no awareness of protocol at all?"

"Enlighten me, Fred," Crankhandle hissed at Colonel Underknuckle. "You're an old hand at equivalent rank and all that. What in the world is an I of IU?"

"That's a Basuran military title," Fred replied. "It means an Intimidator of Insolent Upstarts. Outranks a Maker of Ritual Grimaces, as I recall."

"Well, how does it compare with Space Arm ranks?"

"Oh, somewhere between a lance corporal and a buck general, I'd say, sir."

"Splendid. In that case I outrank him forty ways from Sunday. Heck, I outrank a fleet Admiral, even if I don't get to wear as many medals."

"I suggest, Terries, that you avoid an unfortunate diplomatic incident," Honk said harshly, "by at once according me the honors due my exalted position."

"How about it, Glen?" Crankhandle inquired of his Chief of Protocol. "What are the honors due an Intimidator of Insolent Upstarts?"

"Twenty-three guns would be about right, I should imagine," Glen replied. He had a round well-tanned

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face with a small moustache, like an antique tailor's dummy, and was never seen without a battered yacht-ing cap placed askew on his boyish hairpiece.

"Eh, guns?" Honk exclaimed. "But I was given to understand-

"Purely ceremonial, I assure, you my dear Intimidator," Crankhandle hastened to reassure the alien. "By the way, what is it you want?"

"Want? I am here, Terrans, as the personal representative of the Ultimate Ego of Basur. I am folly accredited to the Terran CDT as Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. And whom have I the dubious

pleasure of addressing?"

"Why, Mr. Ambassador, you may present your credentials to me. I, as it happens, am Undersecretary for Troublesome Affairs, and surely Terran-Basuran relations fall in that category."

"So. Well, perhaps you'd better show me your ID first. After all, as Basuran Chief of Mission, I don't present credentials to just anybody. Technically, I should insist on a t&te-d-tete with your top dog, emper-or, chief or whatever. But I'll not bother with that. I'm a most liberal being, especially considering I'm an I of IU and all."

"Most gracious of Your Excellency. By the way, how did you know where to find me?"

"Quite elementary, my dear Terry. A usually reliable source ..."

"Oh, George," Crankhandle called to the custodial type still hovering just beyond the half-open door, "you wouldn't by any chance be working both sides of the street?"

"Who, me, chief? Heck, maybe this junk-piece slips me a little tip now 'n' again and maybe he don't-after all, I deserve it, just for breathing, you know; like taxi drivers. So if I can maybe give him a little help sometimes, it's no more'n fair."

"To be sure," Crankhandle conceded, "but the question of divided loyalties might arise among the coarseminded."

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"Loyalties-not me, sir. I been working around HQ long enough to know which side of my bread substi-tute's got the icky-wax on it. I look out for Mrs. Smother's boy George; that's a full-time job."

"We'll make a diplomat of you yet, George. I see my confidence in you was not misplaced."

"Sure, that's cool, but how's about a little bump in the old pay envelope, sport. I can't eat compliments."

"It's indeed heartwarming," Crankhandle comment-ed to the staff as he resumed his seat, "to have this opportunity to practice old-fashioned eyeball-to-eyeball diplomacy. I trust all you junior officers will observe closely."

"Skip all that jazz," Honk commanded^ pulling out a chair for himself, and motioning its previous occupant aside. "I'm not here to conduct elementary classes for green Terry diplomats. What I want to know is-" he hit the table with a horny fist, causing ashtrays to jump, "what are you planning to do about the outrage out on Furtheron?"

"Why, what a coincidence," Crankhandle twittered. "We were just talking about that-weren't we, fel-lows?" The great man glanced at his underlings, for ritual corroboration.

"Right, sir!"

"You betcha, chief!"

"Sure, but-"this comment from young Harlowe, "I mean," he floundered on, "what we decided- that is you decided Mr. Secretary- is, uh, we'd do nothing- just like we're doing now."

"Au contraire, my boy," Crankhandle chided gently. "We agreed that talk would handle the matter-"

"One moment!" Honk cut in. "Am I to understand you propose to employ brute conversation to attempt to bludgeon a deserving emergent race into submission?"

"Perish the thought, my dear Intimidator. I merely meant-"

"Have a care, fellow! Have you considered the impact upon Galactic Public Opinion of cavalier treat-

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ment of an underprivileged people such as mine? Besides, you can't get away with trying to brush aside proud Basur."

"Talk about working both sides of the street," George commented. "One second he comes on like a poor little fella that's being picked on-next he's the big tough guy that nobody better step on his shadow."

"Umm, agile," a fat bureaucrat murmured admiring-ly. "But just watch Cranky. He's known for her verbal footwork, you know."

"Calmly, please, my dear Intimidator," Crankhandle urged. "Let us not leap to unfortunate conclusions prematurely."

"You imply," Honk said, "that later on, unfortunate conclusions will be in order."

"Surely; later. Much later."

"Time, sir, is of the essence!" Honk yelled. "At this moment, Basuran nationals are suffering hardship, danger and privation! This is an intolerable situation! I demand prompt and effective action on your part to relieve this terrible injustice!"

"Why-ah, I'm not sure ..." Crankhandle stammered. "Just what situation is it to which you refer? And in what way am I obligated to take action?"

"What situation? Surely you jest! Over five hundred thousand Basuran nationals are at present suffering grievous hardships on a raw frontier world. And you, representative of bloated Terra, are by your own arrogant admissions, doing nothing whatever to relieve them!"

"Yes, but . . ." Crankhandle stammered, "after all, they're your troops; nobody asked them to come trampling down the crops of the noble Terran pioneers on Furtheron! They could all go home!"

"What is this talk of troops? These deserving Basurans are tourists, innocent, fun-loving bird- and wildlife-watchers, seekers after scenes of natural gran-deur such as ripe crops, gold mines and shops stuffed with consumer goods. We Basurans are consumers of unparalleled virtuosity. As for returning home prema-

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turely, as you so callously propose, what would they eat, pray tell? We are at present undergoing a severe famine on Basur. It's time, sir, that you faced up to realities. These personnel are suffering! Something must be done! At once!"

"Well, uh, this is just an observation, mind you, but after all, you weren't actually invited to come to Furtheron. And it's actually rather cheeky of you to hint that you Basurans are in fact not troops. They've already overrun half the planet."

"But, my dear Terry, they are unarmed, defenseless. To describe them as troops, surely it will be necessary for you to establish that they bear arms-which, as I said, they do not."

"A fine point, Mr. Ambassador; one over which our Deep Think teams can mull for weeks, I suppose. But troops or tourists, their presence on Furtheron surely constitutes trespass on Terran-owned soil. Certainly you'll not dispute this point?"

"As is obvious to any unbiased observer, the world Bliff, which you perversely refer to as Furtheron, comes well within the sphere of Basuran manifest destiny, lying as it does inside the natural sphere of Basuran aspiration."

"Indeed, sir? How so? The Furtheronian sun is well over five lights distant from your own."

"Statistics! Bah! The planet's very name bespeaks its ancient place in the Basuran mythos, 'Bliff being a contraction of 'Bomourlerfoof,' which in the mellifluous Basuran tongue means 'admirable member of the horny one.' Even in ancient times, as primitive Basuran rock-gatherers lay around while the foreman wasn't looking, and studied the lights in the sky, they gazed in awe and envy on this stellar superstud, dreaming of future conquests."

"Aha! You let it slip then! Conquests, precisely," Crankhandle exclaimed happily.

"They were thinking of another sort of conquest, entirely."

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"Then they'd best stick to skirt-chasing and leave Terran-owned worlds alone."

"Is this your reply to a cry of need? I suspect that the galactic press will give this outrage wide coverage. Coverage that will reveal you Terries as the heartless exploiters you actually are!"

"Exploiters? That is hardly the appropriate word, Mr. Ambassador. Terra has in no way exploited you Basurans. Au contraire, you have invaded and laid waste a world long and peacefully settled by honest Terran pioneers."

"Bah! Over one hundred thousand persons are now marooned on a hostile planet without adequate food, supplies, or equipment, and you have the audacity to openly state that you intend to give them no assistance whatever. Incredible!"

"What's incredible is that you seem to actually expect us to maintain your invading armies as though they were a group of harmless picnickers in distress!"

"Mere semantics, sir!" the Basuran stated hotly. "People are suffering while you prolong this discussion! I demand immediate action!"

"Look here," Crankhandle said, "since you Basur-ans are able to subsist on raw minerals, how is it your people are suffering from hunger? Eh?"

"As to that, while it is true that the superior Basuran metabolism can make do with elemental substances in emergency, we far prefer correctly prepared meats and vegetables-which you willfully withhold from us."

"So. We're not only expected to support your invading armies, but to support them in luxury, eh? Remarkable!"

Honk got to his feet. "Your cynicism does you no credit, sir! I came here in all sincerity to plead for help for my deserving countrymen. But instead of the assistance which you could so easily have granted from your vast resources-instead of help, I say, you offer nothing but harsh rejection! It's apparent that the fate of some thousands of Basuran citizens is nothing to

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you. Good day, sir! You may be assured I shall report this matter to the press in full!"

"One moment, sir!" Crankhandle called heartily. "Pray leap to no hasty conclusion! My staff and I are even now planning appropriate action!"

"Planning, indeed!" Honk snorted. "As if the correct measures to relieve this disgraceful situation constituted a great technical mystery! The proper course is quite obvious! And I shall expect prompt and effective action. And now, good day to you sir!" The Basuran turned and strode from the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Uncouth," Magnan commented.

"Heavens," a slender econ man murmured. "If he speaks to the press . . ."

"We must take the initiative!" Crankhandle stated firmly. "Ben!" He fixed his gaze at Magnan. "Go after him; make sure he leaves. If you can't manage it, keep the media chaps away from him, and later on this evening bring him around to my apartment. I'll regale him with hearty anecdotes, feed him some bonded spirits, give him the feeling he's moving in high circles. I'll dazzle him with true Terran hospitality: he'll be so overwhelmed

that all thought of mischief-making will be forgotten."

"Good thinking, sir!"

"Right on, chief!"

"It can't miss!"

Crankhandle waved away the chorus of congratulations. Magnan, blushing slightly at the honor thrust upon him, hurried in pursuit of Honk.

"I'm just dreadfully sorry, Mr. Secretary," Magnan stammered some hours later, standing at the half-open door of the Crankhandle apartment, from which the sounds of bibulous merriment came. "I invited him, I urged him to come, but no—he was off to the port, where, he insisted, a fast scouting vessel waited to whisk him back to Furtheron."

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"What was so urgent about getting back there?" Crankhandle demanded, taking a sip of the tall drink in his hand. "I'd invite you in for a drink and a bite, in spite of your modest rank, Ben," he said, "except that I'm sure a career man of your dedication wouldn't dream of drinking while an important assigned mission remained uncompleted."

"You mean—" Magnan cried. "You mean I don't get to take a snort until that Basuran barbarian shows up for your shindig?"

"You ignore my question, Ben. Why did His Excellency find it vital to return to the bleak outpost world, Furtheron, with such precipitate haste?" The Under-secretary sipped again. "And the scene of warfare, at that," he added. "Seems the sort of place an experienced diplomat would avoid as a plague ..."

"Oh, didn't you know, sir?" Magnan shuffled his feet awkwardly, eyeing the tall glass in Crankhandle's hand. "Intimidator Honk is in supreme military command at Furtheron. The whole invasion was his idea, actually; his military career is at stake. And in view of what he termed the regrettable absence of Terran cooperation in the realization of Basuran destiny, it's essential that he be at hand to personally direct operations."

"Oh, quite understandable; had I known, I'd of course have placed suitable transportation at His Excellency's disposal. I shouldn't like to be instrumental in the destruction of a promising career."

"Sure not, sir. But it's OK. He's got his own scoutboat that we refueled and supplied while he was at HQ to negotiate a victory."

"Ah, yes; as to that, much as I regret the necessity for being instrumental in denying a fellow diplomat the laurels of a successful negotiation, I was unwilling to give Honk that triumph at the expense, not only of my own professional reputation, but of Terran interests in general. I hope you understand, Ben. It was not because of any lack of consideration for a colleague that I did not join with Ambassador Honk in condemn-

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ing Terran policy on Furtheron. Here, hold this; but don't drink any." Crankhandle thrust his glass at Magnan, and turned back into the crowded room.

"Why, sir, I wouldn't think of it . . ." Magnan sniffed the glass cautiously and peered after the Under-secretary as the latter circulated among his guests. While the great man's back was turned, Magnan slipped quickly into the room, put the glass on the bar, and spiked it with several ounces of gin; then he selected a prepared cocktail for himself, took it down in one gulp and turned toward the door, ditching his empty glass on a messy end table.

"Ah there, Ben," Crankhandle's unctuous voice caught him in mid-escape. "How nice of you to drop by. By the way I don't suppose you've seen anything of that Basuran upstart?"

"Who, me, sir? I mean, I? That is, ah, as a matter of fact I saw him at the port."

"At the port? I suppose the rascal is attempting to steal away with our, that is, my rightful demands unanswered; you didn't let him slip away, by chance?"

"Actually ..."

Crankhandle held up a hand. "Too bad. No telling what sort of mischief he might get into now that he's at large again. But at least we've kept his visit here secret."

"Hey, Cranky!" A plump man with bleary eyes and his tie askew called cheerfully from across the room. "Where's that Basuran warlord-cum-peacemaker we've been looking forward to meeting?"

"Alas, His Excellency couldn't make it," the Under-secretary said sadly. He turned to Magnan. "Get me a drink, Ben," he commanded, frowning. Magnan handed him the spiked drink.

"Look here," said a small lean woman with a tight hairdo and a thin, pointed nose, thrusting her way through the throng surrounding the Undersecretary. "We, that is to say, I'm president of the Aroused Citizenry for Halting Expansionism. Now, what we at ACHE demand is that an end be put at once to this

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disgraceful planet-grabbing, like out of Furtheron." She placed her knobby fists on her lean hips and stared challengingly at Undersecretary Crankhandle.

"A commendable program, madam," he said smoothly. "Unhappily, the planet-grabbing is being done by another species, not by us; thus we find it difficult to terminate the outrage as briskly as desirable."

"I ain't no madam, you!" the lady interjected sharply. "You just keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"Now, dementia," a small, timid-looking man said behind her. "I'm sure Mr. Crankhandle didn't mean anything derogatory. He was just talking diplomatese."

"Don't you try to butter me up, Henry!" she replied, whirling on the little man. "I guess I know when I been insulted! A madam is a female that runs one of them sporting goods houses or whatever they call 'em!"

"Be assured, my good woman," Crankhandle soothed, "that I could never for an instant envision you in such a context."

"Oh, you couldn't eh?" the lady retorted, shifting her weight to one foot, and thrusting out a hip. "What have them hussies got that I ain't got?"

"It isn't what you've got, it's how it's organized," an anonymous voice volunteered from the crowd of interested bystanders. "Cool down, Clemmie; let's hear the excuses this tool of the power structure's trying to make."

"Yeah, let him hang himself!" another voice pro-posed.

"OK, what about it?" Clemmie demanded. "Just what is your excuse?"

"For what?" Crankhandle inquired coolly. "And to whom?"

"To meem. For what's going on out on Furtheron."

"Precisely what, in your view, is going on out on Furtheron?"

"You know. Oppressing the downtrodden, and all that jazz. Like the Establishment's always doing."

"The downtrodden on Furtheron are the Terran

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population, mostly third- or fourth-generation Furthe-ronians. They are being downtrodden by the Basurans, due, I regret to say, to our failure to allow the latter to die a natural death some years ago when they had destroyed their own habitat."

"Listen! You all heard that!" Clemmie whirled to confront the company. "Listen how casual he talks about germicide, or whatever they call it when a whole bunch of foreigners gets kilt all at once!" She turned to stare accusingly at the embarrassed bureaucrat, who held up his hands as if warding off a barrage of vegetables.

"Dear me, ma'am. I hardly think you have a correct grasp of the contretemps with which we're faced on our far-flung frontier!"

"Far as I'm concerned, it's been flung too far already. We ought to pull them Terry colonists back outta every place they've went and got inta!"

"That's hardly a practical proposal, ma'am, in view of the fact that a vast armada of immense transport vessels would be required, none of which are in existence, to say nothing of the logistical problems incident to such an enterprise, plus, of course, the circumstance that Terra is already in grave

difficulty in attempting to accommodate the indigenous eight billions of population, and has absolutely no space in which to house the refugee inhabitants of half a hundred overcrowded worlds."

"Hah! Alibis! Folks got rights, you know!"

"Just which folks' rights are you now defending, Clemmie?"

"Why, them poor colonists which they went and believed a bunch of government promises and upped stakes and went out there to carve homes outta the wilderness. And now you act like we got no room to welcome 'em back home again. Some gratitude!"

"Hmm; it appears you've inadvertently changed sides, Clemmie. A moment ago you were characterizing these same deserving colonists as exploiters and downtreaders."

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"Hah! I guess I know what side I'm on-the side of right and decency is where I stand!"

"To be sure. Isn't it a pity we sometimes have such difficulty in determining just where niceness and goodness are to be found."

"I don't have no difficulty, buster! Maybe you just put your finger on what's wrong with you big government men."

"Perhaps, Clemmie, you'd be kind enough to advise me just how you'd resolve the Furtheronian dilemma?"

"I ain't here to do your dirty work for you! You figger it out yourself!"

"Suppose then, that in order to secure the rights of the colonists whom you so spiritedly defended a moment ago, we should take positive steps of a military nature ensuring their freedom from molestation by any outside group such as the Basurans?"

"There you go! Talking doubletalk about starting up a war like you was planning a tea party!"

"I take it, then, that you feel we should stand by and see these people dispossessed of their wordly goods."

"Listen at him, trying to weasel out of sticking up for our own folks out there on that Furtheron place!"

Crankhandle turned sadly to Magnan. "You see, Ben, what we're up against. Damned if we do and damned if we don't."

"You lay off that there cursing and taking His name in vain in front of a lady!" Clemmie cautioned shrilly.

"Awkward indeed, sir," Magnan acknowledged. "What shall we do?"

"It's time for stern measures. I feel I must act personally now."

"You, sir? Personally?" Magnan gasped.

"Quite right. I'm always ready to take my place in the firing line. So I'm going to personally appoint a legman to go out there and look the situation over."

"Oh, praiseworthy, sir! Ah, whom, may I ask, will be honored with this assignment? I'd volunteer in a second, of course, but my bunions have been acting up lately."

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"I wouldn't think of taking you away from your substantive duties, Ben, as liaison man with the Inter-planetary Tribunal for Curtailment of Hostilities."

"Oh, good-that is, I mean, whatever is for the good of the cause, sir."

"What about that fellow, tallish chap, I recall you've been associated with him in a number of somewhat unconventional affairs . . . can't place his name ..."

"You may be thinking of Retief, sir. Excellent choice. As you so perceptively pointed out, his meth-ods, though sometimes outside the realm of the strictly conventional, have at times proven effective."

"Umm. don't see what he can do this time; frankly, I'd say it's hopeless. The planet's been overrun and already largely stripped by the beggars. But at least he can go out and put a good face on it for the invadees, so that we don't find ourselves faced with a delegation of survivors demanding compensation on the flimsy grounds that the Corps should have seen out a flotilla of Peace Enforcers to run the Basurans back home even faster than they arrived."

"Yes, indeed, sir. Shall I tell him?"

"Why not? We can't keep it from him forever."

"Oh, there you are, Retief," Magnan caroled as he caught sight of the junior officer among a crowd emerging from the personnel gate to the port. Retief made his way to Magnan's side.

"Yes, here I am," he confirmed. "What brings you out in the bracing morning smog, Mr. Magnan?"

"Why, I happened to be chatting with the Undersec-retary last evening," Magnan replied, "and he mentioned-that is, he empowered me, or ordered me, or requested me, almost politely, actually-but why are you here, Retief?"

"It occurred to me that Cranky might have a sudden attack of common sense and decide to send a working party out to Furtheron to look over the ground at close range. So it seemed like a good idea to slip five to the

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maintenance chief for a quick look at Honk's little one-man dreadnought."

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"Ah, indeed? And did you, in fact, inspect the

vessel? And why?" "I thought it would be advisable for our inspection team to get there before the enemy commander-in-chief arrives to muddy the waters; and if we're going to be chasing him, it will help to know what kind of drive and firepower he's sitting on."

I "My idea exactly," Magnan said nodding. "But,

f alas, I see the boat's already lifted." He gazed sadly at ; the spot where Honk's compact craft had been parked, I now empty except for a litter of candy-bar wrappers and dope-stick butts.

"It's OK, I got here early," Retief consoled him. "Nice little job, Bogan-built, packs Hellbores fore and aft, and a class Y power plant."

"Heavens! Aren't our medium cruisers powered by class Y units?" Magnan looked shocked.

"Right. If his space-hull doesn't fall apart, he'll set a new record getting out there."

"Then we have no chance of preceding him. Pity." Magnan looked sad.

"We might," Retief said. He took from his pocket a small metal cylinder and tossed it up and caught it. "While I was looking at the emergency boost gear," he said casually, "the auxiliary converter solenoid sort of jumped out and landed in my pocket."

"Gracious!" Magnan said. "Won't that prove awkward for Ambassador Honk when he tries to shift into hyperdrive?"

"Yep. It won't shift; he'll have to limp along at about nine-tenths light."

, "How curious," Magnan mused. "I wonder how on earth it happened to fall into your pocket ..."

"Confidentially, I helped it a little. Not much. Just had to remove a small cover plate and two quarter-inch blivets."

p "Retief! You wouldn't-but on reflection, I suppose

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you would." Magnan stared out across the acres of concrete as if he expected to see Honk's semi-disabled craft hovering there. "What do you propose to do next?"

"I thought I'd wait around until the delegation for Furtheron makes the scene, and brief 'em on the status."

"Yes; as to that, it happens, Retief, by a curious coincidence, that I

hastened here this morning in the hope of seeing you, in order to inform you that after serious consideration, Secretary Crankhandle has decided to entrust you with the very mission about which you speculated."

"It figures," Retief commented. "How did I luck into the job of troubleshooter?"

"Why it was simply fortunate that your name cropped up just as His Excellency was considering the matter."

"In that case, I'd better be getting started."

"Yes, indeed. After all, Honk may be carrying a spare solenoid."

"He had a couple, but unfortunately they fell down the disposal chute."

"Yes, I suppose that was to be expected. Well, good luck, Retief. I can't imagine what you can do to salvage the situation-and Crankhandle's career, to say nothing of your own-but I'm sure you'll do your best/'

"I'll try to think of something," Retief said.

Aboard the fast one-man Navy scout-boat which Retief had requisitioned from an astonished clerical type as soon as the latter regained consciousness after demanding nine different notarized forms dated a minimum of two weeks prior to the current date, an alarm bell sounded stridently. Retief laid aside the June 1931 Astounding he had been reading, and switched on the PV screen. The sleek form of a standard Bogan number nine hull appeared there on a roughly parallel course. The readout panel indicated that the vessel was

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at a distance of one hundred twelve miles, and proceeding at a velocity of nine-tenths light. Retief keyed his communicator.

"Ahoy, The Ripsnark," he hailed, reading the name from the vessel's prow. "Is I of IU Honk aboard?"

"I'd look pretty dumb if I'd sent it off on auto while I hung around the port until that pest Magnan came back and resumed bugging me about attending some sort of tribal powwow, wouldn't I," the alien's harsh voice responded. "Who are you and why?"

"I'm Third Secretary Retief of the Terran CDT. As for why, I haven't figured that one out yet."

"The CDT. That's the organization mentioned by that objectionable chap, Chief Troublemaker Crank-handle, or something of the sort. N'est-ce pas?"

"Correct, Mr. Ambassador. It was the Troublemaker himself who sent me out this way."

"Curious coincidence that you should be here at this remote point at the same moment as myself."

"Not quite. I locked my guidance system to your emission trail."

"Whatever for? If you simply wished to hobnob with the great, you could have done it much more easily back on Terra-if I were granting interviews to no-bodies, that is."

"Too late now; I'll just wait and catch you on Bliff."

"Capital notion. I've been casting about for someone from whom to accept articles of capitulation."

"Strange; that sounds almost as if we were at war."

"Of course we are; or we would be if you Terries had the gumption of a sand-bub."

"Didn't you say the Basurans on Bliff are just harmless tourists?"

"Certainly. It's quite natural that I would say any-thing whatever which might promote Basuran interests at the expense of bloated Terra. The astonishing thing is that those poor Terries seem to accept this nonsense as gospel."

"Not all of them, Honk."

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"Well, no matter. In another few planetary cycles the matter will be purely academic, as I expect to wind up this operation at once."

"What will you do when you arrive at Bliff?"

"You expect me to divulge military secrets to a casual passerby? You must think I'm a Terry diplomat."

"Never mind. I have an idea your plans are about to change."

"Impossible! When a Basuran I of IU makes a plan, that plan is carried out!"

"Suppose unforeseen circumstances arise?"

"You imply that a circumstance could exist which my exalted intellect has failed to foresee?"

"No offense intended. By the way, I'll race you to Bliff."

"Rash Terry! But of course you have no way of knowing that my personal vessel is equipped with triple-gain boosters plus full scat gear. It would indeed be a pathetic effort on your part should you actually attempt to pass me."

"In that case, let's keep the stakes modest. How about a case of Bacchus red against a square inch of your hide?"

"As it happens, poor fool, I'm particularly partial to the red Bacchus; accordingly, I'll overlook the inso-lence of your frivolous personal

reference."

"Is it a bet, Honk?"

"Done, Terry. Seals intact, of course; vintage of '61, or any odd-numbered year in the fifties."

"Good choice. Too bad you won't get a chance to sample it."

"Stand clear, Retief! I'm engaging my booster."

"Better check your idiot lights first."

"Whatever for? Are you unaware that a Basuran I of IU is incapable of error, oversight, overconfidence or misjudgment?"

"Is that why you're backing up?" Retief inquired as he engaged his overdrive.

"Hah! Very clever optical illusion, Retief! If I were not a superlative genius, even by lofty Basuran stan-

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dards, I'd imagine that I had in some way goofed, as your rickety boat appears (quite falsely, of course) to be overhauling me."

"Overhauling is what your tub needs, Honk. It seems to be wallowing along at about .89 light."

"Most curious. And simultaneous malfunctions of my instruments, as well, which appear to be indicating grossly substandard performance."

"So long, Honk, I'll see you at Bliff."

Within moments, the Basuran's vessel had dwindled to a tiny blip astern; then it winked out. Retief poured himself a glass of wine and settled down in an easy chair with his Astounding. Some hours later, the autopilot informed Retief that it was initiating deceleration prior to entering braking orbit around Furtheron. He thanked it and removed a filet mignon avec pommes frites from the autochef. By the time he had finished his baked alaska and dry sack, the boat was skimming the planetary atmosphere, which it then entered with only mild buffeting.

"Altering course to enter traffic pattern for landfall," the autopilot said. "ETA plus thirty-one minutes, ten seconds."

Retief took a shower, dressed in an utterly informal black late-afternoon coverall. He took a Mark IV power pistol from a drawer and clipped it into his built-in rib holster. Then he instructed the autopilot to open communications with Traffic Control. A pale, flustered face appeared on the talkie screen, blinking as if dazzled by a sudden light.

"Yes, yes, CDT four-oh-one," it said in a voice that was all ready to get irritable. "I track you five-by-five. I can offer you temporary dockage in area seventy-nine. That's a no-service area, of course. It will just be for a week

or two; then I can move you into twenty-five. That's a covered area and includes class-three service. Of course we're quoting an average seven-hour delay in all classes below two for the duration of the emergency. I trust you're familiar with the emergency? Goodness gracious, some people must bury their heads in the

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sand-I mean, after all, dropping here unannounced and expecting all sorts of special privileges . . . Heavens! It's enough to make one wonder."

"Don't pop a gusset, junior," Relief suggested mildly. "You'll find I filed a flight plan twenty-eight hours ago, and I have the acknowledgement in my hand. And I dock in slot one, area one, and I'll be needing full class-one service, on a no-delay. Better set that up fast; I'm going into communications shadow in a few seconds."

"Well, what nerve! It just so happens, Mister Smarty, that I'm holding slot one-one for an offworld VIP who's already two minutes overdue!"

"Forget it. Your VIP will be along later in the week. You can find a spot for him in area seventy-nine, maybe."

"Well, I'd like to know just who you think you are!"

"If you did your job, buster, you'd know. I'm here on official business, with a double-U priority, not just a tourist hoping to have a chat with you."

"So you say, Mister Smarty. Would you have a name?"

"That reminds me; I'd better have your ID. My name isn't important. You can look it up on the flight plan you should have reviewed when you came to work. But I'll give you an authentication number that will take care of all your problems."

"Why, gracious," the clerk said, and pushed a button before him. A strip of paper chattered from a slot on Relief's panel. On it were printed the clerk's name, and a full set of ID data. "Why didn't you say you were an official of the CDT? Gosh, excuse me, sir. I was just trying-that is, after all, it is my job to see that important people get good service, and of course, I can't allow my facilities to become clogged with ordinary run-of-the-mill traffic. Why, just suppose a really big man showed up and I was unable to accommodate him in appropriate fashion?"

"Horrible idea," Relief agreed. "I'll be in your local pattern in forty-one seconds."

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"Certainly, sir. I'll have slot one-one all ready for you. Hawkins is the name, sir, but of course you have my ID."

Relief dropped the strip of paper into the disposal slot. "I'll be needing rapid transport into the city, Hawkins," he said. "Don't bother about the mink upholstery. And gold door handles won't be necessary. And I'll be needing quarters for a couple of days."

"Why, gee whiz, sir, I'll see to it at once." The screen went dark.

"Well, what do you think?" Retief said to the autopilot. "Will Mr. Hawkins hit it off with Intimidator of Insolent Upstarts Honk?"

"If Honk lives up to his title," the mechanical voice replied, "I suspect that Mr. Hawkins is about to be intimidated."

When Retief left his boat and stepped out onto the carpet flooring the VIP arrival bay, a short, stout man in a plain puce executive coverall stepped forward.

"Welcome to Parkiteer City, Mr. Retief," he said breathlessly. "Of course we ... the Furtheronian gov-ernment, that is to say . . . I'm Chief Executive Burrsaddle-have been looking forward to some home-world action in this, our time of trial. But frankly, we were hoping for a modest flotilla of Peace Enforcers, rather than a lone bureaucrat. You see, the Basuran Warlord, a ferocious fellow named Honk, seems un-amenable to verbal dissuasion, but is intent on actual conquest and plenty of negotiable loot. Understandable, actually. There's nothing we Furtheronians can do to stop his voracious hordes; our Do-Gooder party was able to outlaw any form of military or defense establishment back when we were getting under way-but of course a single Corps PE could dictate terms to the scoundrels, whip them back to their kennels in short order. Can you offer any hope, sir, that such punitive measures are in fact contemplated by Terra?"

"Sorry, Mr. Chief Executive," Retief said. "All you get is one diplomat; but I'll do the best I can."

"No doubt. And now I suppose you'd like to come

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along and take part in the impressive ceremonial welcome I've laid on-"

"I'd prefer to get busy."

"But I've already hired two thousand enthusiastic spectators to line the procession's route of march; and what about all the automatic confetti dispensers I've leased?"

"Save them for the victory parade."

"Hah! You jest. I have no intention of celebrating the Basuran takeover."

"I was thinking of a Furtheronian victory."

"A subtler jest, but still out of place. But as you suggest, we're wasting time. You'll want to see our new Executive Building, the various ministries, and so on. We've still time before tiffin if we hurry along."

"I'm not an institutional-architecture fan," Relief demurred. "I'd like to get a quick look at the occupied areas, and maybe spend some time at the front lines, to see how these Basurans operate."

"They're like army ants, except for more thorough. They begin, of course,

with the organic matter, both animal and vegetable. They seem to prefer dense wood. Our forests no longer exist. Pity. We had a mutated variety of blue wood. Useful as a dye wood, as well as for furniture. Very hard, very dense; from pale azure to deep indigo. The striped was most sought after; one of our best export items.

"After clearing all growth, and consuming all animals they're able to trap and kill, including humans, they start in on the topsoil; all produced by bacterial action plus mechanical pulverization and chemical additives, you know. They devoured our soil down to bedrock. The granite discourages them. Then on to infest another ten miles along the front, which is now an arc some fifteen hundred miles in length. Bare rock behind it."

"Sounds pretty drastic. I'd like to see it."

"It's not that interesting, actually. Scoured rock, ending at the working face where the devils are swarming, busy as termites. Understand they've com-

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pletely stripped their own world. Even attacked the basalt crust."

"I'd like to see it, anyway."

"The nearest point is about twenty miles away now; advances at a rate of ten miles every twenty-one hours."

A fast government ground-car whisked Retief and the presidential party to the city, where Retief saw a typically Terran colonial town, more Terran than Terra. High in a wire-and-glass tower, Chief Executive Burr-saddle showed him a wall map representing the planet's principal, wedge-shaped continent, over half of it blacked out to represent the invaders' depredations.

"Difficult to say how we could recover from such a blow, even if the Basurans were to depart instantly," the official pointed out. "Several thousands of square miles of a desert more featureless than one can well imagine."

"Instead of imagining, how about a fast heli, so I can see for myself?"

"Since you seem so determined, I'll arrange it at once. Though a number of hostesses who've laid on receptions will be disappointed."

"Sorry about that," Retief said. "But I'll be happy to drink a cup of tea after I've done what I can about this." He indicated the map.

Minutes later, he was speeding eastward toward the nearest point of the Basuran line of advance. Below, rolling green hills, forests and tilled farms made a pleasant pattern. Far ahead, clouds of gray dust rolled across the landscape, obscuring the ground.

"We're coming up on it now," the pilot said. "I got to grab me some altitude, 'count of the dust. Them beggars raise dust something fierce, 'bout this same time every morning."

Now, Retief could see below the curved line of demarcation where the green land gave way to smooth gray rock. There was an orderly array of tilled and fenced fields just beneath the heli, ending abruptly

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where the great curve cut across them. A small river poured glistening water over the edge; it spread out in a wide black puddle. There was a cluster of white-painted buildings near the line.

"Land there, Fred," Relief directed the pilot. The little craft settled gently in a fenced farmyard where chickens wandered aimlessly. There was a large frame farmhouse on one side, a capacious barn on the other. A screen door opened on the back porch and a tall, suntanned man in work clothes stepped out, looking curiously toward the new arrival. Retief stepped down and went to meet him.

"Howdy," the farmer called. "Come on in out of the heat and have a cold beer. I'm Henry Suggs."

Retief shook the man's calloused hand. "I'm Retief of the CDT," he said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me about this situation as it looks from two hundred yards."

"More like a hundred," Suggs said. "And getting closer every day. Took the east forty yesterday, and looks like my woodlot's next. Nice to see the gov'mint taking some notice. So far all I've had is evacuation notices. Not likely! My great granpa seeded bare rock with bacteria on this spot a hundred years ago come next tater-digging time-if we've got any taters to dig then. Granpa built the house and barn-hand-sawed evry board. Pop imported the furniture and fixtures. I don't figger to be the one runs off and lets the rock termites have it."

A plump, ruddy-faced woman came through the door, wiping her hands on a spotted apron.

"Henry! Whereat's your manners?" she said mildly. "Invite this gentleman in for dinner. Just took the roast outen the oven."

"I can smell it," Retief said., "I accept."

Sitting at the table with the Suggs family, consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Suggs and four sturdy children ranging from infancy to adolescence, Retief ate heartily and heard the details of the way in which the rumors of

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approaching disaster had been followed by the disaster itself.

"No use in getting all riled up when there's nothing much I can do about it," Henry commented. "I'd like to take a shotgun to the varmints, but the word passed down the line is, they don't mind a load of buckshot. Anyways, no point in killing off a bunch of draftees. It's the big shots back home that's responsible."

"A very reasonable attitude, Henry," Retief said.

"I told you the gov'mint wouldn't jest set back there in the city and let us get et alive, Henry," Mrs. Suggs said. "I knew Terra'd send he'p along soon."

"How much firepower you got with you, Retief?" Henry asked. "I reckon the fleet must be waiting in orbit, huh?"

"No, there's just me and my mouth, as I said," Retief replied. "Plus one power gun, if you want to count that."

"Power gun might poke a hole in 'em," Henry allowed. "But it'll take a while, one at a time. 'Bout a hundred years, I guess."

"I wasn't planning anything like that," Retief said.

Everyone at the table looked up as a high-pitched whistling started up outside.

"Sounds like the mail copter," Henry said. "Only louder."

They rose and filed out into the barnyard. A large and ornately decorated copter was settling to a landing in the pasture. The markings indicated that it was a Furtheronian government vehicle.

"Better go inside," Henry said to his family. "I'll handle this."

"Now, don't go hitting nobody, Henry," his wife wailed.

"Don't you worry, Mellie, I ain't aiming to hit nobody don't need hitting." Henry looked apologetically at Retief. "Course I ain't seen many gov'mint johnnies in my life didn't need a good working-over."

"I was just thinking your restriction wasn't very restrictive, Henry."

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"Let's go see what they want," Henry said. He and Relief walked across to the fence nearest the newly landed copter. As they reached it, the machine's hatch popped open and a baroque figure emerged.

"Well, it's I of IU Honk," Retief said. "I wonder what he's doing here."

Honk stepped down and came across to the two Terrans. He halted and stared at Retief.

"I declare, you look like the cheat and trickster Retief," he said in his rusty voice.

"That's me," Retief said. "You look like that slow-poke, Honk."

"That's me," Honk said dismally. "Tell me, how did you trick me?"

"Easily," Retief said. "No mirrors."

"Drat! I trust you'll not bruit it about. I still find it difficult to imagine how I, being perfect, could have been bested at my own game. My boat is a special job, you know. I shall have the hide off that Bogan sharpie who sold

it to my government."

"Don't bother," Retief suggested. "Just do a little preflight inspection next time."

"Uncanny! I completed a post-debacle inspection just an hour ago. Found a solenoid had been carelessly left off. Probably by those lackadaisical maintenance chaps back on Terra. And how I shall find a replacement here on this benighted planet, I'm sure I can't guess."

Retief took the solenoid from his pocket and showed it to Honk. "Would this fit?" he asked.

"Of course not! One doesn't find obscure parts for custom-built installations lying about in the pockets of alien upstarts, you know."

"I should have thought of that," Retief said, and tossed the cylinder into a nearby hog trough.

"But I have no time to chat," Honk said briskly. "I'm here to address the troops—the tourists, that is. Without periodic encouragement they tend to forget their objective, and settle down to gourmandizing."

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"What is their objective?" Retief asked.

"Why, to reduce this miserable world to total inorganic sterility."

"Why??"

"Simple enough. By rendering it undesirable to inferior organisms, we make it available for ourselves. In a few decades with proper seeding of microorganisms, it will be ready for harvest again."

"What about the present population?" Retief asked.

"I'm not excessively finicky," Honk said. "We'll take them too, with no complaints. Candidly, we prefer the cows and those long-legged cows without horns, 'hors-es' I believe you term them in your barbaric dialect. And the dogs, of course, are quite succulent. Now, the young of your species are not at all bad, I'll concede, especially the small round ones, who merely squirm and gurgle as they're prepared for dinner."

"You're all heart, Honk," Retief said.

"One does one's best to give even the devil his due. Take these tourists of mine: they'd rise in a body and go home if I weren't here to flog their enthusiasm. Dull fellows. But as I'm always at the point of action, spurring them on, they pitch in and do their best."

"Suppose you ordered them all to back off and go away?" Retief asked.

"They'd comply with alacrity, of course. But it's no use, Retief. I have no intention, of course, of abandoning my prize. Do you realize I'm in line for promotion to AC of F after this victorious episode?"

"See that armor plate on the bugger?" Henry said to Retief. "Number eight just bounces off that."

"True enough, fellow," Honk said proudly. "Only at one point . . ." he indicated the juncture of the horny plates in the center of what, on a human being, would be the chest, "is my external integument permeable by sublight projectiles. But trivia aside, show me to a desk, fellow," he commanded, "where I may prepare my dispatches announcing imminent victory. After-wards, you may prepare a repast of native specialities

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for me and make ready a suitable chamber for my night's repose."

"What's that? You expect me to give house-room to an alien that brags he's here to kill me and my family?"

"Of course, varlet. What choice have you?"

"Well," Henry said, "I don't rightly know, but I aim to find out." He doubled his fist and landed a straight right on Honk's facial plates that would have stunned an ox. Instead Henry yelled and drew back a_ bloodied fist, while Honk merely shook his head as if annoyed by a jelly-fly.

"I'll overlook that for the moment," he commented. "Later, I'll dismember you, slowly, in the presence of your squaw and pickaninnies. Or perhaps the reverse. But no matter; on to affairs of substance. Show me my office space!"

"Reckon I got no choice, like he said," Henry said apologetically to Retief, and led the way inside.

In a book-lined study he shoved the papers from a wide table and indicated to Honk that he could be seated.

"Bring paper, fellow, plus quills and a computer," the Basuran ordered. Finding the antique cherrywood chair somewhat confining, he ripped off the arms and threw them through the window. At the crash the door opened and Mellie appeared, looking agitated.

"Why, Henry, what . . .?" she started, but Honk uttered a yell and threw an ashtray at her. It struck her between the eyes; she cried out and retreated.

"Solitude!" Honk yelled. "I require togetherness with my own ineffable greatness in order to compose a dispatch adequate to capture the magnificence of my triumph!" He grabbed a ball-point and a sheet of pink paper and started scribbling.

"Before you commit yourself," Retief said, "how about discussing the matter?"

"No use!" Honk barked. "The die is cast! In any case, why trouble yourself about the fates of these rubes? Anyone can see they're of no importance

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whatever: no cash, no political pull, no organization, nothing! They'll never be missed! And my tourists are scheduled to engulf this spot within the hour. I don't wish to have my office devoured under me. Instead, I'll finish up this confounded paperwork and be off to the ^capital, where I'm to be guest of honor at a banquet given by His Excellency, the Chief Executive. Now, there's a reasonable man. When I pointed out that struggle would be futile, and that a cooperative atti-tude, while not essential, would be helpful, and would result in a handsome deposit of Groaci spruggs in his account in Zurich, he at once placed his personal copter at my disposal and began plans for the official request by Bliff for annexation by Basur. Practical fellow."

"Still, Honk, Terra can't stand by inertly while you and your tourists wipe out two million Terry colonists."

"But of course you can, dear fellow. I'll write you a little note that says you did your best even at the risk of irritating me, so your career won't suffer-and you can be on your way, while nature takes its course. You couldn't expect a ripe plum like Bliff to hang on the branch unnoticed forever."

"Honk, you're savvy enough to know that Terra could send a flotilla out here, any vessel of which could pick Basur up and toss it into your sun."

"Ah-but you won't! That's the curious fact I noticed in my studies of Terry history. You Terries are afflicted with an all-encompassing inhibition when push comes to shove. You've been trimmed time and again by upstarts, merely because of your curious and invariable reluctance to assert your power. Ergo-I shall do as I please."

"How about sparing the human population, then; go ahead and eat the topsoil, but leave the people. If you're interested in the public relations angle, that will make you smell a lot sweeter."

"PR and Galactic Public Opinion are the Terry bag. We Basurans couldn't care less. We want territory, not popularity."

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"Maybe I could scrape up a few concessions, terri-torywise."

"Don't bother, Relief. My plans are made. My mind is made up. That's that!"

Retief found Henry and Mellie in the dining room surrounded by their brood. He shook his head. "No luck," he said. "I suggest you folks take Honk's flitter and get going."

"Nope, I'm not giving up, mister," Henry said flatly. "Somehow, I don't believe, when it gets right down to it, that Eety will actually try to kill us off."

At that moment Honk entered the room, splintering the door in the process.

"Ah, all gathered for dinner, I see," he said gaily. "Most considerate; much as I enjoy the small ones, it's a bit of a bore when one has to run them down. I recall one little devil day before yesterday, ran a good three miles,

swam a river, threw rocks at my person, and at last I was forced to tear down a tree where he had naively taken refuge. But he was succulent; far better even than well-manured soil."

"Lookit here, Mr. Honk," Henry said in a strained tone. "You let my wife and kids go and I'll make it up to you someways."

"Ah, I require an agile body servant to fetch and carry, keep my plates polished, dispose of excreta and the like. Would you like to take the post in exchange for your very ordinary-looking dependents?"

"Dog robber to a junk pile," Henry muttered. "Never thought I'd see the day, but sure, if it'll keep them hooks of yours off my family."

"Done!" Honk exclaimed.

"That includes your tourists, of course," Retief said.

"As to that, one can't ever be quite sure what one's tourists, flushed with touring, may take it into their heads to do."

"I want an iron-bound guarantee," Henry said.

"What you want, and what you'll get may bear little resemblance each to other, fellow." Honk said loftily.

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"I'll issue a memo on the matter, if I should happen to think of it. Meantime, go to my copter, remove my baggage, place it in my room and prepare the place for my occupancy. Move smartly, my man. I've no pa-tience with dawdlers. You may as well help him, Retief," he added, offhandedly as Henry herded Mellie and the young ones from the room.

"I'd rather stay," Retief said. "I still think-"

"It's no use, Retief. You can talk all night and I'll not budge an inch. In a few moments I must be off to guide my tourists here and direct the line of march to engulf the capital, including that disgusting turncoat Burrsad-dle and his banquet."

Henry came back in. "Honk, you don't mind if we eat a bite before you fellows get it all, do you?"

"No looting, Henry! Everything here belongs to me. Don't touch it!"

"Yeah, but the kids-"

"Just don't allow them to blat in earshot of my sleeping chamber. That's all, Henry."

"Wouldn't you like to be one of those magnanimous conquerors, Honk?" Retief asked.

"Not in the least," the Basuran replied. "Don't argue with me, Retief. I've indulged your persistence out of deference to your CDT affiliation. If all else fails, I may someday be relying on you chaps for a handout, so I like to

keep matters chummy between us. But I warn you, I'm losing patience, and I shall be most surprised if you persuade me to change any detail of my program."

"Nice try, Retief," Henry said, and left the room.

"And now, if you'll excuse me," Honk said, and consumed a small wine glass. "My physician has cautioned me about snacks between meals." he confided guiltily. "So I'll simply continue eating, thus retroactively making these tidbits part of a regular meal." He snapped a plate in two and consumed the larger half, following that with a knife, fork, and spoon.

"Delicious," he said expansively. "So much tastier

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than the hood ornaments on your Terry ground-cars- far too bland. Besides which, the chrome plating gets caught in my teeth."

"I think the time has come," Retief said, "to discuss the matter of our wager."

"Oh, that" Honk said shortly. "What were the details? I seem to recall some cheeky remark on your part."

"A square inch of your hide belongs to me," Retief said.

"Oh, indeed? But what a pity you won't be able to collect it. I place a high value on my hide, in its intact state. I must decline to hand your prize over to you voluntarily. Another race of beings, of course, might attempt to collect forcibly; but you Terries, of course, faced with such a situation, are forced by your perverse natures to simply whimper a platitude and abandon the point." Honk stared at Retief, then went on:

"A curious tribe, you Terries. By virtue of your superior endowments of intelligence, ingenuity and industry, you stand above the ordinary strife of galactic life. You could take whatever you want, organize the Arm to suit yourselves, but instead, you talk endlessly, nattering of Galactic Public Opinion and other superstitions, while practical-minded races with an eye on the main road push you around with no fear of effective reprisal. The present situation is a case in point. From the Terry viewpoint, I perceive that this was indeed an idyllic world, populated by successful, peaceful, and contented people. But because our Basuran Ultimate Ego happened to be in a conquistadorial mood one morning, you allow it to be snatched away from you. We're both aware that a single Peace Enforcer could eliminate Basur as an organized power and restore this planet to its legitimate owners, thereby preserving the lives of all these bucolics about whose welfare you seemed so exercised a moment ago. But instead, before nightfall, Henry and all his brood will be devoured, along with their lives' work. And by virtue of your own

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inhibitions, there is absolutely nothing you can do about it."

"I think I've picked out the square inch I want," Retief said. He extracted

the power gun from its holster and aimed it at the center of Honk's thoracic plates. "That one, right there," he said. "Since it's mine, I'm sure you'll have no objection if I poke a hole in it."

Honk rose and stood staring at Retief. "For a moment," he muttered, "I almost thought-" His speech was interrupted as Retief fired. The alien staggered back and fell heavily, with a sound like two Japanese ground-cars colliding. *A wisp of pungent smoke rose from the finger-sized hole in his chest.

Henry burst into the room. "What happened?" he demanded, eyeing the fallen Basuran chief.

"I think I succeeded in surprising him," Retief said.

"I'll do my best to put the best possible face on the affair," President Burrsaddle assured Retief as the latter stepped into his boat for the return trip to Terra. "Your finding anent the dust deposits will be helpful, of course," he added. "Over ninety-nine percent urani-um, plutonium, radium, gold and chow mein. Zillions of tons of the stuff, in purified form, heaped at the center of the Basuran perimeter. Odd about the chow mein, I suppose, but late reports indicate that our chief Qual An man, Mao-Tse Leung, may have gotten part of his lunch mixed in with the sample. So we're taking steps to segregate the radioactives and insure that no one carelessly shovels up a critical mass. The price the stuff will bring on the open market should put us in the black again in short order."

"Fine," Retief said. "I'll give my regards to the numbered-account fellows in Zurich."

"Eh, what's that?" Burrsaddle yelped. "What envi-ous rumonhonger have you been listening to, sir?"

"You don't have a Swiss account?"

"Who, me? Of course not. How silly!"

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"Then you won't mind if I see to it that account number Z47289 at the Banque Suisse is turned over to a fellow named Henry Suggs?"

"Of course not. What difference could that make to me? Ah ... is anything troubling you?"

"Not really," Retief said. "It just occurred to me you might have a surprise coming to you, but I guess not. It might get to belT habit."