

Kwarto settled his pseudopods into a more comfortable position. He would have preferred to adopt the Third Stance of Waiting, but the reports Rwado filed before his nervous episode indicated it wouldn't help. Despite long study, Umboko scientists hadn't been able to decipher Mankind's incomprehensible language of sitting and standing.

Once again, he regretted not accepting the offer of scientific liaison in Belgium. In the two years since the Umboko had arrived, there hadn't been one instance of trouble in Belgium. His brood-family had warned him to stick with science, but he wanted to make a difference. So he applied for a political posting. Somehow, he ended up replacing Rwado as transition overseer for the United States. Which, with typical human disregard for logic in naming things, was the most divided part of the planet. Although, he had to admit it was in a state.

But self-pity wouldn't detoxify the air. He returned his attention to the Oval Office. He thought it was a positive sign that President Masterbath, or Gulp as he preferred to be called, wanted to meet in a room without corners. Obviously he was more aware of the symbolism of the egg than Rwado had thought. Although Gulp had covered most of the walls with portraits of battle.

A low rumble distracted Kwarto from his attempt to discern the President's nuanced negotiating strategy. Kwarto realised it was coming from the other side of the windows. The uniformed men standing outside seemed unconcerned. Curious, he glided over.

At first everything looked normal. Then he noticed the plants beginning to shake as the sound increased. Looking upward he saw one of the humanity's primitive air vehicles hovering over the garden. If the pilot didn't move soon, he risked knocking petals off the roses. Kwarto waited for the guards to wave him off.

Instead of trying to get the jet to leave, they were just holding their hats. Kwarto had barely begun to consider the ramifications of intervening personally, when the jet began to descend. Rocking and wavering, it oscillated across most of the borders, blasting petals and leaves, before finally smashing a particularly fine rose border beneath its landing gear.

Kwarto watched in utter shock as a tall muscular man leapt from the cockpit and waved at the guards. The pilot threw his helmet back into the cockpit. When he turned back, Kwarto realised it was the President himself.

Before Kwarto could recover his composure, Gulp crashed through another border and into the Oval Office. Thrusting out a heavily tanned and muscular hand, he advanced. "I come in peace, ha ha ha."

Kwarto extended a pseudopod in response, then winced as Gulp squeezed it tightly. "Mr President, I'm the new representative from Umboko. I'm here to ensure that you follow the rules set down in our agreement with your United Nations." He realises he is having to shout over the scream of the jet engine. Shouldn't it have shut down by now? Was it broken? Or had Gulp been too distracted by the meeting? "Shouldn't you turn off your plane?"

"It would take five minutes to warm it up again. I'm only going to be here for a couple of hours."

"Mr President, you're meant to be transitioning to electric power. Our scientists have given you a clean, powerful technology to use. Every litre of fossil fuel that jet burns just makes your problems worse. I've heard that a new hurricane has devastated the south-east of your country."

"Oh no. You're not one of those climate change nutbars, are you?" Gulp rolled his eyes. "The science isn't decided on that yet, you know."

"The only remaining human scientist denying it is in an insane asylum."

"Exactly. There are scientists on both sides."

"Mr President, you need to comply with the rules. Every other country on the planet is following them quite voluntarily. Otherwise, we will have to invade and force you to."

"Do what the other countries are doing? Hell, the U S of A is a leader not a follower. Besides, them other countries are just a bunch of fork lickers."

Kwarto was unused to Gulp's habit of inventing new insults that do not actually make sense. Confused, he adopted the Fourth Stance of Query.

Expecting Gulp to clarify his point, Kwarto was somewhat surprised when Gulp kicked him between the lower pseudopods, knocking him over. Unfortunately for Gulp, Umboko are not very similar to humans, so it was not a disabling kick.

The sound of Kwarto's body hitting the floor did attract the attention of the Secret Service who, sharing Gulp's shoot-first-then-shoot-some-more philosophy, assumed Kwarto must be up to something and opened fire.

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Gulp laughed as Kwarto dived out of the window with the Secret Service in hot pursuit. That felt good and was good for national security too. If those Communists were using that zero-point energy stuff and the Umboko were just giving it away, it had to be a bad thing. He would stick to good old US oil and coal.

He realised his detail were returning through the window. The little green man must have escaped. Although the Umboko weren't green. Which just went to show they were up to something, disguising themselves like that. It was his duty to tell people. He wondered whether to announce their evil now or wait for a pansy-ass liberal to start moaning about strip-mining animals.

Oscar Finnegan, his chief of staff, came running in. "What happened, Mr President?"

"That red-green bastard tried to tell me what to do. Threatened to invade if I didn't roll over. But Gulp Masterbath ain't no handbag dog. No, he's a croc-killer. So I kicked him in the fundamentals and then these fine American boys ran him off. You reckon we should do the announcement in the Rose Garden? Already got the jet, so we can just get them writer boys to drag themselves out."

Oscar pauses as several different trains wreck themselves in his brain; but long experience has helped him understand the President's metaphors. Silently agreeing Gulp is definitely not the sort of dog you keep in a handbag, he starts considering the logistics of moving the press corps into the Rose Garden, with a jet taking up most of it. Then the beginning of the sentence catches up with his fore-brain. "Invade? You kicked him?"

"Hell yeah! Telling someone you're gonna attack's a Democrat trick. A real man just belts them."

"I better call the Joint Chiefs and the UN," muttered Oscar. Maybe there was some way to straighten this out before the Umboko actually did invade.

"Good plan. We'll belt them again while they're still reeling. Didn't the CIA say those cuckoo nutters had got rid of their missiles just cos they weren't healthy. That means they can't shoot ours down. We can smack em in the kisser."

"You want to attack Switzerland?"

"Don't everyone? Don't look like you sat on a lemon, Ozzy. I only mean the bit with greenies in, and we only use the small nukes."

Oscar sighed as he started the recently-streamlined process of launching a nuclear attack at Geneva.

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Kwarto ran back to the solar charging point, where he'd left his ship, as fast as his six pseudopods would carry him. Waving it open, he let the ship whisk him back to the Umboko headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.

As the ship zipped efficiently through the sky, Kwarto considered the conundrum. The Umboko had been watching the humans for thousands of years. They built the pyramids – large arrows pointing at the sky – as a signal for humans to come and meet them. Some jerks called the Pharaohs took all the credit. So the Umboko wrote instructions in cornfields on how to build a spaceship. The humans thought they were just an elaborate prank. Kwarto assumed the Fifteenth Stance of Confusion. He didn't know how humans had lasted even this long. They choose to elect idiots like Gulp Masterbath and then complained that their economies didn't work. They bought a new, but just as inefficient, fossil-fuel-powered vehicle every year and then complained the weather was not the same as when they were young. Had they no grasp of meta-systemic analysis?

As soon as the ship settled in front of the newly-constructed Umboko headquarters, Kwarto glided out and climbed the nearby wall to the entrance on the sixteenth floor. But instead of the haven of sanity he was seeking, the building was filled with fast-moving Umboko, some so panicked not even one pseudopod was in a recognisable pattern.

He stopped a nearby colleague. "What is going on?"

"The United States has launched nuclear-tipped solid-fuel projectiles at us. They are wasting more energy than ever before. The chief says that we're all to pull out at once. This planet is doomed. There's just no saving the humans from themselves."

Kwarto adopts the First Stance of Swearing. "That's plonko waste. I'm going to talk to the chief."

He took the nearest ascension tunnel to the top of the building. Umboko and humans had that in common at least, the big wigs were always at the top.

Chief Pling emerged from his office, his big wig wavering precariously on his head. "Kwarto, what did you do?"

"Nothing, Chief. It's their president. He's a lunatic."

"We're out of here. The humans can just let their planet rot, there's no saving them."

"You've not given me a chance. Let me divert those projectiles and invade the United States. Once Gulp Masterbath sees us reverting his troops, he'll have to submit."

Chief Pling stared at Kwarto for a long moment with his pseudopod of examination and then adopted the Sixth Stance of Acceptance. "All right. You have my permission to revert twenty million United States troops, but not a Private more than that."

Kwarto grinned, his brain temporarily falling onto the floor in happiness.

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In the control room, Kwarto watched the technician divert the projectiles toward the nuclear recycling plant that the Umboko placed in orbit shortly after their arrival. Part one of the plan complete, he leant over the microphone in front of him. "All right. Move in and let them have it."

On the screens in front of him, Umboko soldiers moved efficiently up to the Canada-US border, revert guns at the ready.

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General Rauche crumpled a piece of paper and spat out his cigar. "Mr President, NORAD reports our ICBMs have changed direction and are heading into space. And we have reports of Umboko soldiers crossing the border from Canada."

"Them low-down high-up sons of squids are stealing our nukes," raged Gulp, "And you say those hockey-playing excuses for gun owners are just letting them invade? Don't they have any patriotic spirit?"

"Canada isn't part of the United States," replied Oscar patiently.

Gulp waved at a map on the table in front of them. "Sure it's. Alaska's the northeast state. And there it is. And there's Canada below it. So Canada's ours. Now, someone give me some good news."

"Well, the Umboko have been held just inside the border since they crossed."

"Yee-har!" shouted Gulp Masterbath, not afraid to adopt the language of other states if it was manly enough, "I knew our boys would give them a whooping."

"Actually, Mr President, the Army aren't there yet. Each Umboko is stopping to declare they aren't attempting to bring proscribed fruits and vegetables into the country."

"Inscribed vegetables. That one of those funny tomato things? Well, when do the Army get there?"

"The Airborne will be deploying in 20 minutes. Unfortunately we never anticipated being invaded by Canada, so we don't have a readiness plan. Not for over a century."

Someone coughed in the shadows. "Actually, we do."

Gulp peered into the corner. One of the shadows had cuff-links. "Who the gopher spit are you?"

"That's Mr Jones," says Oscar, "He's a contractor with the Defence Department."

"What? CIA?"

"Something like that," replied Jones, "When the plan to defend against Canada was mothballed, no-one specifically mothballed the plan to update the plan, so it was post-positively aggressised as part of a proactive upscale leverage of intelligence actualities in a virtual schema re-orientation. By deploying a pre-reactive material strategy from covert units within Alaska we can initiate redacted redacted, thereby redacted their redacted."

"He means we have a plan for whupping Canada," translated Oscar.

"Well that's the kind of American thinking we need. Rauche, give this man everything he needs to make it happen. Ozzy, bring me my flying jacket."

"Are you cold, Mr President?"

"Cold? No, I'm going to watch our boys show these Canadians they can't just go leaving the Union."

Oscar quailed inside, then sent an aide for the President's jacket. If he went along with the

plan, maybe Gulp wouldn't come up with an even less feasible one. Listening to Gulp talking about getting a good spot to watch the battle, Oscar began to wonder if the Commander-in-Chief understood modern warfare. Let alone whatever crazy futuristic stuff the aliens might be bringing to the table.

Unfortunately for the health of the United States, freed of Gulp's oversight, the Joint Chiefs and Mr Jones quickly implemented a strategy. Using the first generation of stealth deployment vehicles reverse-engineered from the Roswell crash, they managed to launch several chemical warheads at areas of outstanding beauty within Canada. The Umboko soon recalibrated their sensors, directing the second wave to disposal sites, but several unique environments were already contaminated.

The Umboko invasion continued, but half of their forces remained in Canada to commence a environmental clean-up.

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Kwarto stood on a ridge, surveying the once-beautiful Canadian wilderness. Green slime coated every tree and bush as far as he could see, the worst affected already beginning to melt into a foul-smelling sludge. Rage overcoming instinctive fear of touching the unknown, the Canadian Prime-Minister nudged Kwarto to attract his attention and then stepped back. Kwarto turned to find a plate of maple-syrup-coated bacon thrust in his direction. Was the entire race focused on mixing inappropriate substances? Kwarto shifted to the Seventh Stance of Disgusted Decline.

"They totally wrecked our countryside, ay? We're pledging the entire Canadian army to your cause, ay?"

"Good." Kwarto waved to a nearby Umboko, who brought over a stubby gun-like device. "We'll outfit your soldiers with these reverters. We need to get that idiot, Gulp Masterbath. Once he's gone, the rest of the United States should fall in line."

"What does it do, ay?"

"It reverts them back to the time when they were most happy. For the majority of humans, it's when they were about six-years-old." Deciding Chief Pling is unlikely to spend time counting the exact number of soldiers converted, or blame Kwarto if the humans are a little too enthusiastic, he refrains from mentioning the target limitation. "That immense army on the other side of the border will become a bunch of children."

"Will their parents be that happy to see them turned into six-year-olds, ay?"

"Do you have to say 'ay' at the end of every sentence? Isn't that a stereotype? Their parents will probably be happy that their children are not going to die in some ridiculous war."

"All right, I'll make sure my soldiers get these reverting thingies... ay?"

Kwarto nodded and returned to his ship. He quickly reached the border, gaining his first real sight of American troops. Not only were they using massive Cadillac convertibles and Hummers in defiance of the environmental message of the Umboko, but they were actually revving the engines for no reason, enclosing their own side in clouds of choking exhaust. How could a race survive if it was prepared to harm itself rather than see reason? Kwarto adopted what his observations indicated was the First Human Stance of Frustration: two middle manipulator tendrils pointing at the United States army.

Surveying their futile posturing, he considered letting the Canadians deal with it on their own. It was important not to seem-

He nearly fell out of his sling. A giant white egg, covered in brutal projections was floating erratically toward the rear of the American lines. It looked like Umboko technology, but the humans shouldn't have that.

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Ignoring both safety and noise pollution issues, Gulp hammered his jet toward the border at almost ground level, afterburner leaving a trail of forest fires behind him. He slammed down just behind the American lines. Leaping dramatically from the cockpit, he strode into the command post. "We got those cheese-holders on the run, boys? Or do I have time for a beer?"

"Mr President. We weren't told to expect you. Um... we are holding them for the moment, but... there seems to be something odd going on. Some sort of giant floating egg turned up half-an-hour ago and started firing a purple ray."

"Them Canadian traitors got air support? Why haven't we blasted it?"

"No, sir. It's zapping away at the Umboko."

"Egg you say. Don't sound very American to me. You sure it ain't a commie trick, boy? Better shoot at it to be sure."

"Yes, sir."

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Kwarto watched in disbelief as something that looked like a cross between an Umboko escape pod and one of humanity's primitive hovercraft continued to roll back the left flank of the attack. It sputtered as American artillery began to shell it. "What is that horrible noise?"

"I believe it's the Battle Hymn of the Republic, played on a theremin," replied the Canadian general assigned to him as liaison. "But I'm more worried about that ray."

"It's only a modified contagion-containment beam. Tell your men to purge their blood glands before advancing and they'll be fine."

"Blood glands?"

"Yes. The beam induces an aligned flagellum response in bacteria, allowing us to gently herd them away from the area without having to harm them. So as long as-" Kwarto suddenly remembered the xeno-biology briefing he received in transit to Earth; specifically human digestive symbiosis. He adopted the Ninth Stance of Contrition. "I'm sorry, General. I forgot how primitive your species' energy-release process is. Let the Umboko hold back the craft. Focus your people on the right side."

Resettling his medium-sized conflict-amelioration wig, Kwarto headed for the nearest Umboko transport. Unless they were somehow infinitely more intelligent than they seemed, the Americans would not have replicated all the technology of the escape pod. Their reliance on primitive energy sources would be their undoing. If he could induce the right resonance, their engine would just shut down.

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Gulp Masterbath paused, silhouetted, at the top of a small rise. A lieutenant ran over and tried to drag him into cover, but found Gulp was, as ever, intractable.

"Don't panic, soldier. Them fish-eating sons of trees ain't gonna shot old Gulp Masterbath. What's the situation?"

"We're being pushed back. They seem to have reinforcements, and we had to stop the barrage when we noticed there were children on the battlefield."

"Children! Those eight-legged Canadian tea drinkers are using children!" Gulp started running toward the battle. "This needs the personal touch."

Seeing the President launching a single-handed charge through the lines, the lieutenant quickly lead his men in pursuit, gathering up as many other units as he could in a futile attempt to keep the Commander-in-Chief safe.

Breaking through the line of revving Hummers, Gulp strode through the crossing streams of reverters and bullets, miraculously avoiding both. Approaching the nearest six-year-old former soldier, he noticed the US flag on his sleeve and immediately snapped a photogenic salute.

"You're a funny man," said the child, pulling a face.

"What you doing out here, sonny?"

The child brandished an M-16. "Playing cowboys."

"That's a fine gun. But I bet you like ice-cream better."

The child nodded solemnly. Other children, hearing ice-cream, stopped waving guns and gathered around, trousers and sleeves dragging in the mud.

"If you lend me your gun, then you can have ice-cream. The rest of you can have some too."

The children immediately took the deal. Clutching his new toy, Gulp advanced toward the enemy, not noticing the soldiers being reverted around him.

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Blinking, Kwarto checked the report again. Gulp had taken the field himself. This might be the chance to end it all without further unpleasantness. Abandoning his search for a phase aggregator, he ordered the nearest Canadian troops to focus their fire on Gulp.

Beam after beam struck the President, but – unfortunately for Kwarto – Gulp was not given to introspection or regret; whatever he was doing at any one moment was usually the happiest moment of his life, so the beams only reverted him a few seconds to when he lead the charge.

"It's not working. Unless we can deal with Gulp, they'll just send more soldiers." Kwarto waved his pseudopods in annoyance, as the other Umboko just adopted the Fifteenth Stance of Confusion. He would have to be a soldier, as well as a scientist and a politician. Holding his wig to his head, he dashed straight for Gulp.

When Kwarto reached him, the United States President was firing randomly at Umboko, either not noticing or not caring that the bullets were just sticking to them before being picked off for recycling. Kwarto stopped in front of the President, who immediately kicked him between between the pseudopods again.

"Mr President, what is any of this accomplishing?" Kwarto asked, trying not to fall over. "We're turning all of your soldiers into six-year-olds and your guns cannot hurt us."

Instead of a logical answer, Gulp span his M16 dramatically, before pointing the barrel directly at Kwarto's face and pulling the trigger. "Yee-har! Take that you commie no-goodnik."

Kwarto sighed and waited for the gun to run out of ammo. He carefully put the bullets into a pocket to recycle later. "I've had just about enough of this. If you don't stop, we're going to leave."

"Fine, leave. That's what we've been trying to get you to do all along."

Kwarto was suddenly struck by a cunning plan. He could almost kick himself for not having thought of it sooner. "I guess we will have to see if the Democrats want our campaign contributions instead." He started walking away, but only made it three paces.

"Wait. I didn't know you were looking to invest in a political campaign. I've got a bottle of Scotch with your name on it."

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Kwarto swirled the amber liquid around the glass. Apparently not all of Gulp's obsessions were unpleasant. Ethanol. Plant phenols. Water. Yet somehow the combination was more than just chemistry. And Gulp did not seem quite so bad when he was not talking about the environment.

"Then you power through and.... TOUCHDOWN!"

"Sounds very exciting, and much like Ordam Remtar, one of the favourite games of my people. Except, in Ordam Remtar we don't keep stopping and don't wear armour."

"Well, your people probably don't play hard enough to need it. Hell, you're more intellectual than a polecat in a sock drawer."

This was Gulp being friendly to a donor? No wonder no-one wanted this backwards country. Maybe it would help if he responded in kind? "On the contrary, Ordam Remtar is very violent. We can control our impulses, so we seem calm to you. On the Fields of Remtar, we allow ourselves to experience them to the full."

"You saying we're yellower than a French custard maker? Americans are no better than some sort of European?"

Kwarto hastily took a sip of whisky. Becoming European would be a step up, but it was probably not politic to explain that. Apparently he has misjudged the manly-bonding ritual. He should try to calm Gulp down again. "I don't think the United States is like Europe at all. I can't think of anywhere in Europe that would have you as leader."

"Mighty fine of you to say so." Gulp smacked Kwarto hard in the arm, nearly knocking him out of his chair. "You're all right for a squid."

Realising Gulp used physical violence for positive as well as negative social interaction, Kwarto had another idea. Waiting until the President had settled back in his seat, he lashed out as hard as he could, propelling Gulp out of his chair, across the room and into a wall. He tried not to take pleasure in either the pleasing smack or the dazed look on Gulp's face. "You are not without positive qualities either."

All the doors to the Oval Office burst open and men in black suits rushed in. Seeing Kwarto seated next to the crumpled body of the President, the Secret Service made Gulp proud by immediately resorting to a hail of gunfire. Woozy from the combination of whisky and bouncing off a wall, Gulp waved a hand at the pretty ripples where the bullets stuck to Kwarto.

Magazines expended, the Secret Service tried to grab Kwarto. But, adopting the Stance of

Resolute Individuality, he kept slipping free. After a few minutes of watching the brawl, Gulp realised he was still on the floor and staggered up. "S'OK boys. We were just goofing around. Say, Kwarto, you got a hook like an Alaskan lumberjack. I might'a misjudged you lot. Let's sort this whole thing out the easy way."

"That would be a reasonable decision. What do you propose?"

"We'll take your gift of free energy, and all them other dohickeys, on one condition..."

Gulp swayed slightly, before collapsing into a chair.

Kwarto began to feel better. Obviously the manly bonding worked. The people of the United States operated a respect hierarchy, so Gulp probably wanted to pretend the arrangement was his idea.

"We play for it, squidy."

"What?"

"This Ordamorder thing. We play a game of that. You win, we take all your stuff. I win, you donate to my campaign anyway and stop bothering me about all the green crap. Less you're yellow?"

Kwarto flailed in distress. Ordam Remtar was dangerous. It could take years to train a human team to play without the risk of dying. But this was the closest to compromise any of his people had reached with the Americans. And the alternative was just letting the Americans continue to shoot at, run over, or poison everything on the planet. He had to accept.

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Kwarto watched Gulp smear grease all over his naked body. He had tried explaining several times that being naked was unnecessary, but Gulp seemed determined. "Are you sure you understand the rules, Mr President?"

Gulp nodded. "I got it, boy. Whoever holds onto this flarmplat the longest wins."

"And the more of your players holding it, the more points you get," Kwarto said, waving to the four Secret Service agents behind the President, naked other than their sunglasses, which seem to be permanently attached.

"And that you can hit anyone you want," Gulp enthused.

Kwarto nodded wearily. He was still not certain Gulp understood most of the game, but he got that rule straight away. "Time to go to the stadium."

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Kwarto lead Gulp and the four agents into the football stadium commandeered for the event. A wall of noise hit him as he entered the tunnel. Roaring humans of all ages filled the near end of the stands, contrasting with the utterly quiet Umboko at the far end. Instead of the usual grass, the centre of the stadium was filled with obstacles: towers, trenches, hurdles and even some passable fire pits. Pseudopods raised against the noise, Kwarto's team waited near the entrance.

Gulp laughed. "Your team are tiny."

"Tiny Umboko are faster," Kwarto waved a pseudopod. His entire team zipped around the nearest obstacle, a large tower, and returned in only a fraction of a second.

"Wow. Them boys sure are fast."

"Are you ready, Mr President?"

"Let's get it on!"

Kwarto signalled the ship suspended above the stadium to lower its cargo hopper. The humans are silent as a beast the size of an Earth bull is revealed, with thirty chitin-studded pseudopods fanning out from under an enormous spiked shell. A massive bony tail whips around behind it with a brutal whistle.

"Is that a flarmplay?"

"Yes, Mr President." Kwarto adopted the Thirteenth Stance of Smug Satisfaction.

"How are we meant to hold onto that?"

"With the suction cups at the end of your pseudopods," said Kwarto, speeding away to join his team at the far end. Nearly losing his brain again with pleasure, he watched as Gulp desperately huddled with his team until the horn sounded.

Expecting more macho posturing, he watched in surprise as the Secret Service men lifted Gulp up and raced forward through the obstacles. Thinking back to the hour he spent watching US television to better understand them, he suddenly remembered that when they were not shooting everything in sight, they ran alongside moving vehicles and practised carrying the President to safety. Maybe this was not going to be the embarrassingly easy victory he had hoped for.

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Gulp shouted in manly joy, mixing in the colloquialisms of all the rugged states for good measure. The grease would make it more difficult, but it was going to be just like high-school wrestling. Then he reached the flamaty-doo-da and it started going wrong. Every time one of his team managed to find something they could hold onto, one of the Umboko contemptuously poked them free. On the bright side, the Umboko were focused on knocking his men flat in the most embarrassing way rather than hanging on, so were not scoring either.

After a couple of minutes, Gulp realised the game might be harder even than the time he opened the rodeo. He let out a whoop as one of his detail used a piece of gum to glue himself between two spikes, preventing the Umboko from slapping him straight off. But the gum lost more than its flavour when the agent got knocked into a flame pit.

For a moment, the latent stirrings of self-awareness gained enough ground for Gulp to consider just stopping the Umboko scoring. But the sight of the screaming women and children in the audience reminded him that he is American, not some sort of wussy liberal. And Americans win. "Smack'em around, boys. I need to think."

Freed from the need to clamber onto the flarmplat, the Secret Service began to play to their strengths. The Umboko were faster but the Secret Service were stronger, and trained rigorously in both martial arts and interposing themselves without concern for their own safety. Deploying in a loose cordon around both the President and the flarmplat, the agents waited for the Umboko to come close.

To begin with, the Umboko continued their strategy of trying to embarrass the humans. But even with an advantage in limbs, they found themselves the ones most often knocked over or slammed into obstacles. The game seemed tied. First one side then the other stood over the tangled bodies of opponents. The stands echoed with the roar of humans each time an Umboko was felled and the gentle schlep of pseudopods each time a human was embarrassed.

Kwarto could feel his blood oscillating. A professional team losing to naked greased amateurs in their first game was impossible. Rwado was right - Americans were so immune to logic, they weren't properly bound by the laws of physics. But something was odd about the patterns they formed.

Taking advantage of Gulp's distraction, Kwarto risked pulling back from the mêlée to get a clearer view. The humans were great at blocking but their perimeter was irregular. Then it struck him, they trained daily to protect the President. Every time an Umboko might get near the President, they automatically reformed to protect him instead of blocking the flarmplat. Whistling his new strategy, Kwarto lead two of his team in a crescent toward Gulp, while the others slumped out of reach.

As he hoped all four agents shifted. Immediately, the remaining two Umboko straightened and surged for the gap. Out of place and conflicted for one vital moment, the Secret Service tackled thin air.

The flailing tail of the flarmplat clipped one Umboko, sending him tumbling, but the other slipped past and schlepped onto the shell. The combination of angry beast and dedicated agent soon knocked him loose but the Umboko had pulled into the lead.

With the Umboko scoring rather than show-boating, even Gulp realised he needed a better plan. But nothing seemed to work. The little pseudopod sons-of-tie-pins went down hard if you hit them, but now they had adapted to human tactics it was back to a game of speed. And they were faster than a suicide bomber on a Friday.

Suicide bombers! This wasn't just a game. This was about protecting children from the dangers of having to walk to the other end of the block; preventing mothers having to skimp their families because they couldn't fit everything in a small car. If foreigners were prepared to die for their crazy countries, then how effective would it be when a real man did it?

"It's Alamo time, boys! Keep them wrigglers off me." Calling on all the benefits of his sports scholarship Gulp, blitzed the flarmplat. The beast ground to a halt and tilted to one side, stunned. Equally stunned at seeing someone actually knock one over, the Umboko instinctively slipped into the Fifteenth Stance of Confusion.

Grabbing a nearby pole, Gulp ran out a few paces. He reversed his charge and pounded back toward the staggering flarmplat. Vaulting high, he opened his arms wide and slammed into the spikes. As he planned, one impaled him through the gut, leaving him hanging.

The flarmplat bucked and twisted, each shift sending jolts of agony through Gulp, but he merely clenched his stomach muscles harder. The Secret Service, more used to Gulp Masterbath's insanity than the mostly peaceful Umboko, ganged up on the stunned aliens. And the crowd went wild.

Well, the human half. The Umboko half silently adopted various stances.

Channelling their leader's utter lack of self-preservation, the Secret Service beat the Umboko back over and over again. Gulp's tactic – while unorthodox – racked up time, and the humans had almost pulled level.

But the unequal numbers and experience finally told, and Kwarto burst through their cordon. Springing up, he schlepped onto the flarmplat. The Umboko still had a few seconds lead and only thirty seconds of the game remained. With the agents blocked by Umboko and the flarmplat still too stunned to mount an effective attack, Umboko victory seemed inevitable.

Unfortunately, emotions heightened by the game, Kwarto pulled himself closer Gulp, so he could see his face when he lost.

In response Gulp reached even deeper into his soul, calling on all his determination to protect the right of American Children to leave the air conditioning running, and twisted round on the spike. Using the impressive jaw that won him All State Bubblegum champion and 'Most Likely to Star in a Movie' in high school, he clamped down on the nearest pseudopod and gnawed like a croc-killer.

Not a professional player, Kwarto hadn't trained himself to ignore maiming. Decades of social niceties forced him into the Ninth Stance of Dispute Resolution, and he tumbled beneath the flarmplat.

Gulp spat shreds of pseudopod out and mumbled, "Needs lemon." Then his vision dimmed.

And the buzzer went. The stands resounded with Umboko posturing. The Americans had 1.3 seconds more time on the flarmplat.

Even unconscious, Gulp fought against being pulled free, but eventually the Secret Service managed to get him to safety.

And the United States was free to consume conspicuously.

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