

## GIANT KILLER

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"What's that on your head?" Retief eyed a half-inflated bladder of a sour yellow color which lolled over Magnan's left ear.

Magnan rolled an eye up at the varicolored cluster which bobbed with each movement, draggled feathers wagging and lengths of dirty string swaying, the entire assembly secured under his chin by a stained pink ribbon.

"Why, that's my ceremonial Rockamorra headdress; here . . ." He fumbled in his violet afternoon formal cutaway, brought out a bundle of puckered balloons and feathers, offered it. "Here's one for you: you'd better slip into it at once. I'm afraid a couple of the plumes are bent!"

"Where's the Ambassador?" Retief interrupted. There's something I have to tell him!"

"There are a number of things you'll be expected to tell him!" Magnan snapped. "Including why you're half an hour late for the Credentials Ceremony!"

"Oh-oh; there he goes with the staff, headed for the temple; excuse me, Mr. Magnan . . ." Retief pushed off through the crowd toward the wide doorless entry set in the high, blocky structure at the end of the

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courtyard. A long-legged, short-bodied, neckless local with immense flat feet, wearing an elaborate set of ruffles and holding a pike waved him through. The Ambassador and his four staff members were grouped in the gloom a few yards distant, before a gaudy backdrop of luminous plastic in slime green, dyspepsia pink and cirrhotic yellow.

"... classic diplomatic coup," Pinchbottle was say-ing. "I should like to see the looks on the faces of our Groaci colleagues when they learn we've stolen a march on them!"

"Mr. Ambassador," Retief started-

Pinchbottle spun, stared for an instant at a point just above Retief's belt-buckle, then tilted his spherical bald head back, gazed up at his junior.

"I've warned you about pussyfooting, Retief!" he yelled. "When you're around me, stamp your feet when you walk!"

"Mr. Ambassador, I'd like-"

The senior diplomat raised a small, plump-fingered hand. "Spare me a

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"Mr. Ambassador, I'd like-"

The senior diplomat raised a small, plump-fingered hand. "Spare me a catalogue of your likes and dislikes, Mr. Retief! The ceremony is about to begin." He turned to include a wider audience.

"Gentlemen, I trust you all observed my handling of protocol since our arrival here on Rockamorra this morning. Scarcely six hours, and we're about to become the first diplomat-ic mission ever to be accredited to this world! A world, I need not remind you, with a reputation for vigorous commercial activity and unrelenting hostility to diplo-mats; and yet I-"

"Before this goes any farther, Mr. Ambassador"-Retief cut in-"I think-"

"May I remind you, sir!" Pinchbottle shrilled. "I am talking! About a subject of vast importance, namely myself! Er, my contribution, that is, to diplomatic history-"

A pair of robed Rockamorrans

bustled up waving elaborate candelabra which emitted clouds of pungent red and green smoke; they struck poses before the Terrans, intoned resonant ritual phrases in sonorous 161

tones, then stepped back, One pointed a thin, multi-jointed digit at Relief, made a sound like a saw blade dragged across a base-viol string.

"Where's your headdress, Retief?" Pinchbottle hissed.

"I don't have one; what I wanted to tell you-" "Get one! Instantly! And take your place in my entourage!" the Ambassador screeched, moving off at the heels of the local officials. Magnan, rushing up at that moment, waved the bladders excitedly. "Don't bother

inflating it, just get it on!" "Never mind that," Retief said, "I won't be needing it."

"What do you mean? We all have to wear them-" "Not me; I won't be taking part in the ceremony; and I advise you to-"

"Crass insubordination!" Magnan gasped, and rushed off in the Ambassador's wake, as large bouncers moved in to bar the headdressless Retief from follow-ing.

It was a colorful ceremony, involving a vigorous symbolic beating of the diplomats with real laths, immersion in a pond which to judge from the expressions of the bathers when they surfaced, was considerably chillier than the bracing morning air, and finishing off



with a brisk run around the compound-ten laps-during which the panting Terrans were spurred to creditable efforts by quirtwielding native dignitaries loping along behind them. Retief, observing the activities from a position among the curious at the sidelines, won ten credits in local currency on the Chief of Mission whose form he had correctly judged superior to that of his staff in the final event.

Amid a tolling of deep-toned gongs, the Rockamor 162

ran officials herded the wheezing Terrans together, read off a long speech from a scroll; then a small local stepped forward bearing a six-foot sword on a purple velvet cushion lettered

MOTHER-a Terran import, Relief noted. A tall Rockamorran in mauve and puce vestments strode up, lifted the sword; the Ambassador backed a step, said, "Look here, my good man-" and was prodded back into line. The sword-handler solemnly hung a beaded baldric over the stout diplomat's shoulderless frame and attached the scabbard to it.

The locals fell silent, staring at the Terran Envoy expectantly.

"Magnan, you're protocol officer; what am I sup-posed to do now?" the Ambassador muttered from the corner of his mouth.

"Why, I'd suggest that Your Excellency just sort of, ah, bow and then we all turn and leave, before they think

up any more tortures-"

"All right, men: all together," Pinchbottle whispered hoarsely. "About face-" Magnan yelped as the two-yard-long cutlass connected solidly with his shin as the group turned; then they strode away, the Ambassador in the lead, drawn up to his full five feet, with the sword cutting a trail in the dust behind him. There was a happy mutter from the locals, then a swelling shout of joy; eager hands clapped the Terrans on the back, offered them sulphuretted dope sticks, proffered flasks of green liquid as the ceremony broke up into mutual rejoicing.

Retief made his way through the press, intercepted the Ambassador as he

pushed through.

"Well, Retief!" the latter barked. "Absented your-self from the proceedings, I noted! Having sulked in your quarters during the voyage out, you now boycott official functions! I'll see you in my office as soon as I've seen to the safekeeping of this handsome ceremonial weapon I've been awarded-"

"That's what I wanted to tell you, Mr. Ambassador; it's not ceremonial. You're expected to use it."

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"What? Me use this?" Pinchbottle smiled sourly. "I shall hang it on the wall as a symbol-"

"Possibly later, sir," Retief cut in. "Today you have a job to do with it."

"A job?"

"I think you misunderstood the nature of the cere-mony. The Rockamorrans don't know anything about diplomacy. They thought you came here to help them-"

"As indeed we did," Pinchbottle snorted. "Now if you'll stand aside-"

"-so they're expecting you to make good on your promise."

"Promise? What promise?"

"That's what the ceremony was all about; the Rockamorrans are in trouble, but you've promised to get them out of it."

"Of course!" Pinchbottle nodded vigorously. "I've already planned an economic surveyy-"

"That won't do the job, Mr. Ambassador; there's a ninety-foot dinosaur named Crunderthush loose in the area-"

"Dinosaur?" Pinchbottle's voice rose to a squeak. Retief nodded. "And you've just sworn to kill him before sundown tomorrow."

"Look here, Retief," First Secretary Whaf-fle said in an accusing tone, "how is it you appear to understand the proceedings, conducted as they were in this barbaric local patois?"

"I didn't; they talked too fast. But I picked up a smattering of the language studying tapes on the way out, and I had a nice chat with the boatman-"

"I dispatched you to arrange for

lodging and ser-vants, not natter with low-caste locals!" Pinchbottle chirped.

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"I had to do a little nattering in order to rent rooms; the locals don't understand sign language-"

"Impertinence, Mr. Retief? You may consider your-self under suspension-" A group of Rockamorrann officials had gathered, a column of pikemen behind them, stolid and menacing in green-scaled breastplates and greaves.

"Ah-before you confine yourself to quarters, Retief," Pinchbottle added,

"just tell these chaps we won't be available for monster-killing. However, I think I can promise them a nice little Information Service Library, well-

stocked with the latest CDT pamphlets-"

One of the Rockamorrarts stepped forward, ducked his head, addressed the Ambassador:

"Honorable sir, I have pleasure of to be Haccop, interpretator of Terry mouth-noise learn from plenty Japanee, Dutch, Indian, and Hebrew Terry trader. We had nice chin-chin via telescreen before you-chap hit beach. ..."

"Ah, to be sure! Pity you weren't standing by during the ceremony. Now we'll get to the bottom of this nonsense!" The Ambassador shot Retief a withering look. "I have heard ... ah ... rumors, to the effect that there's some sort of ha ha dinosaur roaming the countryside-"

"Yes, yes, excellent sir! Damm decent



you-chap come along us, under circumstances!"

Pinchbottle frowned. "Perhaps I'd better clarify our position, just in case there was any confusion in translation. I am, of course, accredited by the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne as Ambassador Extraordi-nary and Minister Plenipotentiary to your government, with full authority to-"

"Hkkk! With title like that, how can you miss?" Haccop exulted. "You want few our boys along for pick up pieces, or you handle Crunderthush alone, catch more glory?"

"Here, I'm a diplomat! My offer was to assist your poor backward nation-"

"Sure; swell gesture of interplanetary chumship-"

"Just a moment!" Pinchbottle thrust out his lower lip, pointing a finger heavenward. "I deal in words and paper, sir, not deeds! That is, I am empowered to promise you anything I deem appropriate, but the actual performance is up to lesser persons-"

Haccop arranged his wide features in what was obviously a frown. "Around this end Galaxy, chum say, chum do-"

"Surely; and I'll speak to Sector HQ early next month when my vessel returns; I imagine something can be arranged-"

"Crunderthush on rampage now! No catchem wait next month! You owner genuine Japanese-made sword; you use!"

The Ambassador's chins quivered. "Sir! You forget yourself! I am the Terrestrial Ambassador, not a confounded exterminator service!"

"You-chap violate Rockamorran tradition number six-oh-two, passed two hours ago by Council of Honor-able Dotards!"

Pinchbottle unbuckled the sword, tossed it aside. Relief lunged, caught it before it hit the dirt. Arms folded, the Ambassador glared at the Rockamorran.

"Let me state unequivocally, at once, that I have no intention of attacking a dinosaur!"

Haccop's face fell-an effect like a mud-pack slip-ping. "Is final decison?"

"Indeed it is, sir!"

The Rockamorran turned, spoke to the pikeman in glottal Rockamorran; they closed in, pikes aimed at Pinchbottle and the four diplomats who had participated in the oath-taking ceremony.

"Here, what's going on?" the Ambassador yelled.

"It seems they're taking you away to the local lockup, sir," Relief said.

"They can't do this to me! And why aren't you included?" I didn't take the oath-

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"You-chap move along," Haccop said. "Rockamor-ran got no time be patience with oath-busters."

"H-how long will we be incarcerated?" First Secretary Whaffle

ble.ated.

"One day," Haccop said.

"Well, that's not too bad, Your Excellency," Magnan pointed out. "We can spend the time figuring out an alibi-I mean, of course, composing a despatch to Sector Headquarters explaining how this is really a sort of diplomatic victory, in reverse,"

"Tomorrow, my good man," the Ambassador barked, "I can assure you I shall take drastic steps-"

"Have honor of to doubt that, faithless one," Haccop said. "Pretty neat trick take steps with head off."

Ambassador Pinchbottle glared at Retief through the barred window of his cell.

"I hold you fully responsible, sir, for not warning me of this barbaric custom! I trust you've established communication with the Corps Transport and ordered their instant return?"

"I'm afraid not; the local transmitter doesn't have the range-"

"Are you out of your mind? That means ..." Pinchbottle sagged against the bars. "Retief," he whispered. "They'll lop our heads off. ..." A squad of Rockamorran pikemen rounded a corner, marched up to the Terrans' cell; Haccop produced a large key.

"Well, you-chap ready to take part in execution?"

"Just a minute," Retief said. "They promised to kill Crunderthush by

sundown tomorrow. That's still a full day away." 167

"True; but always had head-cutting after lunch; pack in better house that way, at one credit per ticket."

Retief shook his head. "Highly illegal procedure. Killing off a few diplomats is perfectly understandable, but it has to be done in accordance with protocol or you'll have a squadron of Peace Enforcers in here revising Rockamorran traditions before you can say 'interference with internal affairs.'"

"Hmmm. You might have point there. OK, we hold off until tomorrow night, have torchlight execution, very colorful."

"Retief?" Magnan gasped, pushing up against the bars. "Isn't there some way to

prevent this ghastly miscarriage of justice?"

"Only way, you-chap change mind, kill Crunder-thush," Haccop said cheerfully.

Retief looked thoughtful. "Do these gentlemen have to do the job personally?"

"Posilutely! Can't have every Tom, George and Meyer getting into act. After all, killers of Crun-derthush not only national heroes, win plenty refrigera-tor and green stamp too!"

"How about it, sir?" Whaffle addressed his chief. "Have a go, eh? Not much to lose. ..."

"How? I can't kill the beast by firing off a despatch!"



"Maybe we could dig a hole and let him fall in-"

"Do you have any idea what size excavation would be required to inconvenience a ninety-foot behemoth, you idiot!"

"Suppose the Ambassador had a little help; would that be cricket?" Haccop cocked his wide head. "Is good questioning; have to check with Ministry of Tradition on that point."

"I'd love to help, of course," Magnan said brightly. "It's just that I have this cough-"

"Yes, kaff kaff," Whaffle said. "Must be the damp air, all these confounded canals-"

"Will you let them out of the cell to

scout the area and plan some strategy for the kill?" Retief asked.

Haccop shook his head. "Nix. Oath-breakers incar168

cerated by order of Big Shots. Release also have to clear through same. But glad to check up after nap-time."

"When will that be?"

"Nap over late tomorrow afternoon; maybe Midget-with-shiny-head and pals have just time turn trick before deadline."

"How can we kill a dinosaur while we're locked in here?" Pinchbottle demanded.

"Should have think of this before break oath," Haccop said briskly.

"Interesting problem; interesting see

how ..comes out." Outside, Relief drew Haccop aside. "I don't suppose there's any objection to my taking a look around? I'd like to see what this monster looks like."

"Sure; do what you like, not charge for look at Crunderthush, see free any time-just so you got money pay way."

"I see. I don't suppose you'd lend me an official guide?"

"Correct. Rockamorran great tightwad, don't lend nothing, especially to foreigner."

"All I have is pocket change; I don't suppose you'd cash a check?"

"Hey, you skillful guesser, Terry, you like gamble?"

"I can see it's going to be a bit

difficult to get around, without funds-"

"Oh-oh, guess wrong that time, spoil record. Better find answer, though; you run out of cash, you automati-cally slave."

"I get the feeling you don't much care whether this monster menace is removed or not."

"Is correct assumption. Big tourist drawing card. Also more fun this way, have something to bet on. Odds ten to one against Terries now." 169

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"Meanwhile, he goes on eating people."

"Sure, few peasants got devour, but so long Crun-derthush avoid eat me, is no scales off my stiz-plats, in word of

immortal bard."

"Shakespeare?"

"No. Egbert Hiesenwhacker, early Terran trader introduce cards and dice to Rockamorra."

"Cards and dice, eh?"

"Sure; you like play? Come on, have fun, forget troubles, help kill time up to big affair tomorrow." i

"That's a good idea, Haccop; lead the way. ..." F

It was dawn when Relief emerged from the Rockamorran gambling hell; Haccop followed him at the end of a light chain attached to a steel ring rivetted to his ankle, carrying a large basket of Rockamorran currency.

"Hey, Retief-master, lousy trick fill up

when I got three ladies of ill repute-"

"I warned you about those inside straights, Haccop. Now tell me something; all that information the boys gave me about Crunderthush's habits. Was that all the straight dope?"

"Sure, Retief: pukka information-"

"All right, next stop the Ministry of Tradition. Lead on, Haccop." An hour later, Retief emerged from the Ministry, frowning.

"It's not the best deal in the world, Haccop, but I suppose it's better than nothing."

"Should have offered bigger bribes, boss." 170

"I'm on a tight budget. Still I think we have a fighting chance. I'm going to need

a heli and a good pair of binoculars. See to it at once, and meet me at the Grand Canal in half an hour."

"Boss, why worry about small-timers back in hoose-gow? Look, I got plan; we be partners. You deal, and I circulate around behind opposition and signal with trick sunglasses-"

"We can discuss business later. Get going, before I report you to the Slave Relations Board for insubordi-nation."

"Sure, chief, chop-chop!" Haccop set off at a lope, and Retief headed for the nearest sporting-goods shop.

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Half an hour later, Haccop dropped a second-hand float-mounted heli in beside the quay where Retief waited

beside a heap of goods. The Terran caught the mooring rope, pulled the light machine close, handed in his purchases and stepped aboard.

"They say Crunderthush is foraging a mile or two east of town; let's buzz over that way and size him up."

The heli lifted above the fernlike palms, beat its way across the gleaming pattern of canals and dome-shaped dwellings of Rockamorra City, gaining altitude; beyond the tilled paddies at the edge of the town a vast swamp stretched to distant smudges of jungle.

"That's him, boss!" Haccop called, pointing. Retief used the binoculars, picked out a towering shape almost invisible among the tall trees rising in



clumps from the shallow water.

"He's big, all right. But he seems to be eating treetops; I thought he was a meat-eater."

"Sure, meat-eater, master. Dumb peasant climb tree get away, Crunderthush not have to bend neck."

The heli approached the browsing dinosaur at three hundred feet, circled him while Retief observed. The

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giant saurian, annoyed by the buzzing interloper, raised his great-jawed head, emitted a bellow like a blast on a giant tuba. Relief caught a vivid glimpse of a purple throat wide enough to drive a ground car through, studded with fangs like stalactites.

"Friendly-looking fellow. Is it possible to predict his course?"

"Maybe; Crunderthush always take it easy, graze village over pretty good before move on to next. About done here, I estimation. By lunchtime start toward next stop, half mile south."

"Let's cruise over that way."

Haccop dropped the heli to a fifty-foot altitude, buzzed across the flat water, leaving behind a pattern of blastripples, bending the scattered reeds in the wind of its passage.

"How deep is the water here?" Relief called.

"Knee-deep at low tide."

"When's low tide?"

"Hour before sunset tonight."

"What's the bottom like?"

"Exquisite soft mud. Hey, master, you like go down scroonch around in mud awhile? Is good for what ails you-"

"Sorry, we Terries aren't amphibians, Haccop."

"Oops, big excuses, chief; not mean draw attention to racial deficiencies."

"Will Crunderthush follow a straight course across the swamp?" The heli was over the mud walls of the next village now. Retief could see the inhabitants going about their business as usual, apparently undisturbed by their position next on the menu.

"No telling, boss; might get distracted by juicy fisherman or unwary swimming party."

"Can we hire boats down there, and a few helpers?"

"Retief-master, you got enough cash to hire whole town." Haccop signed.

"That pot before last; I never figured you for eagles back to back-" 172

"No post-mortems," Retief admonished. "Land there, in the marketplace." Haccop dropped the flier in, grinned at the quickly gathering crowd of curious locals.

"I tell hicks go away, give Retief-boss room walk around, do little shopping?" he suggested.

"Absolutely not; we're going to need them. Listen carefully, Haccop; here's what I have in mind . . ."

It was late afternoon when Retief, wet

and plastered to the hips with black mud, signaled to Haccop to land at the northernmost point of the village, a narrow ringer of land edged by a baked-mud' retaining wall. Half a mile away, wading ponderously across the shallows, Crunderthush rumbled softly to himself.

"The sound carries well, across the water," Retief commented. "It sounds as though he's right on top of us."

"Arid will be, plenty chop-chop," Haccop pointed out. "Retief-master think rope across water make big fella fall down?" The Rockamorran waved a hand at the taut one-inch nylon cable stretch two feet above the surface of the water across the oncoming monster's path.

"He won't get that far, if everything works out all right. How much time do we have? Another hour?"

"Crunderthush stop now to scratch-"

Retief observed the dinosaur sinking to his haunches, bringing up a massive hind leg to rake at the armored hide with two-foot talons, amid a pro-digious splashing. "Maybe have hour, hour and half before dinnertime." Haccop concluded judiciously.

"OK, let's get moving! Get the hauling crew over here on the double. Have them attach a line to the

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center of the cable, and winch it this way until they can hook it over the trigger." Retief pointed to a heavy timber

construction consisting of an eighteen-inch pile projecting a yard from the ground with a toggle mounted atop it.

"Retief-chief, humble slave bushed from all day stringing wires to trees-"

"We'll be through pretty soon. How's the axe-crew doing with that pole?"

"Top hole, sahib. Pretty near get nice point on one end, notch on other-"

"Get it set up here as soon as they're finished; prop it in the two forked saplings the boys are supposed to set in the bottom out there."

"Too many thing do all one time," Haccop com-plained. "Bwana Retief have strange hobby-"

"I'm taking the heli into town; I'll be back in half an hour. Have everything

ready just the way I explained it, or it won't be just Terry heads rolling around here."

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The great pale sun of Rockamorra, with its tiny blue-white companion close behind, was just sinking in a glory of purple and old rose as Retief returned to ground the heli at the village.

"Ohio, Retief-san!" Haccop called. "All set, accord-ingly to plan! Now we hit trail, plenty quick! Crunder-thush too close for maximizing adjustment!"

"Look at the creature!" Whaffle quavered, descend-ing from the heli. "As big as a Yill Joss Palace-and coming this way!"

"Why have you brought us here,



Retief?" Pinchbot-tle demanded, his jowls paler than usual. "I prefer beheading to serving as hors d'oeuvre to that levia-than!"

"It's quite simple, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said soothingly, leading the stout diplomat across to where

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Haccop stood beaming beside the completed appara-tus. "You merely use this mallet to hit the trigger; this releases the cable, which drives the lance-"

"R-R-R-R-Retief! Are you unaware that-that-that-"

"I know: he looks pretty big at a hundred yards, doesn't he, Mr. Magnan?"

But he moves slowly. We have plenty of time-"

"We? Why include us in this mad venture?" the portly envoy demanded.

"You heard what Haccop said, sir. You gentlemen have to personally kill the creature. I think I have it arranged so that-

"Oh-oh, Master!" Haccop pointed. "Look like dis-traction! Couple drunks going fishing!"

Relief followed the Rockamorrans' gaze, saw a dugout pushing off with two staggering locals singing gaily as they took up paddles, steered for deep water on a course that would take them within fifty feet of the dinosaur.

"Try to stop them, Haccop! If he changes course now, we're out of luck!" Haccop splashed out a few yards into

the mud, floundering, cupped his hands and bellowed. The fishermen saw him, waved cheerfully, kept going.

"No use, boss." Haccop waded back to shore. "Look, better you and me make tracks, hit town farther up archipelago; swell floating crap game going-"

"Mr. Ambassador, stand by!" Retief snapped. "I'll have to bait him in. When I give the word, hit that trigger, and not a second before!" He sprinted to the small wharf nearby, jumped into a tethered boat, slipped the painter, plied quickly out toward Crunder-thush. The monster was poised now, mouth open, gazing toward the fishermen. He emitted a rumbling growl, turned ponderously, took a step to intercept them. Retief,

cutting in front of the dinosaur, waved his paddle and shouted. The giant reptile hesitated, turned to stare at Retief, rumbled again. Then, at a burst of 175

song from the happy anglers, swung back their way. Retief stopped, plucked a rusty fishing weight from the bottom of his skiff, hurled it at Crunderthush. It struck the immense leathery chest with a resounding whop! at which the monster paused in mid-swing, brought its left eye to bear on Retief. It stared, cocked its head to bring the right eye into play, then, its tiny mind made up, raised a huge foot from the mud with a sucking sound, started for Retief. He eased the boat back with quick strokes of the paddle; the dinosaur, tantalized by the

receding prey, lunged, gained thirty feet, sending up a swell which rocked the tiny craft violently. Retief grabbed for balance, dropped the paddle.

"Retief-boss!" Haccop boomed. "This no time to goof!"

"Somebody do something!" Magnan's voice wailed.

"He'll be devoured!" Whaffle yelped.

The dinosaur lunged again; his power-shovel jaws gaped, snapped to with a clash of razor-edged crockery a yard short of the boat. Retief, standing in the stern, gauged the range, then turned and raised an arm, brought it down in a chopping motion.

"Let her go, Mr. Ambassador!" he called, and dived over the side.

Ambassador Pinchbottle, standing transfixed beside the trigger apparatus of the oversized arbalest, gaped as Crunderthush raised his long neck twenty feet above the water, streaming mud, emitted an ear-splitting screech, and struck at Retief, swimming hard for shore. At the last instant, Retief twisted, kicked off to the left. The monster, confused, raised his head for another look; his eye fell on the diplomats on shore, now only fifty feet distant. At his glance, Pinchbottle dropped the heavy mallet, turned and sprinted for the heli. Three other Terrans gave sharp cries and wheeled to follow. As the stout mission chief bounded past Secretary Magnan he tripped, dived face-down in

the soft dirt. The mallet skidded aside; Magnan sprang for it, caught it on the second bounce, leaped to the trigger, and brought the hammer over and down in an overarm swing176

There was a deep, musical boing! The sharpened twelve-foot hardwood pole leaped forward as the taut nylon sprang outward. Crunderthush, just gathering himself for the final satisfying snap at the morsel in the water before him, rocked back as the lance buried half its length full in his chest. Relief surfaced in time to see the dinosaur totter, fall sideways with a tremendous splash that swamped the sea wall, sent a tide of mud-and-blood-stained water washing around the fran-tic Terrans fighting for position at

the heli hatch. Pinchbottle staggered to his feet sputtering, as the flood receded from his position. Magnan sat down hard, fumbled out a hanky and daubed mud from his lapels, watching the stricken monster kicking spasmodically. Haccop whooped delightedly, plunged into the water to assist Retief ashore.

"Nice going, Sidi! Plenty meat here for barbecue for whole town! Dandy substitute event for disappoint of not to see Terry head-chopping after all!" 11

Dabbing at his mud-caked shirt front, Am-bassador Pinchbottle nodded curtly at Retief.

"Having gotten me into this awkward situation, young man, I'm glad to see that you carried on to rectify matters.



Naturally, I could have extricated myself and my staff at any time, merely by a skillful word in the right quarter, but I felt it would be valuable experience for you to work this out for yourself-

"Hey, Retief-master, I form Terries up in column of ducks, go get fitted for leg irons?"

"No, I don't think that will be necessary, Haccop-

"What's that? Leg irons?" Pinchbottle whirled on the Rockamorran. "See here, you nincompoop, I've slain your monster, as required by your barbaric code! Now I demand-

"Slave not demand nothing," Haccop said. "Slave 177

hold mouth right, work hard, hope for

escape beating-" The Ambassador spun to face Retief. "What, may I ask, is the meaning of this idiot's driveling?"

"Well, Mr. Ambassador, the Rockamorrans have very rigid rules about this sort of thing, However, I managed to work out a deal with them. Ordinarily, you couldn't have any assistance in carrying out your oath-"

"Assistance? I seem to recall that you were disport-ing yourself in the swamp yonder when I-er, ah-a member of my staff, that is-dispatched the brute!"

"True; but the Rockamorrans seem to think I had something to do with it. Under the circumstances they agreed to commute your sentence to slavery for life."

"Slavery!"

"Fortunately, I was able to buy up an option on your contracts-provided you still had heads-"

"Buy up . . . ? Well, in that case, my boy, I suppose I can overlook the irregularity. If you'll just run along and see to my baggage-"

"I'm afraid it's not quite that simple, sir. You see, I still have to pay your upkeep, and since I've spent all my money buying you-" Pinchbottle sputtered incoherently.

"... I've had to hire you out to earn enough to cover living expenses until the ship gets back."

"But-but-that will be weeks-"

"OK, Terries; I, Haccop, am slave

foreman. First job, strip out blubber from dead monster. Good job, take maybe two weeks, keep you in ration with maybe little left over for pack of Camels once a week-

"But-but-Retief! What will you be doing in the meantime?"

"Haccop tells me there's another dinosaur operating a few miles east. If I can bag it, that will give you another two weeks' work after this job's finished. With a little luck, I can keep you going until the ship arrives."

"Hey, Retief ..." Haccop came close, whispered 178

behind his hand, "Maybe better bring thin-face slave name Magnan along you, me. Got idea Midget-with-bad-temper

hold grudge, Magnan trip him and make him lose number one position in dash for heli. ..." "Good idea, Haccop, bring him along. . . ."

12

Two hours later, Retief, Haccop, and Magnan, bathed and clad in new Rockamorran hose and doublets, sat on a tiled roof terrace, dining on a delicately spiced casserole of whitefish and sea vegeta-bles. The view out over the town and the water to the east was superb; the brilliant light of the three moons showed the silvery waterways, the island-villages, and,

distantly, the great hulk of the dead dinosaur, its four legs in the air, and four tiny figures crawling over it like fleas.

Their arms, wielding machetes, could be clearly discerned.

"Retief, no time linger over succulent native dishes," Haccop said. "Plenty big game of Red Eye just getting under way at Tavern of Golden Ale Keg.

... "

"Don't rush me, Haccop. Order us a second round of drinks-but none for Mr. Magnan. He doesn't indulge. The Ambassador doesn't approve of booze." Magnan blinked at him thoughtfully.

"Ah, Retief, knowing your skill with the pasteboards and the, er, galloping dominoes, why couldn't you secure sufficient capital to provision Ambassador Pinchbottle and the others without the necessity for their stripping

all that blubber?"

Retief sampled the fresh drink the waiter put before him, nodded appreciatively.

"Mr. Magnan, the ship won't arrive for at least six weeks, possibly longer. Would you recommend that a nonaccredited diplomat with Ambassador Pinchbottle's personality be permitted to run loose among the Rockamorrans for that length of time?"

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Magnan looked grave, swallowed hard. "I see what you mean, Relief; but if he finds out, he'll be furious. ..."

"I don't intend to burden him with the knowledge, j Mr. Magnan. Do you?"

Magnan pursed his lips. "No," he

said. "What he • doesn't know won't hurt him, eh?" He managed a tentative smile. "Speaking of which, I think I'll have i that drink after all."