

THE UNDERHANDLER

Christopher Anvil

James Hardesty, officially known as "Expeditor—Allied Governmental Liaison/Control," familiarly called "Chief" in a variety of tongues, stood far below Earth's ravaged surface in the Communications Center, HQ WestEurope. Overhead, the morning sun cast its wintry glow on missile craters, wrecked buildings, and smashed green-and-violet war machines. Down here, Hardesty coolly studied the projected image of a maze of struts, beams, braces, tubes, and cables that crisscrossed and looped around a number of weird forms watching him out of a big three-dimensional grid.

Hardesty, waiting for the tone that would tell him the technicians were reasonably sure the conference would not be interrupted, briefly looked over the occupants of the grid, noting those of types he had met before, usually on the other end of some murderous technological device. Then he devoted his attention to the one directly in front of him, the most nearly human-looking of the lot.

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Gar Kranf, overlord commanding sector XVI of the Coequality, did his best to put the fatigue of the trip behind him. He leaned forward in the command ship's conference grid to study the three-dimensional image in the clear space before the grid, that resolved itself into an incredible entity that defied its home planet's gravity to balance erect on half its sparse allotment of limbs.

Kranf watched alertly as the creature inspected the conference grid, turning its head to examine the nearer occupants.

Kranf, waiting impatiently for the technicians to finish their checks, held down the silence stud to make sure what he said was not transmitted. Bad as it was to be hastily called in on a disaster only after it got to this stage, it would be worse yet to let the opposition find out just how hasty the call had been.

Kranf cleared his throat. "Acclimatization."

A small voice said, "Sir?"

"This creature before us, in solid image. This is its natural form?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all there is of it?"

"Yes, sir."

"It hasn't, perhaps, lost part of its structure due to wounds?"

"No, sir, that's all there is to it. Actually, they manage to compensate pretty well. They make their equipment with their own limitations in mind."

"This one is typical of what we've been up against here?"

"Yes, sir. They don't have much variation. More or less all of them look like that naturally."

"And do they normally loom straight up off the surface like that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can they move around?"

"Oh—they can move fast."

"The one we're looking at hasn't taken root there?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Well—does it have spikes on its feet? If not, how does it do it?"

"No, sir. These creatures seem to have some kind of body-centering mechanism that enables them to equalize the pull of gravity by minute muscular movements. It can be proved that if you've got all the different structures of the body set off one against another around a common center, and the support is located under that center, a sufficiently strong structure will not get pulled over by gravity."

Kranf took another look at the weirdly balanced alien. "How does it calculate all that?"

"H'm . . . Well, sir, quite a few of them were cut open before the Ecology Center got vaporized, but no one was quite able to figure it out. There should be something corresponding to our pressure-regulation plexus with nerves running to receptors in the soles of the feet. But no one could actually find it."

"They can keep this up?"

"They tire finally, but it takes a long time."

Kranf exasperatedly asked himself just what, if anything, the significance of this might be, and why no one had bothered to mention it before this face-to-face confrontation. All he had heard was complaints about the locals' ferocity, their rocket production, bacterial agents, and innumerable guns of every size and description. Then he noticed that the weird entity in front of him was again looking directly at him, and he, Kranf, in turn studied it.

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Hardesty, conscious that he was at the focus of attention of the monster in front of him, asked himself how he knew it. It could only be by the focusing of the creature's eyes. He gave the prearranged hand gesture to be sure what he said wasn't broadcast. "Miller?"

"Sir?"

"Am I right in thinking this is a new one—this quasi-human in front of me?"

"Looks like it, sir. We can't find any record to match that one. There are one or two others there that we've seen before."

Hardesty glanced from left to right, to see, partly hidden by what looked like separate elaborate control consoles; first, a creature with an upper body like a wolf; second, this new individual suggestive of a human with an extra set of arms and hands; and third, a creature like some variety of octopus, but with a larger number of long flexible limbs. Further back and off to the sides were others, unpleasant enough to look at or contend with, and evidently less exalted in rank.

What the lower extremities of some of these entities might be was hidden from this angle, though experience told him that they were all generously provided with limbs of one kind or another. A flicker of motion higher up caught Hardesty's attention.

Directly above the relatively manlike creature in front of him, Hardesty caught a glimpse of a thing like an oversize spider that faded out of sight in the general vagueness around the edge of the image.

Hardesty uttered a low murmur, but his mouth scarcely moved, and his expression remained blank and uninformative as he focused his gaze on the creature directly in front of him, and waited.

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Gar Kranf, sector overlord, heard the tone signaling that all elements of the connection had been checked. He growled, "I can now speak to the creature?"

"Yes, sir. Just let up the silence stud, the automatic translators will take over, and you will be speaking directly to their local overlord."

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Hardesty heard the tone, but something in the manner of the entity in front of him suggested feelings of superiority that Hardesty intended to dent, one way or another. He ignored the tone, signaled that the transmission be delayed, and said, "Anything new on the title of this latest quasi-human here, the one right in front of me in this maze?"

"Still not clear, sir. We think it means 'Higher Commander,' not 'Supreme Commander,' but we can't be sure."

"But it is clear this one outranks the previous one?"

"Yes, sir. Our best guess is this one's a level up, came here to find out just what was going on, and superseded the local commander because he didn't like what he saw."

"H'm . . . And am I right in thinking that catwolf nearby is someone we've run into before?"

"Yes, sir. A general by the name of Yraang. We think it's the ranking combat officer in their local command structure."

Hardesty took a brief glance at the creature, seeing in his mind the tigerlike lower body concealed by the console, then looked at the octopuslike entity on the other side of the plainly impatient Higher Commander directly in front of him.

"Do we have anything on that squid?"

There was a brief silence. "No, sir. This is the first time we've seen anything like that. It's not just that it's a new individual. We've never even seen that type. It apparently came in with the new commander."

"OK. The conference can start anytime, as far as I'm concerned."

"Yes, sir. . . well . . . Now *they've* signaled for a delay."

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Kranf, who disliked the idea of a sector overlord of the Coequality awaiting the pleasure of an alien monstrosity, however ferocious, held down the stud. "There's a little problem with the automatic translators that sometimes shows up on occasions like this."

"Ah—yes, sir."

"Any slip in translation, when the automatic translators are providing the illusion of easy and free interchange can be ruinous."

"Yes, sir. But—"

"You realize that?"

"Yes, sir. We do. But—"

"One misunderstood word, and millions of unnecessary casualties can result."

"We do our best, sir. But perfection is outside our reach. Even where two entities are nestmates, with no translation machine involved, there are language errors. We can't eliminate the risk."

"I understand. But if there seems to be the possibility of some error, don't hesitate to point it out, because you will be held responsible."

"Yes, sir."

"All right. I will now speak to it." Kranf looked around at the weirdly balanced creature, moved his head slightly to try to get a view of the rest of its body, which of course was not there—that was all there was to it, just two arms and two legs. Then Kranf smoothed out his face muscles, and methodically relaxed both sets of arms and the rest of his limbs lest some trace of tension, which might suggest uncertainty, should show in his voice as he said, putting overtones of Command Power into the words:

"You have received our offer of a Truce?"

Hardesty's eyes glinted.

"We got it."

Kranf considered the peculiar overtones as the automatic translators rendered the reply. Was that due to the device, or was it in the original? He spoke again, his voice rising as he bore down hard with Command Power:

"You explicitly acknowledge and agree to all terms?"

Looking on nervously from different locations in the grid, Kranf's experts winced and braced themselves.

The local overlord said flatly, "We agree to none of your terms."

Kranf felt as if he had been hit in the face. Evidently the translating machine had got the right tone to begin with.

Kranf tried again, easing off on the Command Power, and letting curiosity show in his voice. "Then what do you propose?"

"We will discuss terms of a suspension of hostilities while you withdraw your remaining pests, attack animals, and war-machines, and get them out of our Solar System. Once we agree on that, we will consider terms of peace—provided you make up for the damage you've done here. This is all we're willing to talk about."

Kranf kept his face blank, pressed down the silence stud, and glanced to his right, toward the creature that had reminded Hardesty of a large wolf.

"Yraang," said Kranf.

There was a noise like shells crushed under heavy rocks, and a moment later the translator gave audible

words in a deep brisk voice:

"At your command, War Chief."

"You heard this entity?"

"I heard it."

"What are the chances of success if we put the sector reserves into this fight?"

"Including the war hordes of Thrang and Guyul?"

"Yes."

"They will have to come a long way, and will get here late, which complicates the calculations."

"Your best opinion?"

"My personal estimate is that we would be able to maintain control of possibly two-thirds of the southern hemisphere of the planet, and our base on the planet's moon. Our lodgements elsewhere would be eradicated. The final outcome is uncertain."

"H'm." Kranf kept the silence stud pressed down. "Threletok?"

From overhead came a high piping tone, transformed after a moment into a somewhat heavy pedantic voice: "My estimate is equally speculative. But I would point out that under pressure of sustained attack, their weapons production and tactics have developed, not retrogressed. The prospects are not promising. There is no likelihood of surprising them. Our supplies and reinforcements come from a distance. Their resistance is solid. And their last counterattack shattered any illusion of our inevitably winning. We are in their net, not they in ours."

"What if we use the full resources of the sector?"

"How do we do that? And when? Our resources are at a distance. The problem is that we are losing on the ground, and in the immediate vicinity of the planet. The enemy is fully aware and working at full power to finish us. We may either withdraw to regroup, or fight it out where we are, trusting to prompt reinforcement. If we withdraw, we spare our troops, but the enemy will turn this planet into a fortress, make its moon an advance base to move out in force into the Solar System, and when we renew the attack, they will be much tougher than they are now."

"Suppose we don't withdraw? Suppose we hold our moon base and the bulk of our lodgements on the planet?"

"Then we will have to throw in reinforcements as they get here, in order to hang on. There will be no point when we can bring our superiority to bear all at once. The reinforcements will get ground up piecemeal. And while we put our reserves into this problem, difficulties may arise at—heh—trouble spots elsewhere."

"M'm." Kranf maintained his pressure on the silence stud. "Let's have a brief summary from the local planetary assimilator. And I mean brief."

A weary miserable voice said, "To summarize my request to be relieved of command:

"On approach, we found a single-dominant-species planet varying in technological development from region to region. Electromagnetic surveillance revealed enormous differences in local languages and

customs. It was obvious we couldn't have a binding agreement with such a collection of fragments. However, these differences seemed to offer excellent chances to defeat the locals one by one. And they were dependent on fossil oil to run their technology. Our analysis showed that a large part of this fossil oil came from a comparatively undeveloped region locally known as the Middleast. If we attacked this region, we might do several things:

"First, win a quick local victory.

"Second, overawe the rest of the factions.

"Third, paralyze these other factions at will, by withholding from them our portion of the fossil oil.

"Fourth, adroitly play off one faction against the other, using the fossil oil as a bargaining counter.

"After all, they would be unprepared, and how could they possibly guess what would happen to them once we got control of the fossil oil?"

The voice came to a stop, and Kranf, frowning, said, "Then what?"

"Well—the relatively undeveloped region, for some reason, turned out to be overloaded with weapons. There was a little delay while they got over their surprise, then we got hit with everything—bullets, bombs, rockets, gas—it was like stealing meat out of the claws of a dozing thrakosnarr. Then the outside factions that we planned to finesse later on, came piling in. They had warplanes, long-range rocket-bombs, monster sea-borne floating fortresses, and every description of armored ground attack machine you can conceive of.

"Well, what could we do? We'd planned a neat surgical strike with minimum losses. Instead, the locals went berserk. There was no way we could hope to militarily fight it out on their terms—they had the whole resources of the planet at hand, and we only had what was with us. The obvious thing was to use our scientific superiority to hamstring them."

"Specifically?"

"We set up bioduplication bases, got out our stock of tailored pests, found out which ones seemed to fit, dropped around twenty thousand flights of sixteen-legged jangerls, stingbats, and burrowing trap-adders to poison and terrorize the natives, and give them a little warning that they'd better cooperate."

"How did that work?"

"Well, till we used the pests, there was tough resistance. After that, it got vicious. These split-up groups formed an alliance, got this native here, in front of us, to run things overall, and he got them actively working together. Before long, their measures and their counterblows were on a level we hadn't even imagined was possible. They even adopted a simplified common language to be able to hit us harder. Everything got worse after we started using pests. But what else could we do?"

"Be specific. What incident led you to call for help?"

"Well, we'd just landed two or three million forty-legged flatstings genetically engineered to kill natives, and the natives had come out with a dust that killed flatstings, and then they fired a swarm of missiles that came up off the planet and shot out into space. Only a few came anywhere near us, so we figured their control was breaking down. That was when I sent that report that we were getting the edge on them. Well, these missiles kept coming up, but we were happy to see them waste their firepower, figured we'd won, and called on them to surrender. About then, a missile streaked in from nowhere and hit us from behind. The next thing you knew, they were coming in from all directions, and we realized all these

seemingly wasted missiles had been set to come back at us. There was no possible way we could defend against this.

"These things blew up the Moon Command Base, the bio-teams, the germ-synthesis labs, Tactical Combat Center, and Fleet Refit Base, and all that survived were our forces actually on the planet, and our ships in transit.

"That's when I called for help, sir. I've done my best, and every move I've made has been computer checked for maximum damage to them and maximum gain to us; but nothing worked. I'm out of my depth. Maybe somebody else can solve it."

"H'm," said Kranf, and looked back at Hardesty.

Hardesty eyed him coldly.

Kranf glanced uneasily to his left, where Selouel, the sector underhandler, lay back comfortably, half-a-dozen limbs twined amongst the beams, pipes, and cables, a few crossed thoughtfully in front of him, another half-dozen or so trailing over the edge of his big saucer-like couch. As usual, the sight of the underhandler did nothing to improve Kranf's mood. One glance at the creature, and Kranf felt as if his teeth were coated over with chalk. He tried to swallow, and the saliva wouldn't go down.

"M'm," said Kranf, looking away. "Has anyone any suggestion? This native entity here has refused a truce. It demands that we get off the planet. It further insists that we pay for the damage done . . . Any ideas?"

There was a silence, then a gruff comment from Yraang, to Kranf's right. "Get out. And pay them."

A piping voice came from overhead. "Agreed. The prize is not worth the risk."

The haggard voice of the former planetary assimilator spoke up: "I fought them. And look what happened."

Kranf glanced sidewise and to his left, where Selouel had judiciously intertwined several more unoccupied limbs, and now thoughtfully opened his large eye. His voice, before translation, had a condescending tone that set Kranf's teeth on edge, and despite the automatic translators, a certain amount of this got through:

"One might, perhaps, with a bit of thought, bring about a moderately satisfactory conclusion."

Kranf felt as if he had been slapped in the face with a length of wet rope.

To Kranf's right, Yraang gave a low grunt and growl.

Overhead, Threletok hissed.

Selouel disengaged a tentacle that was wrapped around a brace, and trailed it lightly through the air.

"A certain degree of subtlety is called for. This isn't the usual sort of flounder-and-bungle job you military and bureaucratic types can luck through by routine. A bit of intelligent finesse is required."

Kranf exhaled very slowly, then drew in a fresh breath, and spoke with care. After all, the worst of dealing with Selouel's kind was not their infuriating air of superiority. The truly unbearable part was what was almost certain to come next, unless Kranf was able to get through it just exactly so.

Carefully, Kranf did not try to sound jovial; he did not strain for a flattering comment; he did not even

lean over backward to try to get all the rage out of his system before he spoke. He merely let the intense curiosity sound in his voice:

"How?"

Selouel's large eye fixed him in a bright benevolent gaze.

"Dear fellow, 'how?' 'How' indeed! Think!"

Kranf let his breath out raggedly. No, he hadn't succeeded. Now there was this to go through. The price of failure was humiliation, and Selouel's kind did not stint in dealing it out.

"Now then," said Selouel, "try to think for a moment. You know this native, 'Hardesty,' is their leader. You have heard that he has been successful in welding together a diverse lot of these incongruous two-legged two-armed monstrosities, and making a cohesive force out of them. Now, then, how will these locals regard their leader?"

Kranf groped mentally. He had to have Selouel's suggestion. Not only did the miserable creatures—who were almost totally worthless for any ordinary useful routine—not only did they somehow hit on the right answer in a good proportion of desperate cases—but once they did offer a suggestion, the responsibility was off the commander who followed out the suggestion. The underhandler was then stuck with the responsibility. But first Kranf had to somehow get the suggestion out of Selouel.

Now, how will the natives regard their leader?

"Aaahh," said Kranf, groping mentally. "They will be obedient to him."

Selouel's benevolent gaze cooled. His numerous limbs froze briefly, then gave a faint convulsive twitch.

"Come, come," said Selouel, irritation creeping into his voice. "You can do better than that."

"Respect," gritted Kranf. "They will regard him obediently, and with respect and veneration."

Selouel's gaze brightened.

"Exactly. Veneration. Now, let us make no mistake." Selouel settled back, and gazed off abstractedly into the distance. "No, we cannot count on having it all our own way here. But we can neutralize them for now, and perhaps incidentally draw their fangs for the future, who knows? We can certainly give it a try. Here's what we will do, if you are agreeable. And I suggest that we proceed quickly. I will tell you just what to say to them."

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Hardesty, observing the consultation, consulted with his own experts and subordinates, who watched intently, and were recording all this though they could hear nothing.

"What does anyone make of this?"

An ironic voice, belonging to his Deputy WestEurope, replied, "It's a question, sir, whether they should drop twenty million sixteen-legged rats with teeth on both ends, and infected with a cross between rabies and the black plague, or whether they should try a dose of some new stuff that promises to turn all the vegetation on the planet back into carbon dioxide and water vapor."

"Would fit, wouldn't it? Any other—"

Abruptly, Kranf began to speak: "Very well. After due consultation, we have decided to accept your

terms."

Hardesty froze, momentarily unable to grasp what he was hearing.

Kranf went on: "Our initial attack was wrong, compounded by the fear of the local commander to admit his blunder when he finally realized it. Your race is of such capabilities that an able leader would have requested your cooperation in joining the Coequality. An error in sampling provided our local commander with a false picture of your nature, and led him to use unacceptable methods. We are sincerely sorry.

"If you agree, we will withdraw our forces at once, and we will attempt to pay in full—insofar as payment for such an offense can be made. We will do everything we can to make this up to you."

Hardesty, stunned, struggled to recover his mental balance.

Kranf said, "Because of the severity of the attack, and the distance our supplies must be transported, we feel that a long time must necessarily elapse before we can make good the damage, and ease the ill will it has created. But we believe you can understand that. Our offer is as follows:

"First, we will withdraw at once, retaining, with your permission, only a few supply distribution centers on Earth, and a base on your moon, for the importation of goods and supplies.

"Second, as we feel that some among you might naturally seek revenge, we ask that you refrain from constructing any numerous or sizable warships for interstellar use until we have completed our repayment.

"Third, because of the possibility of outside interference, we will provide defense of your Solar System, and will protect your interests against any outsider until such time as you choose whether or not to join us.

"Fourth, to assure us of your good will as we make repayment, we ask for a hostage. We ask to take your leader, Expeditor Hardesty, on a long journey at extreme near-light speed. Due to the contraction of time at that speed, he will experience a comparatively short period of absence. But during this absence, we will have time to repay you for the damage we have done you.

"Fifth, by the time Expeditor Hardesty has been returned to you, we will attempt to have repaid you, to your and his satisfaction. You may then choose whether to continue with us, or to go your own way alone.

"We regard this as a fair offer, and it is the best offer we know how to make. Please bear in mind that we will do everything we can to provide full repayment, freely and willingly, to undo this injustice as far as we are able.

"Since we do not know what your answer may be, we want to mention the alternative. If you should refuse this offer, we will consider it a sign of your implacable enmity. We will then bring our main forces to the scene for a war of extermination.

"Whatever you decide, we offer you our sincere apology for a wrongful attack made by us in error.

"We await your decision."

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Hardesty, at HQ WestEurope, waited before speaking, and chose his words with care: "We accept your apology. We will now give your offer very careful consideration."

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Gar Kranf spoke the customary formula that came to him by habit: "May wisdom and forethought guide your deliberations."

The two-legged two-armed creature before him, still weirdly balanced upright, somehow conveyed an impression of benevolent good will, then vanished as the contact was broken.

"H'm," said Kranf, turning to Selouel, "this may work, at that. Now, what's the trick?"

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Some hours later, Hardesty sat frowning as the recorded images of the conference, projected on the screen, faded out and the room lights came back on. He glanced at the typescript of the peace offer. He looked around as the various delegates and experts sat up, scowling. Hardesty cleared his throat, turned to the projectionist, and glanced around the room.

"If there is no objection, I wonder if we could see that again."

There was a murmur of agreement.

The lights faded out.

Once again the screen lit with a view of the conference amongst Kranf, Yraang, Selouel, and their less clearly visible compatriots. There was no sound, but there was plenty to look at.

This time, when the lights came back on, for just a moment Hardesty didn't see the room around him. He was still seeing the crafty glint in a large eye, and a number of sinuously waving limbs.

"H'm," said Hardesty, glancing at the copy of the peace offer.

Around him, this time, there were not only murmurs, but curses.

Hardesty balanced the peace offer in his hand. He glanced around the room, and cleared his throat.

"Would anyone object to watching that again? It's true that they're all aliens, and there's no sound, but it seems to me there's something that comes across plainly enough from that conference of theirs."

There being no objection, once again the room darkened.

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Gar Kranf, sector overlord, stared at his underhandler.

"Are you serious? There's no trap in this? It's a straight offer of friendship?"

Yraang, to Kranf's right, turned to stare balefully at Selouel.

The underhandler's large eye beamed benevolently as several of his tentacles turned gracefully upward.

"Would we want," said Selouel, "to give fresh cause for offense? If the estimate of the potential trouble from this planet is correct, such a course would be ill-advised, to express it mildly."

Kranf felt the uneasy sensations of one sledding across a frozen bog on a hot spring day. "Yes. No doubt that's true. But still—"

"Though," said Selouel, "if it should just happen to turn out to our advantage and their expense, that would be merely a just reward for our sincere generosity."

Yraang's fur rose up in a ridge along his back. He clamped his jaws shut, and looked away.

Overhead, Threletok hissed.

Kranf suppressed a curse, and waited before speaking. "Look, if I have it straight, we are planning to freely and openly repay these people for the damage done them. And that damage was terrific. Are you telling me that is all there is to it?"

Selouel delicately turned a tentacle in the air, admiring its graceful form, and the delicate purple flush that flowed along it as the color cells were activated. A glowing pink followed the delicate purple, to be followed by a soft turquoise, which gave way in turn to a sort of quietly gleaming ivory, and then a lavender blush—

Yraang's tiger body came half out of his seat, his white daggerlike teeth gleaming. Kranf hastily got hold of the rough fur with three of his hands, his voice low but earnest: "Never mind. Let's not let it bother us. Except for a few final details, the whole mess is now his responsibility. Let's just hope the locals accept the offer, whatever's behind it."

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James Hardesty, Expeditor—Allied Governmental Liaison/Control, cleared his throat and eyed the assorted monstrosities in their grid.

"In the name of the Allied Governments," said Hardesty, "and speaking in the exact spirit in which the offer was made, I accept your offer of peace and repayment, and I agree to serve as hostage in the meantime."

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Gar Kranf, sector overlord, finished what he hoped was the final report on this all-time indescribable shambles, and looked it over without enthusiasm. This last report, amongst other things, gave the details of the removal from the planet of some five million cocoons of winged green firetings, each and every one of which had had to be located by visual search, and then cut down with meticulous care, in order not to jar the touchy short-tempered inhabitant of the cocoon.

The locals were now more or less mollified, but Kranf had not missed the fact that the first crates of supplies had gone straight into roboticized bomb-proof examination centers especially fitted out, if Kranf's information was correct, with sectioning and sampling equipment, electron microscopes, electronic sniffers, specially trained dogs, and chemical, physical, and biological laboratories devoted to finding anything whatever that might be peculiar about the supplies provided. This did not strike Kranf as a promising sign. But he was prepared to let Selouel take the responsibility for whatever happened. The main thing was, Kranf's part in this unmitigated disaster was about over.

Kranf's assistant, looking sober, came in carrying a headset.

"Sir, the master overlord."

Kranf winced. A catastrophe of these proportions within his sector was bound to involve explanations, at the very least. He took a deep breath, reached out, and, as he slid on the headset, was rewarded by a view of one of his own kind seated on the far side of a desk, with a huge transparent all-sectors globe behind him.

Kranf said courteously, "Greetings, sir."

The master overlord looked him in the eye. "Greetings. I've just finished your report. Kranf—what

in—that is to say, what exactly is behind this solution you've arrived at?"

Kranf struggled to keep any oily tone out of his voice. He said straightforwardly, "Sir, according to regulations, I turned the problem over to the sector underhandler, at his suggestion."

The master overlord looked at Kranf, frowning.

Kranf looked back frankly, squarely.

The silence stretched out.

The master overlord leaned forward.

"Kranf."

"Sir?"

"What is the solution?"

"The underhandler, sir, didn't explain it in detail."

"You mean you don't know?"

"According to regulations, sir," said Kranf frankly and openly, "I turned the matter over to him, and followed his instructions strictly to the letter. Regulations are not clear that the underhandler must explain the matter to the sector overlord."

The master overlord sat back, then leaned forward, all four hands gripping the sides of his desk.

"Are you telling me that if I want to know the plan, I will have to go to your underhandler and get it out of him myself?"

"No, sir. But—"

"Tell me what you do know about it."

"Sir, the idea is that we are to claim the attack was all a mistake; that if we had realized the capabilities of the locals, we'd have invited them to join us; that we'll do all we can to undo the damage; though, because of the distances and amounts involved, it will take us a long time, unavoidably; that we will invite them to join us, after we've made up for the misunderstanding and the damage as best we can; and that, meanwhile, their leader is to go on a long near-light-speed trip on a courier ship, as our guest, to guarantee their cooperation."

"That's it?"

"Yes, sir. Along with various details, and incidental odds and ends."

"Then this report isn't missing anything? All right. What's the point?"

"I—ah—"

The master overlord leaned forward. "Listen, Kranf, did you ever yet know an underhandler to come out with a simple straightforward plan?"

"I—well—no, sir . . . now that you mention it."

"Where's the catch?"

"I don't know."

"All right. Now listen to me. The usual underhandler plan is designed to trap its victim, by using some failure or weakness—of the victim's. That's not their only stunt. But that's where the teeth are, generally. Now, I have examined this very carefully, and I have yet to find the hook."

"Sir, I couldn't figure it out, either. But Selouel is the sector underhandler, and he did straighten out that mess with that race of hardshells we ran into a couple of centuries back. The trouble is I just—dealing with them is so—well, it just seemed to me that if he chose not to volunteer the information, still, he knew himself what he was doing in his own specialty, and it was strictly his responsibility—just as long as it works, that's all."

"The trouble is, I have to know what this plan is. It may not be your responsibility any more, but it is still my responsibility. And I am going to find out that plan."

Kranf drew a deep ragged breath, and said nothing.

The master overlord leaned forward with an imitation friendly conspiratorial smile.

"Wouldn't you like to know, yourself, what the plan is? Be frank, now."

Kranf's instinct for self-preservation overpowered his natural response.

"Yes, sir. I'll go ask him."

* * *

Selouel was in his study, a few limbs trailing in a gigantic open bath tank full of steaming water, several other limbs leisurely clasping a musical instrument equipped with a hundred or so strings, with a quadruple row of pearl-colored push-buttons along the base, a sizable leather bag attached to one end, with a kind of lever and pump on the side. Horns, drums, and dangling steel strips, rings, and disks protruded from the frame of the instrument, while little mallets with brass, steel, or leather heads hung from it on slender gold and silver chains.

As Kranf entered the study, there was a rhythmical clank-clank-clank in the background, as Selouel worked the pump lever with one limb, meanwhile idly caressing the strings with the tip of a second tentacle, along which waves of bumps and twists traveled to sound other strings in passing. The tip of another tentacle was tapping first this and then that pearl-colored button, as one horn after another emitted its blast, squeak, whistle, grunt, or squeal. Various other limbs hovered in the air, to suddenly snatch this or that hammer, to create a throb, tinkle, clunk, rattle, or clang.

The whole performance, so far, was no worse than being stuck in heavy traffic in a polyglot city with drivers of many kinds of engine-driven and animal-drawn vehicles all jammed together slowly winding their way through a busy factory district, so that the sounds of the metalworking shops, the horns, the bells, and the cries of the animals, and calls and curses of the drivers were all mingled together in one deafening chaos of clashing noise.

So far, it was endurable.

The trouble was, Selouel was only idling along. His kind could go a lot faster and louder than this, and think nothing of it. On top of that, at any moment, Selouel might begin to sing. In ordinary conversation, the underhandler's voice, with its undertones, overtones, and untranslatable intonations, was hard enough to bear. Raised in song, it was indescribable. Just at a glance, Kranf could see that Selouel was

producing the present cacophony while working at a very casual pace. He had his voice and a lot of limbs still in reserve.

"Ah—" said Kranf tentatively.

Selouel's large eye came partly open. Half-a-dozen free tentacles made urgent downward shushing motions.

Kranf shut his mouth, and waited miserably. After all, he had got in touch first and asked if it was all right to come over. Selouel had said certainly, he would be free "in a moment."

Now, damn it, the "moment" should be here soon, shouldn't it?

But Selouel appeared to be moving to a slowly increasing beat. Another tentacle was now joining those already at the instrument.

Kranf glanced around nervously, then froze.

Softly, Selouel had begun to croon.

* * *

Hardesty, his compartment on the aliens' spaceship set to mimic a twenty-four hour day, noted the gradual darkening of the simulated landscape "outside" the imitation window of his compartment. Hardesty was aware, by now, of the various spy-devices watching him. But he saw no cause to object to the arrangements. Again, he thought over his deductions as to this peace proposal. So far, the conclusions still seemed reasonable.

* * *

Kranf, jumpy, trembling, nerves on edge, shoved the door of his office shut behind him, sank into his seat, drew a shaky breath, and picked up the communications headset. He was suddenly looking at the master overlord, who was snarling at someone on an angled screen by his desk. A moment later, he turned. "Ah, Kranf. You look done in. You have the plan?"

Kranf winced under the blows of little hammers still pounding inside his head. "Finally, sir."

"Let's have it."

"Just the plan, sir, or the background to explain it?"

The master overlord winced. "He gave that too, eh? All right. The whole works."

"Yes, sir. Selouel says there are two sets of data—those which can be treated logically and quantitatively, and those that cannot. He calls the first 'mathematical factors,' and the second, 'unmathematical factors.'"

"Let's see, now . . . All right. I've got that. Go on."

"We, he says, rely on the mathematical factors, and do moderately well at it, but are disastrously weak where the unmathematical factors are concerned."

"Mmf."

"He was very condescending, sir."

"I can imagine. Well—go on."

"The locals, he said, are also strong on the mathematical factors. Stronger, perhaps, than we. Therefore, to beat them—that is, to have a chance to beat them—we need to use the unmathematical factors."

"Well, granting that what he says is true, and I suppose it could be, that's reasonable. But his plan doesn't guarantee victory?"

"No, sir. He thinks it gives very good chances of a favorable outcome, and the possibility of outright victory. But only the possibility. He doesn't know for sure how it will work out."

"H'm . . . well, considering the alternatives—good enough. Now, let's have the plan. And, just incidentally, has it been computer checked?"

"Ah—since it's unmathematical—"

"Oh. I see. It can't be put into form to check it with a computer?"

"Let me just explain it, sir, and you'll see. According to Selouel, there are three basic positive drives which motivate most living creatures: self-preservation, species preservation, and expansion of territorial control. He claims that these three take various forms, and boil down in essence to just one, and he had a long complicated explanation of relationships, derivations, modes of expression, and—" Kranf noted the glazed expression taking form on the master overlord's face. "If we can just skip all that, sir, it will save time."

The master overlord nodded in relief.

"The practical use," said Kranf, "is to apply these drives of our opponent to tie him in knots."

The master overlord leaned forward eagerly.

"Good. Now, how do we do that?"

"The idea is to pour the necessities and luxuries to them, and be in no way threatening, ourselves. We just provide all their needs, while sincerely asking their forgiveness."

"Generous of us. Where's the payoff?"

"Selouel says we already have the first part, in that the fighting has stopped."

"Well, that's good for a start. But it would be better to beat them. Where's the teeth in this plan?"

"According to Selouel, at any one time, each individual or organization has just so much energy, and the energy diverted from one positive drive normally goes to another. But in this case, the territorial expansion drive is in a state of suspension, while we make payment. And, since we are defending them, the self-preservation and species-preservation drives are also inactive. If so, then no positive drive is in action.

"Selouel thinks the most likely result of this inactivity is that they will degenerate and finally end up as more or less pure pleasure-lovers. This will, incidentally, be reasonably satisfactory to the species-preservation drive, which, according to Selouel, is very persistent and adaptable, and will probably lead them into a mating binge. In short, since it will take us a long time to pay them back, they will have a decades-long bout of dissipation and deterioration, at the end of which they will be overpopulated, weak, utterly worthless as warriors, and no danger to us at all. That is, if it works."

The master overlord looked impressed. "It's crooked, after all."

"Yes, sir."

"And there's no way for the locals to detect it. It fits perfectly with our official explanation."

"Yes, sir. But Selouel doesn't guarantee it will work. On the other hand, if it doesn't work, at least we shouldn't have a war with them."

"H'm. It's unfortunate we couldn't have gotten our reinforcements there faster. Then we could have avoided all this expensive subtlety, and just battered them into submission."

"Yes, sir. But if too many of our troops were here, then every sorehead and malcontent on every other planet—"

"Yes, I know. I see the problem."

"So, you see, sir, the underhandler's solution is, if you can't break them, rot them; if they won't break or rot, then be fair to them, because anything else would be too dangerous."

The master overlord sat back. "This experience shows a need for better training and coordination. We will have to hold more Fleet training exercises, and set up new bases closer to Earth. After all, by the treaty, we have an obligation to protect this planet. So, we will need to shift our strength toward Earth. After all, Kranf, if these locals do degenerate sufficiently, they won't be able to look after themselves. We have to remember, they are under our—ah—protection." He smiled.

Kranf, for just a moment, didn't follow the master overlord's meaning. Then he nodded obediently.

* * *

Hardesty glanced at the chart showing elapsed ship-time and elapsed Earth-time. Incredibly, fifteen years would now have passed on Earth. And the time there, from his viewpoint, would now be flowing past even faster than before, as the ship picked up more and still more speed.

* * *

Selouel, relaxed in his big dishlike lounge, reached out his number fourteen tentacle, picked up a few dozen of the tasty salted groundnuts grown locally, and shot them into his open mouth. As he crunched contentedly, his number three tentacle flexed and folded, switching holds with its grippers on the massive third-decade report that described the continuing deterioration of the Earth locals. Selouel, who was somewhat far-sighted, held the report out at a considerable distance as he read it.

The lids slid closer over Selouel's large eye as he worked his way through the report, reading sections on "Death Rate of Former Combat Officers," "Local Avocations," "Usage of Illicit Intoxicants," "Flowering of Useless Leisure-Time Occupations . . ."

The sleep-inducing qualities of the report were such that Selouel almost lost it into the slowly filling bath tank.

Irritated, he switched grips on the report, and considered a section headed, "Mating Patterns of the Indigenous Locals." This section included four page-length tables, each containing long columns of figures, plus two charts, a foldout, and sixteen pages of closely printed text. Doggedly, Selouel read on:

". . . averaging 5.7 offspring per mating unit (see Chart 22-1). Cross-correlation by factorial analysis against prior data universes (Grumpff and Schnittl, cited above; also see Graggdrith, B.: Annals Investig. Soc./Popltn. Scien. 156V990 661c-9) downflows to Model 16-1 (Kindly fold out three-dimensional surfact). Referencing the Z-plane, note that the current-time data intersection band is concave upward . . ."

The report almost got away from Selouel a second time, and he dumped it onto a nearby bath stool. This was mating they were talking about! And they had achieved such a degree of detached mathematical objectivity that it came across like a maintenance routine for space stations.

Selouel's large eye narrowed. The trouble was, he thought, that the people who made these observations truly believed that everything should and could be reduced to figures and dealt with by purely mathematical methods. But how was the scent of a flower, and its effect, to be accurately described mathematically? How was an emotion to be truly understood and appreciated mathematically? Didn't they sense the risk of overlooking the essence of reality and being left with an empty cloak of external description?

Selouel could feel the approach of an idea, hazy at first, and then—

The jarring buzz of the urgent-communications alarm sounded overhead. Startled, he reached up, and flipped the "Receive" switch. An anxious voice spoke, and Selouel recognized Sector Overlord Kranf: "Underhandler Selouel?"

"If your receiver is functional," said Selouel, groping futilely for some trace of the vanished idea, "who else could you be talking to?"

"With all the steam, I can't see a thing."

Selouel shut off the hot water. "Now what? Are you in difficulties again?"

There was a little silence, then a sigh.

"We have," said Kranf, "a revolt on Triform. The local overlord is in desperate straits. Are you busy?"

"Not seriously. I was looking over the latest ten-yearly report on Earth, which came in along with a sack of the local groundnuts. The groundnuts are excellent. What's your problem?"

Kranf's voice was worried. "Triform has three dominant species, and when we got here, the one that's warlike was so outnumbered that we beat them after a short struggle. Then, just out of normal prudence, the overlord in charge exterminated the survivors of the warlike species. The whole thing was computer-checked. Since the other species were unusually submissive, our people seem to have gotten a little careless. Now, out of nowhere, the extinct warlike species, which was totally wiped out, has suddenly reappeared. Our men barely got out of the last scrape with a whole skin, and the casualties have been terrific."

Selouel half-closed his large eye.

"The information was, of course, fed into the master computer that these species were completely separate?"

"Of course."

"Naturally. Well, after I have a good soak, I'll look into it. I'm sure a heavy weight of data sheets will be on the way."

"The situation is desperate!"

"What's the local technology like?"

"Backward, except in weaponry. There, they are precocious."

"With the blockhead you have running that planet, we can take trouble for granted. Ransack your officer corps for someone with half to two-thirds of a brain; if you can find anyone, put him in charge. Meanwhile, I will check the information coming in, and let you know. So far, it sounds solvable to me."

* * *

On the near-light-speed courier, Hardesty finished his morning's exercises, and stepped into the shower. His routine on the ship was the same as usual, but time outside was passing now at an incredible rate as the ship curved back on the lap of its trip that would again take it toward Earth. Soon, he should be back home, and he clenched his jaws at the thought. When he returned, his veterans would be gone. It would all be up to a new generation then.

* * *

Sector Overlord Kranf, on the planet Triform, surveyed the horde of Type Two adults gorging on the latest load of crushed roots and cane sludge. Guns and helmets lay strewn around and forgotten over what had been a battlefield.

"Well," said Kranf, staring at the sight, "it's damned ridiculous. And it's expensive. But it worked."

Selouel said seriously, "The life-form, of whatever type, ordinarily seeks self-preservation, species-preservation, and increased control. Energy for one purpose may, by proper measures, be diverted to another purpose. The entity will usually give up increased control for self-preservation, and self-preservation for species-preservation. There is a point of equilibrium, which varies among individuals and races, as to where the effort will be concentrated, in the absence of immediate stress. If the species is driven back from this equilibrium, a later relaxation of need or circumstances tends to cause a sharp recoil toward and often for a time well beyond the equilibrium point."

Kranf, not given to abstract discussions, took a deep breath and considered how to get Selouel back on the track.

Selouel was going on, ". . . so that, provided the creature genuinely perceives fighting capacity to be unnecessary, then where the forms are convertible, the fighting form usually will revert to one of the other forms. So, the problem is to remove the perception of a need to fight. Now—"

Kranf growled, "Anyway, it worked."

Threletok spoke up: "The time will soon be here to check up on Earth. Everything appears to be proceeding in good order, with the locals spending more and more time on pleasure. Their native overlord will be returned to the planet before long. Should we make arrangements to watch the landing?"

* * *

Selouel, as the date for Hardesty's return drew closer, paid more attention to the mind-numbing reports that flooded in. Uneasily, he set a formidable object headed, "Final Report Planet 'Earth'" on his specially braced holder, and eyed the report as a wrestler eyes a particularly nasty opponent.

Bunching himself up onto a large stool, Selouel got himself situated fairly near the report, then reached out and dipped a tentacle-tip into a sizable washtub with chunks of ice floating around in it. He braced himself, plunged a long flexible limb into the tub, and got a jarring chill that snapped him wide-awake in a flash. Good enough. He began to read the report.

The next few hours crept past to the sounds of crackling paper, low mutterings, sighs, yawns, and sudden splashes of water. Nervous subordinates on the far side of Selouel's door gave it a wide berth.

Then came a prolonged silence. After sitting immobile for some time, Selouel, his large eye narrowed,

took a good grip on the report's front and back covers with one tentacle, and slid another in between two diagrams in the middle of the report.

There was a ripping sound as Selouel extracted the first diagram, and got it out where he could lay it beside the columns of figures. There was another tearing sound, and he had the second diagram loose. He stretched out a long sinuous limb, and rummaged through a kind of footlocker in a far corner of the room, to pull out a magnifying glass the size of a garbage-can lid. There was silence as he held the first diagram beside the pages of data, and looked through the glass.

"H'mm . . ." He brought over the other chart, switched places with the first, flipped rapidly back and forth through the report, and grew rigidly intent. An hour crept past as he subjected one page, then another, to intense scrutiny. An unoccupied limb stretched out and groped around in a drawer behind him, fished out a large thick pencil and several scraps of paper, which it brought over and placed on the edge of the report. For a while, Selouel scribbled intently. Then another limb groped out, felt its way up the communicator to one side, flipped it on, and Selouel, still huddled over the report, growled over his shoulder, "Get me Sector Overlord Kranf."

There was a pause, then a haughty voice replied, "The sector overlord is busy and cannot be disturbed."

Selouel, his voice abstracted, and his large eye still fixed on the report, said, "This is Sector Underhandler Selouel, and I will either discuss this matter with Sector Overlord Kranf, or I will inform the master overlord himself. What Sector Overlord Kranf will then do to you is a matter of total irrelevance to me." After a brief silence, he added, "Alternatively, I may come in and break your neck myself."

There was a ringing silence, and then a brisk voice: "Kranf here."

Selouel let his breath out with a hiss, and settled back a little from the report.

"Kranf, this final report on Earth is cooked."

"What? Who? Selouel? I can't see you. What's that?"

Selouel gave a complex writhing motion that ended up with him facing the communicator. "I've been looking over this so-called final report, that shows drug use up so much, recreation up so much, such-and-such an increase in DQ—"

"Yes, I read it. The general idea is, everything looks pretty good. 'DQ'? Let's see . . . what's DQ? What do you mean it's 'cooked'?"

"'DQ' is 'Degeneration Quotient.' By 'cooked,' I mean the report is fake. Rip out those two center charts, and try to match them with the figures they're supposed to be based on."

Kranf stared at him, then turned from the screen. There was a sound as of someone fishing through a large pile of waste paper, then a heavy thump, then a ripping sound. Kranf reappeared on the communicator screen, the charts in one pair of hands, the body of the report gripped in the other, looking back and forth from one to another, his lips moving in perplexity. There was a lengthy quiet, then Kranf looked up.

"H'm . . . You seem to be right. Unless, possibly, these footnotes—" He rummaged around through the back of the report, resting the bulky document on the edge of his desk, looked up with an affronted expression, went back to the body of the report, then shoved it back, frowning. "You're right. But that doesn't prove the information itself is no good. What we have there may be some kind of complicated clerical error."

Selouel nodded. "You don't see it all until you go into it more closely. Then it's overpowering. Take a look at that section on drug use. Whoever set that collection of figures down is more subject to some brand of intoxication than the natives."

Kranf riffled through the pages, settled back, and read aloud, his voice a monotonous drone: "Monthly Total Native Hallucinogenic Drug Usage by Weight, per Day, Standard Format Estimate, in Quadrillions of Tons.' Let's see, what in the . . . oh, that's a superscript . . . well . . . Ah, here we are . . . First day of the month, 21.6, next day, 21.85, then 22.08, then 22.10, 22.4, 23.78, 22.5, 23.9, 23.4, 23.85, 23.99, 24.02, 24.4, 24.6, 24.8, 24.75, 24.6, 24.70 . . . Mmf, lost the place . . . 24.79, 24.85, 24.9, 25.1, 25.05, 24.88, 25.3 . . . Well, it looks good. What's wrong with it?" Kranf looked up.

Selouel said, "Think it over and you'll see what's wrong with it."

"The trend of the figures seems to fit in. Daily drug use has been rising steeply for years. This is on trend. So are the other elements of this so-called DQ. This is all satisfactory. What's wrong?"

"Kranf, my boy, for one thing, how many of these natives are there?"

"Billions of them. The reproductive rate is terrific."

"All right. Now tell me—What is 25.3 quadrillion tons of dope per day divided by the numbers of billions of natives we have down there? How much is that for each individual?"

There was a silence, then Kranf gave a grunt, as if he had been hit in the midsection. "That's impossible."

Selouel said, "There is no way the locals can use up that much drug per individual, but setting down those figures keeps the increase in usage 'on trend,' all right. You go through that report an inch at a time, and you will find inconsistencies no one can explain away. But if you just glance it over for a general picture, everything looks fine."

Kranf said doggedly, "There's no way I can go over these mind-benders an inch at a time. Not if I'm going to have any time left to run the sector."

"Exactly. And since no one can read all this junk and stay conscious, much less absorb it, we read the summary and look at the charts, then sling the report in a corner and get back to work. So there's no great problem in faking the whole thing to keep us happy. Incidentally, if you're right that these figures fit with what went before, then they're all fake, except maybe the first few."

"But what does it mean?"

"It probably means the locals have our survey teams—which openly check our own performance, and secretly report local conditions to us—enmeshed in every kind of stupefiant known to the planet."

Kranf exhaled noisily. "A wonderful time to find it out. Their local overlord is about to get back. What do we do now?"

"You get ready to move fast, just in case. This mess is my special responsibility, and I just hope they function the way I think they do."

"We—ah—we've still got this overlord. That is, the hostage. We could—"

"The best thing we can do is hand him back in one piece as promised. They may be able to strike at us. If so, we can strike back. But let's provide them no motive to go berserk again."

"Yes. I agree. Well, who do we notify about this?"

"I will notify the master overlord. As for the rest, why start a panic? Just give the notice that their local overlord is being returned as agreed, and everyone should be alert, in case the locals should, for any reason, try anything."

"If they do try anything, it should start with a heavy blow, and a good time would be when their overlord gets back. Do we attend the ceremony when this Hardesty is returned?"

Selouel said dryly, "By remote transceiver, if possible."

"The locals might get the idea we're afraid to go in person."

"We can say we feel the reunion is a private Earth matter, and we don't wish to intrude."

"And suppose they invite us?"

"Then we go. I've got a suit of ceremonial armor around somewhere."

* * *

To Selouel's discomfort, the locals duly sent out invitations. Selouel, Kranf, and Yraang, along with lesser dignitaries, found themselves in a large forest clearing, looking around at an assortment of rocks, shrubs, moss, ferns, bramble bushes, and worn paths that wound through the landing site, and were visible between hordes of robed enthusiasts carrying large signs and the longbows, target rifles, packs, and other implements of their chosen sport or recreation.

Yraang, looking around, gave a low rumbling growl, and the automatic translators rendered this unpromising noise into intelligible speech:

"A large crowd."

Kranf, uneasily watching Selouel out of the corner of his eye, nodded agreement.

Selouel was busy with a stuck section at the shoulder end of one of his long flexible limbs, where the ceremonial armor, which he hadn't worn for the better part of a century, had proved a trifle small, so he had had extra rings added. Not only had these rings turned out off-color, but they were too thick, their joints with neighboring rings were stiff, and no amount of grease would fix it. One particular ring had got stuck at an extreme up-angle, so Selouel now had one limb painfully groping for the sky.

Kranf looked over the locals. The sight of them, weirdly balanced upright, made him uneasy. Here and there the effect was compounded by large signs giving a message or identifying a group:

"WELCOME HOME, CHIEF!"

"Weekend Parafun Jump Club"

"AAA+1 Marching Society"

"Friendly Order of Berets"

"Queensberry Legal Fellows"

"Recreational Marksmen Club"

"Royal Marine Bathing Society"

"Sweet Pea Karate Fellowship"

"Judo Aikido Chum Club"

"Now," growled Kranf, "are they, or are they not, degenerate?"

Threletok noted the translations of the signs on a convenient screen nearby, and observed thoughtfully, "The organizations seem to be harmless recreational clubs and societies."

Yraang growled, "You see the native in that purple robe—by the welcoming ramp? Watch it keep the crowd back . . . Look at the arms on that monster! True, it's only got two of them. But that's not my idea of degeneration."

Kranf growled, "Is that translation right? How degenerate is a bunch that makes parachute jumps for fun?"

Selouel, struggling with the armor, now had half-a-dozen limbs shoving against the stuck joint, and was aware that his writhings were attracting unwelcome attention from the Earth crowd, where people were now nudging each other, and turning to stare. Threading one limb through several others near their base, and pressing down hard, Selouel managed to build up a kind of compound pressure against the joint in the armor, and—

Claang!

The joint came free.

Selouel wasted a few seconds trying to remember the names of the artificers who had done this work, then he practiced moving around. The joint moved stiffly, like all the rest of the new ones, but it moved. Good enough. Now there was Kranf's question about this crowd. Selouel glanced around.

He took in the crowd's loose colorful garments, the signs, the long hair worn either loose or tied by strings or wisps of colored cloth. His gaze settled on a group under the sign, "Ye Wooozie Smoking Fellowshippe." He grappled briefly with the name, then looked over the individuals. Seated on the hood and blocky front fenders of a vehicle painted camouflage green and brown, they wore outer garments of loosely floating net, had flowers stuck in their hair, and were passing around a mouthpiece on a long flexible tube trailing out from a central pot on a smoldering brazier. As the mouthpiece passed from hand to hand, wisps of smoke drifted out. The smokers clutched at the mouthpiece for another puff.

Well, that looked promising, but there was still something—

"H'm," said Selouel, thinking of the faked data, and the survey teams that had been quietly picked up, and found in a rare state of stupefaction.

"Well?" said Kranf.

Selouel studied the scene with foreboding.

"On top of everything else, there is something—h'm—yes, if I am not mistaken, there is a noticeably low proportion of Earth females here." Selouel's limbs tensed as he looked searchingly around. "Aside from the 'Sisterhood of Nurses' and the 'Ladies Auxiliary of the Hunt Club,' this crowd would appear to be almost entirely male."

"What's the significance?"

"The species-preservation drive prompts the males to protect their women in times of danger. This is not a promising sign."

"Well, here comes the landing boat. Maybe we can tell more from their greeting."

The crowd looked up and moved aside as a glittering rounded cone dropped slowly down.

Selouel noted several Earth individuals casting furtive glances at their guests from the Coequality.

A sickly nasal voice began to moan the words of what must be a popular song:

"Oh, I cry why, Lover—Please tell me why, Lover . . ."

A tense voice spoke into Selouel's ear-membrane:

"Does their local overlord have the unfortunate seizure now, sir? We can get at him in the landing boat. He may be out of range a few minutes from now."

Selouel had forgotten that provision, imposed on the plan by the master overlord, but with the final decision left to Selouel.

"No," said Selouel into the unobtrusive mouthpiece. "Don't do it—Repeat, do not."

The crowd was reaching into its voluminous robes, pulling out flasks, bottles, jugs, hypodermic needles, long pipes, weird glass cylinders, and sacks of white powder, as the song wailed over the assemblage: "Lover, tell me why-y, should I ever have to die-ie? Life with you's so sweet, so sweet, so very very sweeEEEEet. So-o, Lover, tell me why-y-y, should I ever, ever have to die-e . . ."

Selouel, who would have been glad to answer the question, was staring at the multiplying paraphernalia for every intoxicant known in this end of the universe. His gaze was caught by a thing that combined glass bulbs, tubes, coils, mouthpieces, syringes, and flasks, and his mind spun as he tried to picture the thing in use.

Threletok, who as yet knew nothing of the faked reports, piped, "It worked! They have degenerated! This is total victory! We have wo—"

The former expeditor appeared in the landing boat's hatchway.

The crowd turned as one person. Bottles, cylinders, hypodermics, weirdly shaped pipes—all streaked toward Kranf and his party, hit the ground some forty feet away, and burst in blinding white flashes.

Ground and sky, trees, grass, vehicles, the crowd, the landing boat—vanished from Selouel's view in a huge puff of smoke.

Kranf jerked back. Threletok screamed. Yraang bared his fangs, and Selouel, conscious that the whole thing was out of his grip now, stayed still as the cheers, shouts, and roars of engines echoed around the clearing. The voice spoke close to his ear membrane:

"The locals are breaking into formed units—Surrounding the expeditor—He is being hustled into a ground vehicle—Euh!—The ground vehicle sprang into the air! All these vehicles parked around the edge of this clearing are taking off!"

With the smoke blowing away, Selouel could not only hear them but see them streaking off overhead.

Now, with his plans in ruins, with the communications chief shouting that a message was coming in for

him from the Earth overlord, suddenly Selouel got the idea he'd been about to get when Kranf had called for help from Triform. Now, when it was too late, the whole thing was clear.

"Proceed," he said dryly to the communications technicians, and a few moments later he had the headset on, and was looking at the neat, smiling Hardesty.

"Well," said Hardesty, "I see you kept your promise. It was you, of course, behind the original peace offer?"

"Yes," said Selouel, "and now we offer you the chance to voluntarily join our Coequality."

"At least for now," said Hardesty, "we want independence."

"We honor your decision," said Selouel carefully, "and we would value your friendship. Our guard squadrons will be removed at once. You, of course, will take over their duties?"

"Yes," said Hardesty. "And we expect soon to put somewhat larger ships in space."

"May good fortune attend you," said Selouel, "and wisdom be your guide."

"Thank you. We will remember you kept your promise."

The communications link was broken.

Selouel exhaled carefully, removed the headset, gave it to the waiting technicians, and looked at his companions.

Kranf said dully, "Well, they fooled us. Now what?"

"Now," said Selouel, "we order our fleet back from this bomb of a planet. Then I am going to take a hot bath. After that, if anyone cares to join me, I am going to soothe myself with music. Following that, for all I know, the master overlord may have me pulled to pieces for stupidity. Everything in its due and proper course."

* * *

The master overlord had been dealing with underhandlers for a long time, but this was the first time he had seen one suffering from dissatisfaction with his own performance. The master overlord, who had often hoped to reduce an underhandler to this crestfallen state, perversely found himself feeling sympathetic.

"After all," he heard himself say, "nothing has happened that you didn't warn against. These lack-limb short life monstrosities have followed one of the two possible courses you predicted. The result is certainly unusual, but it's better than the mess we were in when you took over."

"I should have known the reports weren't valid."

"How? Twenty-five specialists who have spent their lives in a field a thumb's width wide and a universe deep get together and write a three hundred page document based on the life-work of ten generations of their own kind, using their special vocabulary. You and I are supposed to pick this thing up, when we have a day's work to do, and understand it? And three years later new observations may show their conclusions were false, anyway. And that's just one report."

"The report isn't all," said Selouel moodily, "though it's bad enough. It was right in front of me, and I missed it."

The master overlord, seeing Selouel droop in every limb, and observing the number of Selouel's limbs, said consolingly, "Well, perhaps we can use it another time. What else do you blame yourself for?"

"How many times have I sneered when I heard someone say, 'Has it been computer-checked?' And yet, where the mathematical factors are concerned, that makes sense."

"Yes," said the master overlord, gratified to hear this admission.

"And," said Selouel, "it would equally make sense to carry out a check where unmathematical—particularly emotional—factors are concerned."

"If we could do it. But you can't accurately represent emotions on a computer. We've tried it, and it doesn't work. No, it's better to rely on calculation, and mangle these unmathematical factors when they turn up. If that doesn't work," said the master overlord benevolently, "well, we have our underhandlers to turn to."

Selouel did not look consoled

"And I missed it," he said.

The master overlord stared at him. "Missed what?"

"There is what amounts to an emotional computer, and we use it all the time. Why not here?"

"This is news to me."

"None of us can function without predicting the actions of others, and interpreting their emotional response. We do it by using what is, in effect, an analog rather than a digital device, namely, our own emotional nature. It isn't perfect, but we have no choice. Well, what does it matter if the others are aliens? We have to allow for variations, but we all have the same basic drives. How could I overlook—"

The mater overlord decided that underhandlers were as hard to take humbled as overbearing. Possibly worse.

"Listen," he snarled, "specifically what did you miss?"

"First," said Selouel, "that the viewer was left on as usual when we conferred after their local overlord rejected our first truce offer."

"Well, the idea is to signify that the communication isn't ended. The other side sees its point is being considered, even if it can't hear the details. What's the harm?"

"They got to see our consultation, that was the harm."

The master overlord sat back, and pictured it.

"But—with no sound—"

"A vital point was to present ourselves as perfectly sincere."

The master overlord got a brief mental picture of Selouel looking shrewd, with four or five arms writhing in the air, with Kranf suspiciously looking on, and Yraang leaning forward with bared teeth.

"H'm . . . yes . . . I see what you mean."

"And then," Selouel went on, "as if that wasn't bad enough, I actually imagined that these locals might deteriorate if this hero of theirs should be sent on a long trip!"

The master overlord sat back, his upper right hand clasping his chin, and his other hands clasping various elbows. He said thoughtfully, "We know now that it didn't work. But how could we know at the beginning? It all fit together."

"We should have run it through our emotional computer."

"Should have imagined it done to us, and thought how we would react? All right. Show me."

"Just what would we do if, say, we knew that, after a few centuries, Kakolian or Mardugast would return to us, in the prime of life?"

The master overlord gripped the arms of his chair.

Mardugast! The Master War Chief of the Ages! With an effort, he controlled his emotions. His voice became dry.

"We would not," he said, "spend our time, while we awaited his return, smoking kasheef."

"It would," said Selouel, "call forth our greatest efforts. We would train our descendants, and deceive the opposition, so that all would be ready at his return."

"I see. Yes. With the right comparison, it is clear what happened."

"Clear, but too late."

"Too late for this time," said the master overlord pragmatically. "But we see what happened, and we can be ready the next time. And all this trouble follows, one way or another, from the nature of the locals. You didn't make them. Your problem was to find a way to get along with them. And, at least, they do seem pacified."

Selouel sighed. "That seems true, at least."

The master overlord noted that the underhandler, having unburdened himself of his sins, was looking like himself again. Yet there was a subtle difference, and the overlord, pinning it down at last, asked himself if this horrible planet might not have some good in it, after all:

That lordly superiority that made underhandlers so hard to endure had, after grappling with this world, vanished without a trace.