

Ultimatum

" . . . into the chaotic Galactic political scene of the post-Concordiat era, the CDT emerged to carry forward the ancient diplomatic tradition as a great supranational organization dedicated to the contravention of war. As mediators of disputes among Terrestrial-settled worlds and advocates of Terrestrial interests in contacts with alien cultures, Corps diplomats, trained in the chanceries of innumerable defunct bureaucracies, displayed an encyclopedic grasp of the nuances of Extra-Terrestrial mores as set against the labyrinthine socio-politico-economic Galactic context. Ever-zealous in its enforcement of peace, the Corps traditionally has functioned at its most scintillating level under the threat of imminent annihilation. Facing overwhelming forces at Roolit I, steely-eyed Ambassador Nitworth met the challenge unflinchingly, coolly planning his coup . . ."

—extract from the Official History of the Corps Diplomatique, Vol I, Reel 2. Solarian Press, New York, 479 A. E. (AD 2940)

Ambassador Nitworth glowered across his mirror-polished, nine-foot platinum desk at his assembled staff.

"Gentlemen, are any of your familiar with a race known as the Qornt?"

There was a moment of profound silence. Nitworth nodded portentously.

"They were a warlike race, known in this sector back in Corcordiat times—perhaps two hundred years ago. They vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. There was no record of where they went." He paused for effect.

"They have now reappeared—occupying the inner planet of this system!"

"But, sir," Second Secretary Magnan offered. "That's uninhabited Terrestrial territory . . ."

"Indeed, Mr. Magnan . . ." Nitworth smiled icily. "It appears the Qornt do not share that opinion." He plucked a heavy parchment from a folder before him, harrumphed and read aloud:

HIS SUPREME EXCELLENCY THE QORNT, REGENT OF QORNT, OVERLORD OF THE GALACTIC DESTINY, GREETES THE TERRESTRIALS AND WITH REFERENCE TO THE PRESENCE IN QORNT MANDATED TERRITORY OF TERRESTRIAL SQUATTERS, HAS THE HONOR TO ADVISE THAT HE WILL REQUIRE THE USE OF HIS OUTER WORLD ON THE THIRTIETH DAY: THEN WILL THE QUORT COME WITH STEEL AND FIRE, RECEIVE, TERRESTRIALS, RENEWED ASSURANCES OF MY AWARENESS OF YOUR EXISTENCE, AND LET THOSE WHO DARE GIRD FOR THE CONTEST.

"Frankly, I wouldn't call it conciliatory," Magnan said.

Nitworth tapped the paper with a finger.

"We have been served, gentlemen, with nothing less than an ultimatum!"

"Well, we'll soon straighten these fellows out—" the Military Attaché began.

"There happens to be more to this piece of truculence than appears on the surface," the Ambassador cut in. He paused, waiting for interested frowns to settle into place.

"Note, gentlemen, that these invaders have appeared in force on Terrestrial-controlled soil—and without so much as a flicker from the instruments of the Navigational Monitor Service!"

The Military Attaché blinked. "That's absurd," he said flatly. Nitworth slapped the table.

"We're up against something new, gentlemen! I've considered every hypothesis from cloaks of invisibility to time travel! The fact is—the Qornt fleets are undetectable!"

The Military Attaché pulled at his lower lip. "In that case, we can't try conclusions with these fellows until we have an undetectable drive of our own. I recommend a crash project; in the meantime—"

"I'll have my boys start in to crack this thing," Chief of the Confidential Terrestrial Source Section spoke up. "I'll fit out a couple of volunteers with plastic beaks—"

"No cloak and dagger work, gentlemen! Long range policy will be worked out by Deep-Think teams back at the Department. Our role will be a holding action. Now, I want suggestions for a comprehensive, well-rounded, and decisive course for meeting this threat. Any recommendations?"

The Political Officer placed his fingertips together. "What about a stiff Note demanding an extra week's time?"

"No! No begging," the Economic Officer objected. "I'd say a calm, dignified, aggressive withdrawal—as soon as possible."

"We don't want to give them the idea we spook easily," the Military Attaché said. "Let's delay the withdrawal—say, until tomorrow."

"Early tomorrow," Magnan said. "Or maybe later today."

"Well, I see you're of a mind with me," Nitworth commented, nodding. "Our plan of action is clear, but it remains to be implemented. We have a population of over fifteen million individuals to relocate." He eyed the Political Officer. "I want five proposals for resettlement on my desk by oh-eight-hundred hours tomorrow . . ." Nitworth rapped out instructions; harried-looking staff members arose and hurried from the room. Magnan eased toward the door.

"Where are you going, Magnan?" Nitworth snapped.

"Since you're so busy, I thought I'd just slip back down to Com Inq. It was a most interesting orientation lecture, Mr. Secretary. Be sure to let us know how it works out—"

"Kindly return to your chair," Nitworth said coldly. "A number of chores remain to be assigned. I think you need a little field experience. I want you to get over to Roolit I and take a look at these Qornt personally."

Magnan's mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

"Not afraid of a few Qornt, are you, Magnan?"

"Afraid? Good lord, no, ha ha. It's just that I'm afraid I may lose my head and do something rash."

"Nonsense! A diplomat is immune to heroic impulses. Take Retief along. No dawdling now! I want you on the way in two hours. Notify the transport pool at once."

Magnan nodded unhappily and went out into the hall.

"Oh, Retief," Nitworth said. Retief turned.

"Try to restrain Mr. Magnan from any impulsive moves—in any direction."

* * *

Retief and Magnan topped a ridge and looked down across a slope of towering tree-shrubs and glossy violet-stemmed palms set among flamboyant blossoms of yellow and red, reaching down to a strip of white beach with the blue sea beyond.

"A delightful vista," Magnan said, mopping at his face. "A pity we couldn't locate the Qornt. We'll go back now and report—"

"I'm pretty sure the settlement is off to the right," Retief said. "Why don't you head back for the boat, while I ease over and see what I can observe."

"Retief, we're engaged in a serious mission. This is not a time to think of sight-seeing."

"I'd like to take a good look at what we're giving away."

"See here, Retief! One might almost receive the impression that you're questioning Corps policy."

"One might, at that. The Qornt have made their play—but I think it might be valuable to take a look at their cards before we fold. If I'm not back at the boat in an hour, lift without me."

"You expect me to make my way back alone?"

"It's directly down-slope—" Retief broke off, listening. Magnan clutched at his arm. There was a sound of crackling foliage. Twenty feet ahead, a leafy branch swung aside. An eight-foot biped stepped into view; long, thin green-clad legs and back-bending knees moved in quick, bird-like steps. A pair of immense black-lensed goggles covered staring eyes set among bushy green hair above a great bone-white beak. The crest bobbed as the creature cocked its head, listening.

Magnan gulped audibly. The Qornt froze, head tilted, beak aimed directly at the spot where the Terrestrials stood in the deep shade of a giant trunk.

"I'll go for help," Magnan squeaked. He whirled and took three leaps into the brush; a second great green-clad figure rose up to block his way. He

spun, darted to the left. The first Qornt pounced, grappled Magnan to its narrow chest. Magnan yelled, thrashing and kicking, broke free, turned—and collided with the nine-foot alien, coming in fast from the right. All three went down in a tangle of limbs.

Retief jumped forward, hauled Magnan free, thrust him aside, and stopped, right fist cocked. The two Qornt lay groaning, moving feebly.

"Nice piece of work, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. "You nailed both of them."

"Those, undoubtedly, are the most blood-thirsty, aggressive, merciless countenances it has ever been my misfortune to encounter," Magnan said. "It hardly seems fair; eight feet tall AND faces like that . . ."

The smaller of the two captive Qornt ran long, slender fingers over a bony shin from which he had turned back the tight-fitting green trousers.

"It's not broken," he whistled nasally in passable Terrestrial, eyeing Magnan through the heavy goggles, now badly cracked. "Small thanks to you."

Magnan smiled loftily. "I daresay you'll think twice before interfering with peaceable diplomats in future."

"Diplomats? Surely you jest."

"Never mind us," Retief said. "It's you fellows we'd like to talk about. How many of you are there?"

"Only Zubb and myself—"

"I mean altogether. How many Qornt?"

The alien whistled shrilly.

"Here, no signaling!" Magnan snapped, looking around.

"That was merely an expression of amusement—"

"You find the situation amusing? I assure you, sir, you are in perilous straits at the moment. I MAY fly into another rage, you know."

"Please, restrain yourself. I was merely somewhat astonished—" a small whistle escaped—"at being taken for a Qornt."

"Aren't you a Qornt?"

"I? Great snail trails, no!" More stifled whistles of amusement escaped the beaked face. "Both Zubb and I are Verpp. Naturalists, as it happens."

"You certainly LOOK like Qornt."

"Oh, not at all—except perhaps to a Terrestrial. The Qornt are sturdily-built rascals, all over ten feet in height. And, of course, they do nothing but quarrel. A drone caste, actually."

"A caste? You mean they're biologically the same as you—"

"Not at all! A Verpp wouldn't think of fertilizing a Qornt."

"I mean to say, you're of the same basic stock—descended from a common ancestor, perhaps."

"We are all Pud's creatures."

"What are the differences between you and them?"

"Why, the Qornt are argumentative, boastful, lacking in appreciation for the finer things of life. One dreads to contemplate descending to their level."

"Do you know anything about a Note passed to the Terrestrial Ambassador at Smørbrød?"

The beak twitched. "Smørbrød? I know of no place called Smørbrød."

"The outer planet of this system."

"Oh, yes; we call it Guzzum. I had heard that some sort of creatures had established a settlement there, but I confess I pay little note to such matters."

"We're wasting time, Retief," Magnan said. "We must truss these chaps up, hurry back to the boat, and make our escape. You heard what they said—"

"Are there any Qornt down there at the harbor, where the boats are?" Retief asked.

"At Tarroon, you mean? Oh, yes. A large number; the Qornt are making ready for one of their adventures."

"That would be the invasion of Smørbrød," Magnan said. "And unless we hurry, Retief, we're likely to be caught there with the last of the evacuees—"

"How many Qornt would you say there are at Tarroon?"

"Oh, a very large number. Perhaps fifteen or twenty."

"Fifteen or twenty what?" Magnan looked perplexed.

"Fifteen or twenty Qornt."

"You mean that there are only fifteen or twenty individual Qornt in all?"

Another whistle. "Not at all. I was referring to the local Qornt only. There are more at the other Centers, of course."

"And the Qornt are responsible for the Ultimatum—unilaterally?"

"I suppose so; it sounds like them. A truculent group, you know. And interplanetary relations are rather a hobby of theirs."

Zubb moaned and stirred. He sat up slowly, rubbing his head. He spoke to his companion in a shrill alien clatter of consonants.

"What did he say?"

"Poor Zubb. He blames me for his bruises, since it was my idea to gather you as specimens."

"You should have known better than to tackle that fierce-looking creature," Zubb said, pointing his beak at Magnan.

"How does it happen that you speak Terrestrial?" Retief asked.

"Oh, one picks up all sorts of dialects."

"It's quite charming, really," Magnan said. "Such a quaint, archaic accent."

"Suppose we went down to Tarroon," Retief asked. "What kind of reception would we get?"

"That depends. I wouldn't recommend interfering with the Gwil or the Rheuk; it's their nest-mending time, you know. The Boog will be busy mating—such a tedious business—and of course the Qornt are tied up with their ceremonial feasting. I'm afraid no one will take any notice of you."

"Do you mean to say," Magnan demanded, "that these ferocious Qornt, who have issued an ultimatum to the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne—who openly avow their intention to invade a Terrestrial-occupied world—would ignore Terrestrials in their midst?"

"If at all possible."

Retief got to his feet.

"I think our course is clear, Mr. Magnan. It's up to us to go down and attract a little attention."

* * *

"I'm not at all sure we're going about this in the right way," Magnan puffed, trotting at Retief's side. "These fellows Zubb and Slun—oh, they seem affable enough—but how can we be sure we're not being led into a trap?"

"We can't."

Magnan stopped short. "Let's go back."

"All right," Retief said. "Of course, there may be an ambush—"

Magnan moved off. "Let's keep going."

The party emerged from the undergrowth at the edge of a great brush-grown mound. Slun took the lead, rounded the flank of the mound, halted at a rectangular opening cut into the slope.

"You can find your way easily enough from here," he said. "You'll excuse us, I hope—"

"Nonsense, Slun!" Zubb pushed forward. "I'll escort our guests to Qornt Hall." He twittered briefly to his fellow Verpp. Slun twittered back.

"I don't like it, Retief," Magnan whispered. "Those fellows are plotting

mischief."

"Threaten them with violence, Mr. Magnan. They're scared of you."

"That's true—but the drubbing they received was well-deserved. I'm a patient man, but there are occasions—"

"Come along, please," Zubb called. "Another ten minutes' walk—"

"See here, we have no interest in investigating this barrow," Magnan announced. "We wish you to take us direct to Tarroon to interview your military leaders regarding the Ultimatum!"

"Yes, yes, of course. Qornt Hall lies here inside the village."

"This is Tarroon?"

"A modest civic center, sir, but there are those who love it."

"No wonder we didn't observe their works from the air," Magnan muttered. "Camouflaged." He moved hesitantly through the opening.

The party moved along a wide, deserted tunnel which sloped down steeply, then leveled off and branched. Zubb took the center branch, ducking slightly under the nine-foot ceiling lit at intervals with what appeared to be primitive incandescent panels.

"Few signs of an advanced technology here," Magnan whispered. "These creatures must devote all their talents to war-like enterprise."

Ahead, Zubb slowed. A distant susurrations was audible, a sustained high-pitched screeching. "Softly, now. We approach Qornt Hall. They can be an irascible lot when disturbed at their feasting."

"When will the feast be over?" Magnan called hoarsely.

"In another few weeks, I should imagine, if, as you say, they've scheduled an invasion for next month."

"Look here, Zubb." Magnan shook a finger at the tall alien. "How is it that these Qornt are allowed to embark on piratical ventures of this sort without reference to the wishes of the majority—"

"Oh, the majority of the Qornt favor the move, I imagine."

"A handful of hotheads are permitted to embroil the planet in war?"

"Oh, they don't embroil the planet in war. It's merely a Qornt enterprise. We Verpp ignore such goings-on."

"Retief, this is fantastic! I've heard of iron-fisted military cliques before, but this is madness!"

"Come softly, now . . ." Zubb beckoned, moving toward a bend in the yellow-lit corridor. Retief and Magnan moved forward. The corridor debouched through a high double door into a vast oval chamber, high-domed, gloomy, paneled in dark wood and hung with tattered banners,

scarred halberds, pikes, rusted longswords, crossed spears, patinaed hauberks, pitted radiation armor, corroded power rifles, the immense mummified heads of horned and fanged animals. Great guttering torches in wall brackets and in stands along the length of the long table shed a smoky light that reflected from the mirror polish of the red granite floor, gleamed on polished silver bowls and paper-thin glass, shone jewel-red and gold through dark bottles—and cast long flickering shadows behind the fifteen trolls who loomed in their places at the board. Lesser trolls—beaked, bush-haired, great-eyed—trotted briskly, bird-kneed, bearing steaming platters, stood in groups of three strumming slender bottle-shaped lutes, or pranced in intricately-patterned dance, unnoticed in the shrill uproar as each of the magnificently draped, belted, feathered, and bejeweled Qornt carried on a shouted conversation with an equally noisy fellow.

"A most interesting display of barbaric splendor," Magnan breathed. "Now we'd better be getting back—"

"Ah, a moment," Zubb said. "Observe the Qorn—the tallest of the feasters—he with the headdress of crimson, purple, silver and pink—"

"Twelve feet if he's an inch," Magnan estimated. "And now we really must hurry along—"

"That one is chief among these rowdies. I'm sure you'll want a word with him. He controls not only the Tarroonian vessels but those from the other Centers as well."

"What kind of vessels? Warships?"

"Certainly. What other kind would the Qornt bother with?"

"I don't suppose," Magnan said casually, "that you'd know the type, tonnage, armament, and manning of these vessels? And how many units comprise the fleet? And where they're based at present?"

"They're fully automated twenty-thousand ton all-purpose dreadnoughts. They mount a variety of weapons—the Qornt are fond of that sort of thing—and each of the Qornt has his own, of course. They're virtually identical, except for the personal touches each individual has given his ship."

"Great Heavens, Retief!" Magnan exclaimed in a whisper. "It sounds as though these brutes employ a battle armada as simpler souls might a set of toy sailboats!"

Retief stepped past Magnan and Zubb to study the feasting hall. "I can see that their votes would carry all the necessary weight."

"And, now, an interview with the Qorn himself," Zubb shrilled. "If you'll kindly step along, gentlemen . . ."

"That won't be necessary," Magnan said hastily. "I've decided to refer the entire matter to a committee—"

"After having come so far," Zubb said, "it would be a pity to miss having a cozy chat . . ."

There was a pause.

"Ah . . . Retief," Magnan said. "Zubb has just presented a most compelling argument . . ."

Retief turned. Zubb stood, gripping an ornately decorated power pistol in one bony hand, a slim needler in the other. Both were pointed at Magnan's chest.

"I suspected you had hidden qualities, Zubb," Retief commented.

"See here, Zubb; we're diplomats—" Magnan started.

"Careful, Mr. Magnan; you may goad him to a frenzy."

"By no means," Zubb whistled. "I much prefer to observe the frenzy of the Qornt when presented with the news that two peaceful Verpp have been assaulted and kidnapped by bullying interlopers. If there's anything that annoys the Qornt, it's Qornt-like behavior in others. Now, step along, please."

"Rest assured, this will be reported—"

"I doubt it."

"You'll face the wrath of Enlightened Galactic Opinion—"

"Oh? How big a navy does Enlightened Galactic Opinion have?"

"Stop scaring him, Mr. Magnan. He may get nervous and shoot." Retief stepped into the banquet hall, headed for the resplendent figure at the head of the table. A trio of flute-players broke off in mid-bleat, staring. An inverted pyramid of tumblers blinked as Retief swung past, followed by Magnan and the tall Verpp. The shrill chatter at the table faded.

Qorn turned as Retief came up, blinking three-inch eyes. Zubb stepped forward, gibbered, waving his arms excitedly. Qorn pushed back his chair—a low, heavily padded stool—and stared unwinking at Retief, moving his head to bring first one great round eye, then the other, to bear. There were small blue veins in the immense fleshy beak. The bushy hair, springing out in a giant halo around the greyish, porous-skinned face, was wiry, stiff, moss-green, with tufts of chartreuse fuzz surrounding what appeared to be tympanic membranes. The tall headdress of scarlet silk and purple feathers was slightly askew, and a loop of pink pearls had slipped down above one eye.

Zubb finished his speech, fell silent, breathing hard.

Qorn looked Retief over in silence, then belched.

"Not bad," Retief said admiringly. "Maybe we could get up a match between you and Ambassador Sternwheeler. You've got the volume on him, but he could spot you points on timber."

"So," Qorn hooted in a resonant tenor. "You come from Guzzum, eh? Or Smørbrød, as I think you call it. What is it you're after? More time? A

compromise? Negotiations? Peace?" He slammed a bony hand against the table. "The answer is NO!"

Zubb twittered. Qorn cocked an eye, motioned to a servant. "Chain him, then . . ." he indicated Magnan. His eyes went to Retief. "This one's bigger; you'd best chain him, too."

"Why, your Excellency—" Magnan started, stepping forward.

"Stay back!" Qorn hooted. "Stand over there where I can keep an eye on you."

"Your Excellency, I'm empowered—"

"Not here, you're not!" Qorn trumpeted. "Want peace, do you? Well, I don't want peace! I've had a surfeit of peace these last two centuries! I want action! Loot! Adventure! Glory!" He turned to look down the table. "How about it fellows? It's war to the knife, eh?"

There was a momentary silence.

"I guess so," grunted a giant Qornt in iridescent blue with flame-colored plumes.

Qorn's eyes bulged. He half rose. "We've been all over this!" he bassooned. He clamped bony fingers on the hilt of a light rapier. "I thought I'd made my point . . ."

"Oh, sure, Qorn."

"You bet."

"I'm convinced."

Qorn rumbled and resumed his seat. "All for one and one for all, that's us."

"And you're the one, eh Qorn?" Retief commented.

Magnan cleared his throat. "I sense that some of you gentlemen are not convinced of the wisdom of this move," he piped, looking along the table at the silks, jewels, beaks, feather-decked crests, and staring eyes.

"Silence!" Qorn hooted. "No use your talking to my loyal lieutenants anyway," he added. "They do whatever I convince them they ought to do."

"But I'm sure that on more mature consideration—"

"I can lick any Qornt in the house," Qorn said. "That's why I'm Qorn." He belched again.

A servant came up staggering under a weight of chain, dropped it with a crash at Magnan's feet. Zubb aimed the guns while the servant wrapped three loops around Magnan's wrists, snapped a lock in place.

"You, next!" The guns pointed at Retief's chest. He held out his arms. Four loops of silvery-grey chain in half-inch links dropped around them. The servant cinched them up tight, squeezed a lock through the ends and

closed it.

"Now," Qorn said, lolling back in his chair, glass in hand. "There's a bit of sport to be had here, lads. What shall we do with them?"

"Let them go," the blue and flame Qornt said glumly.

"You can do better than that," Qorn hooted. "Now, here's a suggestion: we carve them up a little—lop off the external labiae and pinnae, say—and ship them back—"

"Good lord! Retief, he's talking about cutting off our ears and sending us home mutilated! What a barbaric proposal!"

"It wouldn't be the first time a Terrestrial diplomat got a trimming," Retief commented.

"It should have the effect of stimulating the Terries to put up a reasonable scrap," Qorn said judiciously. "I have a feeling that they're thinking of giving up without a struggle."

"Oh, I doubt that," the blue-and-flame Qornt said. "Why should they?"

Qorn rolled an eye at Retief and another at Magnan. "Take these two," he hooted. "I'll wager they came here to negotiate a surrender!"

"Well," Magnan started.

"Hold it, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, "I'll tell him."

"What's your proposal?" Qorn whistled, taking a gulp from his goblet. "A fifty-fifty split? Monetary reparations? Alternate territory? I can assure you, it's useless. We Qornt LIKE to fight—"

"I'm afraid you've gotten the wrong impression, Your Excellency," Retief said blandly. "We didn't come to negotiate. We came to deliver an ultimatum . . ."

"What?" Qorn trumpeted. Behind Retief, Magnan spluttered.

"We plan to use this planet for target practice," Retief said. "A new type hell bomb we've worked out. Have all your people off of it in seventy-two hours, or suffer the consequences."

* * *

"You have the gall," Qorn stormed, "to stand here in the center of Qornt Hall—uninvited, at that—and in chains—"

"Oh, these," Retief said. He tensed his arms; the soft aluminum links stretched, broke. He shook the light metal free. "We diplomats like to go along with colorful local customs, but I wouldn't want to mislead you. Now, as to the evacuation of Roolit I—"

Zubb screeched, waved the guns. The Qornt at the table craned, jabbering.

"I told you they were brutes," Zubb shrilled.

Qorn slammed his fist down on the table. "I don't care what they are!" he honked. "Evacuate, hell! I can field eighty-five combat-ready ships—"

"And we can englobe every one of them with a thousand Peace Enforcers, with a hundred megatons/second firepower each."

"Retief—" Magnan tugged at his sleeve. "Don't forget their superdrive—"

"That's all right; they don't have one."

"But—"

"We'll take you on!" Qorn French-horned. "We're the Qorn! We glory in battle! We live in fame or go down in—"

"Hogwash," the flame-and-blue Qornt cut in. "If it wasn't for you, Qorn, we could sit around and feast and brag and enjoy life without having to prove anything."

"Qorn, you seem to be the firebrand here," Retief said. "I think the rest of the boys would listen to reason—"

"Over my dead body!"

"My idea exactly," Retief said. "You claim you can lick any man in the house. Unwind yourself from your ribbons and step out here on the floor, and we'll see how good you are at backing up your conversation."

* * *

Magnan hovered at Retief's side. "Twelve feet tall," he moaned. "And did you notice the size of those hands?"

Retief watched as Qorn's aides helped him out of his formal trappings. "I wouldn't worry too much, Mr. Magnan. This is a light-Gee world. I doubt if old Qorn would weigh up at more than two-fifty standard pounds here."

"But that phenomenal reach—"

"I'll peck away at him at knee level; when he bends over to swat me, I'll get a crack at him."

Across the cleared floor, Qorn shook off his helpers with a snort.

"Enough! Let me at the upstart!"

Retief moved out to meet him, watching the upraised backward-jointed arms. Qorn stalked forward, long lean legs bent, long horny feet clacking against the polished floor. The other aliens—both servitors and bejeweled Qornt—formed a wide circle, all eyes unwaveringly on the combatants.

Qorn struck suddenly, a long arm flashing down in a vicious cut at Retief, who leaned aside, caught a lean shank below the knee. Qorn bent to haul Retief from his leg—and staggered back as a haymaker took him just below the beak. A screech went up from the crowd as Retief leaped clear.

Qorn hissed and charged. Retief whirled aside, then struck the alien's

off-leg in a flying tackle. Qorn leaned, arms windmilling, crashed to the floor. Retief whirled, dived for the left arm, whipped it behind the narrow back, seized Qorn's neck in a stranglehold, and threw his weight backward. Qorn fell on his back, his legs squatted out at an awkward angle. He squawked, beat his free arm on the floor, reaching in vain for Retief.

Zubb stepped forward, pistols ready. Magnan stepped before him.

"Need I remind you, sir," he said icily, "that this is an official diplomatic function? I can brook no interference from disinterested parties."

Zubb hesitated. Magnan held out a hand. "I must ask you to hand me your weapons, Zubb."

"Look here," Zubb began.

"I MAY lose my temper," Magnan hinted. Zubb lowered the guns, passed them to Magnan. He thrust them into his belt with a sour smile, turned back to watch the encounter.

Retief had thrown a turn of violet silk around Qorn's left wrist, bound it to the alien's neck. Another wisp of stuff floated from Qorn's shoulder. Retief, still holding Qorn in an awkward sprawl, wrapped it around one outflung leg, trussed ankle and thigh together. Qorn flopped, hooting. At each movement, the constricting loop around his neck jerked his head back, the green crest tossing wildly.

"If I were you, I'd relax," Retief said, rising and releasing his grip. Qorn got a leg under him. Retief kicked it. Qorn's chin hit the floor with a hollow clack. He wilted, an ungainly tangle of over-long limbs and gay silks.

Retief turned to the watching crowd. "Next?" he called.

The blue and flame Qornt stepped forward. "Maybe this would be a good time to elect a new leader," he said. "Now, my qualifications—"

"Sit down," Retief said loudly. He stepped to the head of the table, seated himself in Qorn's vacated chair. "A couple of you finish trussing Qorn up; then stack him in the corner—"

"But we must select a leader!"

"That won't be necessary, boys. I'm your new leader."

* * *

"As I see it," Retief said, dribbling cigar ashes into an empty wine glass, "you Qornt like to be warriors, but you don't particularly like to fight."

"We don't mind a little fighting—within reason. And, of course, as Qornt, we're expected to die in battle. But what I say is—why rush things?"

"I have a suggestion," Magnan said. "Why not turn the reins of government over to the Verpp? They seem a level-headed group—"

"What good would that do? Qornt are Qornt; and it seems there's always

one among us who's a slave to instinct—and, naturally, we have to follow him."

"Why?"

"Because that's the way it's done."

"Why not do it another way?" Magnan offered. "Now, I'd like to suggest Community singing—"

"If we gave up fighting, we might live too long; then what would happen?"

"Live too long . . ." Magnan looked puzzled.

"When estivating time comes, there'd be no burrows for us; and anyway, with the new Qornt stepping in next Awakening—"

"I've lost the thread," Magnan said. "Who are the new Qornt?"

"After estivating, the Verpp moult, and then they're Qornt, of course. The Gwil become Boog, the Boog become Rheuk, the Rheuk metamorphosize into Verpp—"

"You mean Slun and Zubb—the mild-mannered naturalists—will become warmongers like Qorn?"

"Very likely; `the milder the Verpp, the wilder the Qornt,' as the old saying goes."

"What do Qornt turn into?" Retief asked.

"Hmmm. That's a good question. So far, none have survived Qornthood."

"Have you thought of forsaking your warlike ways?" Magnan asked. "What about taking up shepherding and regular church attendance—"

"Don't mistake me. We Qornt like a military life. It's great sport to sit around roaring fires and drink and tell lies and then go dashing off to enjoy a brisk affray and some leisurely looting afterward. But we prefer a nice numerical advantage. Now, this business of tackling you Terrestrials over on Guzzum—that was a mad notion. We had no idea what your strength was—"

"But now that's all off, of course," Magnan chirped. "Now that we've had diplomatic relations and all—"

"Oh, by no means. The fleet lifts in thirty days; after all, we're Qornt; we have to satisfy our drive to action."

"But Mr. Retief is your leader, now. He won't let you . . ."

"Only a dead Qornt stays home when Attack Day comes. And even if he orders us all to cut our own throats, there are still the other Centers—all with their own leaders. No, gentlemen, the invasion is definitely on."

"Why don't you go invade somebody else?" Magnan suggested. "Now, I could name some very attractive prospects—outside my sector, of course."

"Hold everything," Retief said. "I think we've got the basis of a deal here . . ."

* * *

At the head of a double column of gaudily caparisoned Qornt, Retief and Magnan strolled across the ramp toward the bright tower of the CDT Sector HQ. Ahead, gates opened, and a black Corps limousine emerged, flying an Ambassadorial flag below a plain white banner.

"Curious," Magnan commented. "I wonder what the significance of the white ensign might be?"

Retief raised a hand. The column halted with a clash of accoutrements, a rasp of Qornt boots. Retief looked back along the line. The high white sun flashed on bright silks, polished buckles, deep-dyed plumes, ceremonial swords, the polished butts of pistols, the soft gleam of leather.

"A brave show indeed," Magnan commented approvingly. "I confess the idea has merit—"

The limousine pulled up with a squeal of brakes, stood on two fat-tired wheels, tyros humming softly. The hatch popped up. A portly diplomat stepped out.

"Why, Ambassador Nitworth," Magnan glowed. "This is very kind of you—"

"Keep cool, Magnan," Nitworth said in a strained voice. "We'll attempt to get you out of this . . ." He stepped past Magnan's outstretched hand and looked hesitantly at the ramrod-straight line of Qornt, eighty-five strong—and beyond at the eighty-five tall Qornt dreadnoughts.

"Good afternoon, sir . . . ah, Your Excellency," Nitworth said, blinking up at the leading Qornt. "You are Commander of the Strike Force, I assume?"

"Nope," the Qornt said shortly.

"I . . . ah . . . wish to request seventy-two hours in which to evacuate the Headquarters," Nitworth plowed on.

"Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "This—"

"Don't panic, Retief. I'll attempt to secure your release," Nitworth hissed over his shoulder. "Now—"

"You will address our leader with more respect!" the tall Qornt hooted, eyeing Nitworth ominously from eleven feet up.

"Oh, yes indeed, sir . . . Your Excellency . . . Commander. Now, about the invasion—"

"Mr. Secretary," Magnan tugged at Nitworth's sleeve.

"In heaven's name, permit me to negotiate in peace!" Nitworth snapped. He rearranged his features. "Now, Your Excellency, we've arranged to evacuate Smørbrød, of course, just as you requested—"

"Requested?" the Qornt honked.

"Ah . . . demanded, that is. Quite rightly of course. Ordered. Instructed. And, of course, we'll be only too pleased to follow any other instructions you might have—"

"You don't quite get the big picture, Mr. Secretary," Retief said. "This isn't—"

"Silence, confound you!" Nitworth barked. The leading Qornt looked at Retief. He nodded. Two bony hands shot out, seized Nitworth, and stuffed a length of bright pink silk into his mouth, then spun him around and held him facing Retief.

"If you don't mind my taking this opportunity to brief you, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said blandly, "I think I should mention that this isn't an invasion fleet. These are the new recruits for the Peace Enforcement Corps."

Magnan stepped forward, glanced at the gag in Ambassador Nitworth's mouth, hesitated, then cleared his throat. "We felt," he said, "that the establishment of a Foreign Brigade with the P E Corps structure would provide the element of novelty the Department has requested in our recruiting, and at the same time would remove the stigma of Terrestrial chauvinism from future punitive operations."

Nitworth stared, eyes bulging. He grunted, reaching for the gag, caught the Qornt's eye on him, dropped his hands to his sides.

"I suggest we get the troops in out of the hot sun," Retief said. Magnan edged closer. "What about the gag?" he whispered.

"Let's leave it where it is for a while," Retief murmured. "It may save us a few concessions."

* * *

An hour later, Nitworth, breathing freely again, glowered across his desk at Retief and Magnan.

"This entire affair," he rumbled, "has made me appear to be a fool!"

"But we who are privileged to serve on your staff already know just how clever you are," Magnan burred.

Nitworth purpled. "You're skirting insolence, Magnan," he roared. "Why was I not informed of the arrangements? What was I to assume at the sight of eighty-five war vessels over my headquarters, unannounced?"

"We tried to get through, but our wave-lengths—"

"Bah! Sterner souls than I would have quailed at the spectacle of those armed horrors advancing."

"Oh, you were perfectly justified in panicking—"

"I did NOT panic!" Nitworth bellowed. "I merely adjusted to the apparent

circumstances. Now, I'm of two minds as to the advisability of this foreign legion idea of yours. Still, it may have merit. I believe the wisest course would be to dispatch them on a long training cruise in an uninhabited sector of space—"

The office windows rattled. "What the devil—!" Nitworth turned, stared out at the ramp where a Qornt ship rose slowly on a column of pale blue light. The vibration increased as a second ship lifted, then a third—

Nitworth whirled on Magnan. "What's this! Who ordered these recruits to embark without my permission?"

"I took the liberty of giving them an errand to run, Mr. Secretary," Retief said. "There was that little matter of the Groaci infiltrating the Sirenian System. I sent the boys off to handle it."

"Call them back! Call them back at once!"

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. They're under orders to maintain total communications silence until completion of the mission."

Nitworth drummed his fingers on the desk top. Slowly, a thoughtful expression dawned. He nodded. "This may work out," he said. "I should call them back, but since the fleet is out of contact, I'm unable to do so, correct? Thus, I can hardly be held responsible for any over-enthusiasm in chastising the Groaci." He closed one eye in a broad wink at Magnan.

"Very well, gentlemen, I'll overlook the irregularity this time. Magnan, see to it the Smørbrørdian public are notified they can remain where they are. And by the way, did you by any chance discover the technique of the undetectable drive the Qornt use?"

"No, sir. That is, yes, sir."

"Well? Well?"

"There isn't any. The Qornt were there all the while. Underground."

"Underground? Doing what?"

"Hibernating—for two hundred years at a stretch."

Outside in the corridor, Magnan came up to Retief, who stood talking to a tall man in a pilot's coverall.

"I'll be tied up, sending through full details on my—our—your recruiting scheme, Retief," Magnan said. "Suppose you run into the city to assist the new Verpp Consul in settling in."

"I'll do that, Mr. Magnan. Anything else?"

Magnan raised his eyebrows. "You're remarkably compliant today, Retief. I'll arrange transportation—"

"Don't bother, Mr. Magnan. Cy here will run me over. He was the pilot who ferried us over to Roolit I, you recall."

Magnan nodded curtly.

"I'll be with you as soon as I pack a few phone numbers, Retief," the pilot said. He moved off. Magnan followed him with a disapproving eye. "An uncouth sort, I fancied. I trust you're not consorting with his kind socially . . ."

"I wouldn't say that, exactly," Retief said. "We just want to go over a few figures together."