

WICKER WONDERLAND

"Patiently toiling in humble consulates on many a remote world, Junior Corps officers, ever-mindful of the welfare of emergent non-Terrestrial peoples, labored on in their unending quest to bring the fruits of modern technology to supplement native arts and crafts, enriching their halcyon days with the awareness of the profound effect their efforts might have on entire populations. The examples set by such dedicated public servants as Vice-consuls Pird and Wimperton stand as an inspiration to us all . . ."

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Consul-General Magnan clutched his baggy chartreuse velvet beret against the blast of air from the rotor of the waiting heli, beckoned Retief closer.

"I'll be candid with you, Retief," he said from the side of his mouth. "I'm not at all happy about leaving you here as deputy chief under a Groaci superior; the combination of unpredictable elements is an open invitation to disaster."

"I've never known disaster to wait for an invitation, where our Groaci colleagues were concerned," Retief commented.

"Naturalizing a Groaci was irregular enough in itself—" Magnan went on. "Tendering him an appointment in the Corps smacks of folly."

"Don't underestimate the boys at headquarters," Retief said cheerfully. "Maybe this is just the first step in a shrewd scheme to take over Groac."

"Nonsense! No one at HQ would want to go on record as favoring such a policy . . ." Magnan looked thoughtful. "Besides, what does Groac have that we need?"

"Their cast-iron gall would be a valuable acquisition—but I'm afraid that's the sort of intangible that will elude the wiliest diplomacy."

Magnan pursed his lips. "Take care, Retief: if anything goes awry, I'll hold you fully responsible." The senior diplomat turned to the other staff members waiting nearby on the tower-top helipad, moved among them shaking hands, then scrambled into the heli; it lifted, beat it way eastward against a backdrop of vermilion-bellied clouds in a sky of luminous violet. Behind Retief, the voice of Vice-Consul Wimperton rose to a shrill bark.

"No want um basket! No need um beads! Want um heavy metal, you blooming idiot!"

Retief turned. A short-legged, long-torsoed local draped in a stiff lime-green garment stood round-shouldered before the Commercial Attaché dwarfed under a load of fancifully woven and beaded baskets.

"No want um?" the Poon inquired in a voice that seemed to thrum in his chest. "Plenty too cheap—"

"No bloody want um! How many times do I have to tell you, you bug-eyed—"

A curtain twitched aside from a narrow doorway; a spindle-legged Groaci in Bermuda shorts, argyle socks and a puce and magenta aloha shirt peered out.

"Mr. Wimperton," he said faintly, "I must request that you refrain from abusing the locals so loudly; I have a splitting headache . . ."

The deck lifted, creaking, sank back gently. The Groaci put a hand against his midriff and clutched the doorframe.

"My, that was a dandy," Wimperton said. "Felt like my stomach came right up and bumped my chin!"

"I'm sure we're all aware of the motion, Mr. Wimperton—all too aware . . ."

"Say, you don't look at all well, Mr. Consul-General," Wimperton said solicitously. "It's this constant rocking, up and down, to and fro; you can never tell which way the tower will lean next—"

"Yes, yes, a penetrating observation, Mr. Wimperton." The Consul-General tilted two eye-stalks toward Retief. "If you'd step inside a moment, Mr. Retief . . . ?" He held the curtain aside, let it drop behind Retief.

Late sunlight filtering through the open-work walls of the consulate splashed a checkered pattern across colorful rugs of kelp fibre, low couches, desks, and chairs of woven wickerwork. Consul-General Dools looked at Retief nervously.

"Mr. Retief," he said in his faint voice. "Now that our previous chief, Mr. Magnan, has departed, I, of course, find myself in charge . . ." He paused while the floor lifted and sank; his eye-stalks waved sickeningly.

"As a newcomer, perhaps you've noticed . . . ah . . . irregularities in our little organization here . . ." Four of his eyes studied different corners of the room. Retief said nothing.

"I wished merely to caution you: It would be unwise to evince excessive curiosity . . ."

Retief waited. The tower leaned to the steady pressure of the rising gale. The floor slanted. Consul-General Dools clung to a desk, his throat-sacs vibrating.

"There are many ways," he started, "in which accidents could befall one here . . ."

The floor sagged, rose abruptly. Dools gulped, threw Retief a last despairing glance and fled as Wimperton came in, still muttering. He looked after the departing Groaci.

"Consul-General Dools isn't a very good sailor," he commented. "Of course, in the week you've been here, you haven't seen a real blow yet—"

The native peddler poked his round head through the door hanging, padded across the room on large, bare webbed feet, paused before Retief.

"You want um basket?" The round, amber-and-olive patterned face gazed hopefully at him.

"I'll take that one," Retief said in the native language, pointing.

The lipless mouth stretched wide in the local equivalent of a delighted grin.

"A sale! I was beginning to think you High-Pockets—excuse me, sir—you Terries were tighter than weed-ticks in a belly-button." He lowered his wares, extracted the basket.

"You shouldn't encourage him," Wimperton said snappishly. "For months I've been indoctrinating him to bring in some gold nuggets; the land-masses are practically solid with them—but no, they build their town on a raft of seaweed in mid-ocean and weave baskets!"

"They evolved in the weed," Retief said mildly. "And if they lifted the embargo on gold, in six months the planet would be swarming with prospectors, dumping their tailings into the ocean. They like it the way it is."

The Poon caught Retief's eyes, jerked his head toward the doorway, then ducked out through the door hanging.

Retief waited half a minute, then rose lazily, stepped out on the wide observation deck. All around, lesser towers, intricately patterned, rose from the miles-long mat of yellow-green seaweed far below, moving restlessly with the long ocean swells. Sea fowl with weed-colored backs and sky-blue undersides wheeled and screamed. Between the swaying pinnacles, a spider-web complex of catwalks swung in hundred-yard festoons. A continuous creaking of rattan filled the air. Far away, the white-flecked surface of the open sea was visible.

Retief crossed to where the Poon waited by the stairwell entry.

"You seem like a good fellow," the native said as Retief came up. "So I'll give you some free advice." He glanced around at the color-drenched sky. "There'll be a Big Blow tonight. Get down below—don't waste any time." He hitched at his load of baskets, turned to the stairs. "And don't bother to tell those clowns—" he jerked his head toward the consular offices. "They're bad medicine." He bobbed his head and was gone.

Retief threw a sharp glance at the clouds, got out a cigar and lit up, turned from the rail.

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a somber uniform stood by the catwalk mouth. He looked Retief over casually, then came across the close-woven deck, thrust out a large, well-tanned hand.

"My name's Klamper, Planetary Monitor Service. I guess you're the new man."

Retief nodded.

"Let me give you some advice: watch out for the natives. They're sly, tricky devils . . ." He paused. "You were talking to one just now. Don't let him

lure you into going down into the native quarter. Nothing down there but natives and dark holes to fall into. A helluva place for a Terry. Knifings, poisonings—Nothing there worth climbing down thirty flights of wicker steps to look at."

Retief puffed at his dope-stick. The wind swirled the smoke away.

"Sounds interesting," he said. "I'll think it over."

"Plenty to do right up here in the consulate tower," Klamper said. "I guess you've seen the Tri-D tank—a twenty-footer—and the sublimation chamber—and there's a pretty good auto-banquet. And don't overlook the library. They've got a few dandy sense-tapes there; I confiscated them from a Joy-boat in a twelve-mile orbit off Callisto last year." The Constable got out a dope-stick, cocked an eye at Retief.

"What do you think of your Groaci boss, Consul-General Jack Dools?"

"I haven't seen much of him, he's been seasick ever since I got here."

"First time I ever ran into a Groaci in the CDT," Klamper said. "A naturalized Terry, I hear. Well, maybe he hasn't got all five eyes on an angle—but I'd say watch him." Klamper hitched up his gun belt. "Well, I'll be shoving off." He glanced at the stormy sky. "Looks like I've got a busy night ahead tonight . . ."

Retief stepped back into the office. A small, round man with pale hair and eyebrows looked up from the chair by Wimperton's desk.

"Oh," Wimperton blinked at Retief. "I thought you'd gone for the day . . ." He folded a sheaf of papers hurriedly, snapped a rubber band around them, turned and dropped them in the drawer of the filing cabinet. The round man hooked a small, glassy smile in position.

Wimperton rose. "Well, I'll be nipping along to dorm tower, I believe, before the wind gets any worse. This breeze is nothing to what we get sometimes. I'd suggest you take care crossing the catwalk, Mr. Retief. It can be dangerous. In a cross-wind, it sets up a steady ripple . . ." His limber hands demonstrated a steady ripple. "Other times it seems to float up and down." He eyed Retief. "I hope the motion isn't bothering you . . . ?"

"I like it," Retief said. "As a boy, I had a habit of eating candy bars—you know, the sticky kind—while standing on my head on a merry-go-round."

Wimperton's eyes stared fixedly at Retief. A fine sweat popped out on his forehead.

"Feels like it's building up, all right," Retief said genially. "Feel that one?"

A distant, thoughtful look crept over Wimperton's face.

"It's good and hot in here, too," Retief went on. "And there's that slight odor of fish, or octopus, or whatever it is . . ."

"Uh . . . I'd better see to the goldfish," Wimperton gasped. He rushed

away.

Retief turned to the round-faced man. "How was your trip, Mr. Pird?"

"Ghastly," Pird piped. His voice sounded like a rubber doll. "I visited continents One and Two. Bare rock. No life higher than insects, but plenty of those. You know, it never rains on Poon. All five continents are deserts, and the heat—"

"I understood the Zoological Investigation and Liaison Council Headquarters had financed a couple of wildlife census stations over there," Retief said.

"To be sure, facilities were provided by ZILCH, but, unhappily, no volunteers have come forward to man them." Pird smiled sourly. "A pity; Consul-General Dools has expressed a passionate interest in wildlife." Pird grabbed at a paperweight as it slid across the desk-top. The walls creaked; wind shrilled, flapping the door hanging. The floor heaved, settled back. Pird swallowed, looking pale.

"I believe I'd best be going." He started toward the door.

"Hold it," Retief called. Pird jerked. His eyes blinked.

"Aren't you going to warn me about anything?"

Pird stared for a moment, then scurried off.

Alone, Retief stood with braced feet in the consular office, gloomy now in the eerie light of the stormy sunset. He crossed to the filing cabinet, took a small instrument from a leather case, went to work on the lock. After five minutes' work, the top drawer popped out half an inch.

Retief pulled it open; it was empty. The second contained a dry sandwich and a small green flask of blended whiskey. In the bottom drawer were four dog-eared copies of *Saucy Stories*, a prospectus in full-dimensional color illustrating *Playtime on Paradise, the Planet with a Past*, glossy catalogs describing the latest in two-seater sport helis, and a fat document secured by a wide rubber band.

Retief extracted the latter, opened the stiff paper. It was an elaborately worded legal instrument. In the fifth paragraph, he read:

" . . . whereas such body is otherwise uninhabited, unimproved and subject to no prior claim filed with the proper authorities as specified in paragraph 2A (3) d and;

Whereas claimant has duly established, by personal occupancy for a period of not less than six Standard Months, or by improvement to a value of . . ."

Retief read on, then removed the elaborately engraved cover sheet of the document, folded the rest and fitted it into an inside pocket. Outside, the wind rose to a howling crescendo; the floor shuddered, the walls tilted precariously. Retief took a magazine from the drawer, fitted the document cover over it, folded it and snapped the red rubber band in place, then replaced it in the drawer and closed it. The lock seated with a snick. He left the consulate and crossed the swaying catwalk to the next tower.

* * *

Retief stood in the doorway of his room, smoking a cigar. Pird, just starting down the stairway, clucked. "Better hurry, sir. Everyone else has gone down. The wind is rising very rapidly."

"I'll be along," Retief looked down the empty corridor, undulating in the dim late-evening light, then went along to a curtain-hung doorway, stepped out onto a windswept balcony from which a swaying wicker catwalk launched itself in a dizzy span to the consulate tower, a hundred yards distant. A dim light winked on in the consular offices, moved above slowly. Retief watched for a moment, then turned up the collar of his windbreaker, stepped off into the dark tunnel of the wildly swinging passage. The gale buffeted at it with a ferocity that had increased even in the quarter-hour he had spent in the dorm tower. The sky had darkened to an ominous mauve, streaked with fiery crimson. Below, lights sparkled all across the lower levels.

Abruptly, the catwalk dropped three feet, came to a stop with its floor canted at a sharp angle. Retief steadied himself, then went on, climbing now. Ten feet ahead, the yellow and blue hanging at the end of the passage was visible. It moved. The slight figure of Consul Dools appeared for a moment, wrapped in a dark poncho, then whisked back out of view.

Retief made another two yards against the bucking of the sloping passage. He could hear a rasping now, a harsh sawing sound. A wedge of electric-purple sky appeared through the wicker roof ahead, widened . . .

With an abrupt crackling of breaking fibers, the end of the catwalk broke free and dropped like an express elevator. Retief locked his fingers in the twisted rattan and held on. The face of the tower flashed past; then the end of the catwalk whipped aside; Retief slid two feet, caught himself with his torso half out the open end. Air shrieked past his face. A foot from his eyes, the severed end of the supporting cable whipped in the wind—cut clean.

Retief looked down, saw the massed lights of the native section swooping up to meet him. A wall rushed close; Retief felt the whistle of air as he brushed it; then he was hurtling past low towers with lighted windows behind which alien faces gaped briefly. He swept low over a narrow street ablaze with colored lights, felt a shock as the catwalk brushed a building somewhere above; then the street was falling away below as the free-swinging catwalk cracked-the-whip, soaring upward, slowing now . . .

A wall loomed before him with a narrow balcony before lighted windows. For an instant, it seemed to hang before his face—and Retief lunged, kicked his legs free of the twisted wicker—and caught the heavy rattan guard rail. He hung on, groping with his feet, with the gale tearing at, shrieking in his ears . . .

Hands gripped him, hauling him up. He shook his head to clear it, felt a heavy hanging brush his face. Then he was standing on a yielding floor, blinking in the soft light of a primitive incandescent lamp, feeling the warmth and strange, spicy odor of an alien room.

A five-foot native stood before him, staring up anxiously with large protruding green eyes in a smooth, olive-colored face. A wide, almost human mouth opened, showing a flash of pink interior.

"Are you all right, buddy?" a strangely resonant voice inquired in the bubbly local tongue.

Retief felt of his jaw, moved his shoulders gingerly. "A little dazed by the speed with which the boys work, but otherwise fine," he replied.

"You speak Poon like a native, by Hoop!" the alien said. "Here, sit down. How about a drink of yiquil?" He indicated a low couch heaped with varicolored cushions, turned to a cupboard, wide webbed feet in bright yellow sandals gripping the swaying floor.

"You fell off a catwalk, eh?"

"Something like that," Retief accepted a deep two-handled porcelain jug, delicately shaped. He sniffed the drink, then sipped.

"My name's Url Yum. I'm a netter for Matwide Fooderies."

"I'm Retief. I'm with the Terran Consulate." He glanced around the room. "Handsome apartment you have here."

"Oh, it's all right—" There was a sharp whistle at the door.

"You feel like meeting a bunch of people? I guess they saw you fall, and they'll be crowding in now to take a look at you; we don't often see Terries here in town, you know."

"I'd rather not go on exhibit right now, Yum."

"Sure, I know how you feel. I had to go over to Dryport on business a few months back, and every other do-gooder wanted to have me in for tea and look me over."

The whistle sounded again at the door. Url Yum padded across to the closet, brought out a large satchel, pulled out bright-colored gear of plastic and metal.

"I was just about to go for a swim. Why don't you join me? You don't want to go back up tonight—in this wind. We can go down the back way. How about it?"

"A swim? In this weather?"

"The best time. Hunting's good; the small stuff shelters under the Mat, and the big stuff is in there hunting them—and we hunt the big stuff." He held up a polished spear-head.

"Look, Yum, I'm just a Terry; I can't hold my breath more than a minute or two."

"Neither can I. That's what the gear's for. You burn oxygen, same as we do, don't you?"

The whistle came again, more peremptory now. "Hey, Yum!" a voice called.

Retief finished his drink. "That yiquil's great stuff, Yum; it's already affecting my judgment. Let's go!"

* * *

They stood in a narrow way that wound between high walls hung with lights and signboards, studded with balconies from which pennants fluttered, crowded with brilliantly mantled and jeweled Pupoony, filled with the shriek of wind, the chatter of whistled conversation, and over all the polyphonic creaking of the city.

"I've heard of twisting roads," Retief called. "This is the first time I ever saw one that fit the description."

Yum put his mouth close to Retief's ear. "You know the whistle dialect?"

"I can understand it," Retief shouted back. "But I can't whistle it."

Yum motioned, led the way down a side alley to a sea-shell ornamented hanging, pushed into a low room with couches along one wall, open shelves on another. A portly Poon waddled forward.

"Oi, Yum! Oi, stranger."

"Oi," Yum said. "Gipp, this is Retief. We're going down. Can you fix him up with a spray job?"

"Lucky you came to my place, Yum. I happen to have a compound specially prepared for Terry requirements, a fresh batch, just concocted yesterday."

"Good. Retief, put your stuff over there . . ." Yum opened his satchel, took out equipment, laid it out on a low table. He selected a pair of goggles, handed them to Retief. "These are a little big, but I think they'll seat all right." He handed over a heavy cylinder the size and shape of a beer bottle, added other items.

"OK: propulsion, communication, lights, breathing apparatus, emergency gear. Now, after you strip and get your equipment buckled on, Gipp will fit you with water foils, and spray you in."

Retief donned the gear, watched with interest while the portly proprietor shaped a putty-like material to his feet, forming large fins which stiffened to a rubbery consistency, then brought out a portable apparatus with a tank, compressor, and hose with a wide nozzle.

"Give him a Striding Devil job, Gipp," Yum ordered.

Gipp hesitated, looking at Retief. "I suppose you've had a lot of experience . . . ?"

"He'll be all right," Yum put in. "He catches on fast, and he's got a good arm."

"Whatever you say, Yum—but you ought to warn him that a Death Angel

will jump a Strider on sight."

"Sure—that way we don't have to go looking for 'em."

"Well, if you get one, remember I'm paying top sprud for stones."

"You'll get first crack."

Gipp started up the compressor, twiddled knobs, then directed a heavy spray of viscous, greenish fluid on Retief's chest, working it in a pattern that covered him to the knees, then shut down and set about changing hoses.

"What's this stuff for?" Retief inquired, studying the thick, soft layer hardening on his skin.

"Protective covering; it's tough as yuk skin. And it has an osmotic action; passes oxygen in, and CO2 out. The color disguises you so you don't scare off the game—and the finished job holds all your gear in place. It's a good insulation, too. That water's cold. It strips off easily when you come back in."

Gipp worked for another five minutes. Retief craned his neck to look at himself. His back, he saw, was a dull black, with red and white flecks, separated from the glossy green front by pale grey sides. Broad pink gill-flaps flared from throat to shoulders. The ankles and fin-covered feet were a vivid red-orange.

"He's got the build for it," Gipp said, looking him over. "If I hadn't done the job myself, I'd swear he was a Strider, by Hoop!"

"That's the idea, Gipp. Now just give me a straight Big Mouth outfit." Yum took a flask from a side pocket, offered it to Retief, who took a generous pull, then passed it to Gipp, busy with his apparatus.

"No thanks; I don't need any delusions of grandeur tonight. I hope to do a good volume of business before the storm hits its peak." He worked carefully, covered Yum with a uniform dull grey, added a peaked crest of garish yellow.

"All right, Retief." Yum handed him a light, short-barreled rifle from the muzzle of which a razor-edged spear head protruded. "Let's go down."

Gipp led the way to a back room, opened a wide wicker cover set in the floor. Retief looked down at the sloping surface of a three-foot tube of close-woven strips.

"Follow me," Yum said, and dived, head first, out of sight. Retief gripped his spear-gun, waved Gipp a cheery farewell, and dived after him.

* * *

The water was ink-black, alive with darting lights in red and yellow, ponderous-moving patterns of green and blue, and far below, dull gleams of violet. Retief kicked his feet, watched lights scatter before him in a boil of phosphorescence.

A dark shape darted from the gloom, hovered before him; he recognized Yum's yellow crest, waving gently in the moving water.

"Only peaceful place in town, when the wind's working," Yum's voice crackled in Retief's ears. "Let's work our way east to get clear of the activity around here; then we'll see if we can't bait an Angel up."

"How deep are we?"

"The Mat's thirty meters thick here; we're going to work Underside first; if that's no go, we'll move down."

Yum darted off with a flick of webbed feet. Retief followed. Above, the mass of the floating continent of weed was a fairyland tangle of waving fronds, fantastically shaped corals, moving lights.

"Use the knob on your left hip as a jet control," Yum said. "Steer with your feet—and keep your rifle ready. If you see anything that looks like you, let him have it."

Retief tried the knob, felt water churn past his knees; he leaped ahead, driving through the water with a speed that blurred the weedscape above. A slight twist of the ankles sent him angling sharply toward the depths; a minute adjustment brought him back to Yum's side. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, picked out the shapes behind the lights now. Massive, sluggish swimmers cruised, wide jaws open. Slim torpedo shapes darted and wheeled. A nebulous form, glowing with a nacreous pink, rose up, reached out with feathery arms; Yum swerved away, Retief following fifteen feet to one side of his bubble-trail.

After a ten-minute run, Yum slowed, rose until he brushed the tops of the coral trees, then reached up with his feet, planted them in a swirl of smoky mud, and stood, inverted. Retief came alongside, twisted, felt the soft ooze under his feet.

"It's a little confusing at first," Yum's voice came clear in Retief's ears. "But you'll get used to it."

Retief looked around. The undulating surface of the weed mass stretched away into deep gloom, studded with waving fronds, stiff-branched trees of red-violet, orange and chartreuse coral, feathery banks of leafy undergrowth set with multi-colored flowers as big as dinner plates, among which moving lights sparkled and played.

"I'll pace you, off to the left," Yum said. "Move along with big, leaping strides. Anything your size except another Strider will give you a wide berth. If you see one, hit him fast. Aim for the mid-section. Now, if we pick up an Angel, you'll notice the shadow first. Just keep moving; I'll get under him and hit him where it hurts. When he turns, give it to him near the big red spot on his back. Got it?"

"How many rounds in this rifle?"

"Five in the magazine, and a spare magazine on your left shoulder."

"How do we know there aren't other hunters around? I'd hate to spear a

friend of yours by mistake."

"You'll get a recognition tone in your phones if anybody gets within fifteen yards—maybe. That's part of the game. I got a nice barb cut out of my left leg last year—some joker wanted a Big Mouth for cut bait." Yum waved and flicked away. Retief picked an open avenue between towering corals and started off. Walking was not too difficult after the first few steps; rather like tramping the dusty surface of an asteroid, he reflected—except that the diving gear was considerably less bulky than a space suit.

There was a movement to Retief's right. A tall biped stalked into view ten yards distant, barely visible in the glow of phosphorescence. Retief halted, brought the gun around. The newcomer moved on in great floating leaps. Retief turned to follow.

"Never mind the Strider," Yum said. "He didn't see you; must have just fed. We'll work off to the right here and let him have this territory."

Retief watched as the biped bounded off into the gloom, then moved on. Ahead, the darkness seemed deeper; a cow-sized creature with warts and glowing rings around wide eyes blundered past, rocking him with a surge of water. Tiny fish flashed past. The gloom deepened.

"Action!" Yum's voice came, tense in the earphones. "Keep going; we've got a big one coming up to take a look . . ."

Retief twisted to look toward the depths, like a black sky in which a dark cloud moved. He went on.

"That's the stuff, act like you don't notice him; otherwise he'll let fly with his musk, and we'll be working in the dark . . ."

The shadow moved, spreading. All around, the scene darkened. A last sluggish sea-creature humped past, raising a trail of mud-fog.

"Hey," Yum's voice came. "He's by-passing us, moving on . . ."

"Maybe he's just not hungry tonight—"

"It's that Strider we saw; he's after him. Let's go!"

Retief turned, saw a swirl of phosphorescence, jettted after it. The surface of the weed sloped, an inverted hill. Retief moved up beside Yum, following the immense shadow that fled across the rolling surface. The Strider came into view, leaping back toward the two hunters.

"Take him!" Yum barked. "I'll get under the big boy . . ." He swirled away. Retief brought the rifle to his shoulder, aimed—

A brilliant light flashed from the Strider's chest. The creature reached, grabbing at its back . . .

"Hold it!" Yum's voice snapped. "That's no Strider . . .!"

The long greenish beam of the searchlight swung, flashing from coral trees, glowing through drifting mud-clouds.

"The damned fool! He'd better douse that light . . . !"

The Death Angel closed, like a hundred-foot blanket of black jelly settling in; the stranger backed, worked frantically to fit a magazine to his rifle, bringing it up—

The Angel struck; for a moment it hugged the surface of the weed, rippling its edges—then it heaved, recoiling violently—

"Good-O!" Yum yelled. "I planted one fair and square! Move in and hit the hot-spot, Retief, and we'll be up half the night counting gold over a bottle of hundred-year yiquil!"

Retief hurled himself forward, kicked clear of the weed-bed, centered his sights on a foot-wide patch of luminous red at the center of the vast writhing shape, and fired, fired again, then went tumbling as the turbulence caught him and bowled him over.

* * *

Retief and Yum crouched by the prone body of the Angel's victim.

"He's a Terry, all right, Retief. I wonder what he was doing Underside—alone?"

"Probably a tourist, out to see the sights—though I hadn't heard of any travelers registered with the consulate."

"You may be right. We're not far from the Tap Root; he was headed that way, and he seemed to know where he was going."

Retief checked the man's equipment, noted his pulse and respiration.

"He seems to be all right."

"Sure. He just took a good jolt of current. We didn't give the Big Boy a chance to get his shredding hooks into him."

"We'd better take him up."

"Sure—soon as we stone out our Angel, before the Big Mouths get him. There's a Public Entry Well not far away; probably the one he used. We'll just tow him along with us. He'll be OK."

The vast bulk of the Angel drifted fifty yards from the crowns of the coral trees. They swam to it, shooed off an inquisitive scavenger, moved around to the red spot on the expanse of black hide. A short spear stood, half its length buried dead center in the target. A second spear protruded a foot away.

Yum whistled. "You work close, Retief. Nice shooting." He unclipped a slim-bladed knife, made an incision, plunged an arm into the rubbery body, brought out a lumpy organ the size of a grapefruit. He whistled again.

"This must be the beachmaster of all Angels! Look at the size of that pouch!" He slit the leathery bag carefully, dipped in two fingers and

extracted a black sphere as big as a large grape.

"Retief, we make a great team! Look at those stones!"

"What do you use them for?"

"We grind them up and sprinkle them on our food. A great delicacy."

"Yum, what's this Tap Root you mentioned?"

"Eh? Why, its—well, it's the root that supplies the Mat."

"Just one—for all this weed?"

"Sure; it's all one plant—the whole Mat."

"I'd like to take a look at it. I can't picture a Terry swimming around down here at the height of a storm, just to rubberneck—not unless it's a pretty spectacular sight."

"It doesn't look like much; just a big, tough cable, running down into the Big Deep." Yum tucked the pearls into a pouch clipped to his belt and led the way along the sloping weed surface, indicated a dark mass ahead.

"That's it—back in that tangle of rootlets there. The Tap's a hundred feet in diameter and over a mile long. It anchors the Mat, and feeds it, too."

"Let's take a closer look."

Retief moved in among the waving rootlets.

"Say—what's that?" Yum's voice came over the earphones. Ahead, a large dark shape nestled among the entwining roots. Retief swam up alongside.

"It's a scout boat—Terry design . . ." He swam to the entry port, found it locked. "Let's reconnoiter a little, Yum."

The two moved over the waving mass of rootlets, cruising beside the moss-grown, barnacled wall of the immense root. Retief caught a glimpse of a white object, fluttering in the dark water. He headed for it. It was a plastic tag, wired to a spike driven into the husk of the root. Below it hung a small box, metal covered, with an insulated cable projecting from one side.

"What is it? Who'd come here and tamper with the Root?" Yum asked, puzzled.

"It's a detonator," Retief said. "The cable is designed to plug into a packaged explosive charge—"

"Explosive! Here, by the Root?"

"How long would the weed last with the root cut?"

"Last? It wouldn't last a day. You can cut a sprig of the weed, it crumbles in a matter of minutes. Oh, the fruit, leaves, husks, are tough enough—but the main mass would disintegrate like a sugar lump in a mug of hot roca."

"Somewhere there's a bomb to go with the detonator, Yum," Retief said. "Probably aboard the boat. Our swimmer was on the way to get it, I'd guess. Let's check him for keys."

Yum fumbled over the limp body. "He's clean, Retief. He must have lost them in the fight."

"All right; let's get him to the surface and see what he has to say . . ."

* * *

In the damp-smelling cavern of the Public Entry Well, Retief stood over the unconscious man. Water dripped from him, puddled on the heavy-duty rattan ramp that sloped up from the water. The attendant on duty came forward, clucked at the sight of the inert body.

"He left here, not fifteen minutes ago. Wouldn't accept my offer of a guide. I warned him . . ."

"Where are his clothes?" Retief asked.

"On the shelf—there." The attendant pointed to a coat, trousers, boots, a tangle of heavy leather belts, and an empty holster in a neat pile.

"A cop?" Retief said. He examined the garments. "No identification," he said. "And no keys."

"What happened?" the attendant asked.

"An angel hit him."

"He'll be out for hours, then," the attendant said. "A big angel gives a pretty good shock. Hah! These tourists are all alike."

"Yum, you don't have a police force here—or an army . . . ?"

"No, what would we need with those?"

"Can you get a few friends together—volunteers, to watch the patrol boat?"

"Sure, Retief. All you want."

"Station about a dozen in the underbrush around the boat; tell them to keep out of sight—we don't want to scare anybody off. But be careful—a spear-gun is no match for a Mark IV blaster."

"I'll call the boys." Yum went into the attendant's office, emerged five minutes later.

"All set," he declared. "What about him?" he indicated the sleeping cop.

"Have the fellow on duty watch him until your friends get here—meanwhile, he'd better put him somewhere out of sight."

"What about the bomb?"

"We'll have to try to stampede somebody. Whoever sent our friend here

doesn't know he didn't make it."

Retief looked at Yum, frowning in thought. "Yum, peel out of that scare suit and put the uniform on." He began stripping off the Striding Devil disguise. "I'll borrow some local garb."

"You've got an idea?"

"Not much of one. Just a wild hunch."

Yum kicked free of the last of the diving gear, pulled on the shapeless patrol outfit. It hung ludicrously on his squat frame.

"Retief, I wouldn't fool anybody in this . . ."

"That's just the point, Yum. Now let's move . . . !"

* * *

Yum stopped before a dark entry, pointed up at a lighted floor above. "This is it," he called over the howling wind. Retief's long violet cloak whipped at his ankles; Yum held onto his Patrolman's cap with one hand.

"All right." Retief leaned close to Yum and shouted. "You wait five minutes, Yum; then just move off down the street. Move as though you were in a hurry. Then you'd better go back and help out the boys. If anybody comes close, let him get the port open; then hit him fast."

"Well—I guess you know what you're doing."

Retief climbed the trembling wicker stairway, gripping the handrail as a violent gust bounced him against the swaying wall. Two flights up he pushed aside a hanging lettered TERRESTRIAL CONSULATE-GENERAL—EMERGENCY QUARTERS.

Wimperton and Pird looked up from a table on which a meal of emergency rations was laid out in the bleak light of a feeble DC lamp. Wimperton's mouth opened wide. Pird scrambled up and stood wiping his fingers on his pink vest.

"Hi, boys," Retief said cheerfully. "Damnedest thing happened to me. You'll never guess."

"Ah . . . you fell out a window?" Wimperton hazarded.

"Close, but no dope-stick; the catwalk broke under me. Quite a ride." He strolled to the window. "Some wind out there. Say . . ."

"Yes, indeed, quite a wind, you're right," Pird piped.

"Look here," Retief said. "Is that a Patrolman? Wonder what he's doing out in the storm!"

Wimperton and Pird jumped to the window, craned. Below, Yum's ungainly figure waddled briskly along the pitching street, turned a corner.

"Hey, that's—" Wimperton started.

"Yes, that's strange, all right," Pird cut in. "Poor weather for a stroll."

"But that wasn't—"

"Wasn't anything for us to worry about, ha ha," Pird babbled. He pretended to yawn. "Well, about time to turn in, eh?" He patted his mouth, watching Retief.

"I'm glad you suggested that," Retief said. "I was afraid you'd want to sit up and talk."

"Just take that first room there," Pird said eagerly. "Lovely room. Just lie right down and drift right off. Wimperton, you show Mr. Retief the room and I'll just . . . ah . . . check a few things."

Retief glanced back from the door, caught a glimpse of Pird darting past the outer hanging. He stepped into the room. There was a tidy bunk, an easy chair, a rug, a tri-D set.

"This is dandy." He patted the bed. "Well, Wimperton, have a pleasant night."

"Yes indeed—you too . . ." Wimperton disappeared. Retief flipped the light off, lay back and waited. A minute passed. The door curtain twitched aside for a moment, dropped back. Lights winked off in the outer room.

Retief rose, glanced out. The shelter was deserted. He crossed to the outer hanging, went down the swaying wicker stairs three at a time, stepped out into the storm-whipped street. Pird and Wimperton, each dragging a suitcase, staggered out of sight around the corner. Retief wrapped the cloak close and followed.

* * *

Standing in the shadows by the straining wicker-work wall of a Public Entry Well, Retief watched Wimperton and Pird as they paced the ramp. Pird glanced at a finger watch.

". . . any time now . . ." the words came faintly through the hammer of the wind and the groaning of wicker. Pird stopped before Wimperton, apparently asking a question.

Wimperton reached inside his coat, brought out a thick packet of papers restrained by a red rubber band, waved them at Pird, put them back. Retief edged closer.

". . . don't like it either," Wimperton's nasal voice stated. "Either the locals are wise—or they've got a deal with . . ." The wind whirled the words away.

Retief stepped back into the street, saw the pink glow of a public phone fifty yards distant. He fought his way to it through the wind, dialed, asked for Yum.

"No action here yet," the native said. "How did the routine go over?"

"Our pigeons flew the coop, all right. They know they've got troubles, but

they're not sure just what kind. They're at a Public Entry near the consulate, waiting for a pick-up."

"They'll have a long wait; their driver's still asleep."

"Yum, I have a feeling the bomb's timed to go off at the peak of the storm. How long will that be?"

"Oh, about two hours, I'd say."

"What will conditions be like at the top of the consulate tower now?"

"Rough. The towers lean to the wind. The ceilings fold right down against the floors in a good blow—and this one's a dandy."

"We're about out of time, Yum—and there are two parties still unaccounted for. I'm afraid I have one more trip in this wind."

"You're coming back here?"

"I'm going up—and I'd better get moving while there's still crawl space in the consulate."

* * *

A howling gale struck Retief's head as he hauled himself up from a dark opening onto the thirtieth-floor balcony, looked up the long slant of the tower face. Forty feet above, the guard rail lining the terrace of the consulate penthouse was dimly visible in the murk.

Under Retief, the tower wall trembled and moved like a living thing. He reached for a handhold, started up the thirty-degree slope. Gusts tore at him; he rested, hugging the surface, then went on. Ten minutes later he pulled himself over, lay full length on the steep slope of the tower roof.

The wind was less, here in the shelter of the canted floor. Retief slid down, then jumped, tumbled through the wind-tattered entry hanging, caught himself and blinked through the gloom of the deserted office.

From the far wall, a grunt sounded. Retief made his way across the room, flicked a wall switch. Dim light glowed, showed him the trussed form of Consul-General Jack Dools huddled in the angle of wall and floor. Five bloodshot eye-stalks quivered appealingly at Retief.

He went to a tilted desk, extracted a letter knife from a clip, came back and sawed at the cords binding the Groaci, then pulled the gag free of the mandibles.

"Ah, the shining of the sun on your ancestral egg-hill," Dools gasped in Groaci. "To express heartfelt gratitude; to vow eternal chum-ship . . ."

"Think nothing of it, Mr. Dools. You feel well enough to travel? We'll have to go down the outside; the stairs are collapsed."

"How pleasant to see you alive, dear fellow," Dools went on in Terran. "I feared the miscreants had done their worst. I tried to interfere, but alas—"

"I saw you; at the time, I had the idea you were doing the sawing, but then I got to thinking about the booze and girly-book supply in the filing cabinet. Alcohol would poison you; and as for unadorned mammals—"

"Mr. Retief, take care," Dools hissed. "My hearing is keen; someone comes . . ."

Retief looked toward the doorway, then hastily tucked the cut ends of the rope out of sight under Dools' body. "Play 'em close to your thorax, Mr. Dools," he cautioned.

A tall figure climbed through the flapping door hanging, crouched on the sloping floor, braced by one hand. The other held a power pistol, aimed at Retief.

"Just stay where you are, bright boy," Klamper called over the screech of the wind. "Don't bother untying him. My errand won't take but a minute."

He half-slid, half-crawled to the filing cabinet, keeping both eyes on Retief, fumbled a key from a pocket. He opened the top drawer, then the next, rummaged, tried the last drawer, then turned on Retief, showing even white teeth in an expression that was not a smile.

"I ought to have my head examined. I let those two light-weights sell me a story. What an act; Wimperton gobbled like a turkey when he opened up that phoney cover and got a load of the funnybooks inside. So I let 'em sucker me into a goose-chase—unless you've got it?" He came closer. "Turn out your pockets, hot-shot."

Retief shook his head. "If you're looking for the papers, forget it. I left them in my other suit."

"You loused up six months' work, greenhorn. But I'll be back to fill out some fresh forms. Too bad you won't be here to watch."

He raised the power pistol; behind him, Dools lunged for the Patrolman's ankle. A bolt of blue fire crackled harmlessly past Retief's ear as he leaned aside, chopped at Klamper's gun hand, followed up with a knee to the face. Klamper rolled with the blow, scrambled over a sagging desk, and dived for the doorway. Dools grabbed up the gun, started after him.

"Let him go, Mr. Dools," Retief said. "I think I know where he's headed. Now let's get out of here before we get our clothes pressed with us in 'em."

* * *

At the Public Entry Well, Yum and a group of well-muscled locals met Retief.

"Our man was here about ten minutes ago," Yum said blandly. "Big fellow, in a hurry."

"You let him through?"

"That's right."

"Then you warned the boys at the boat to stop him . . . ?"

"Well, no, Retief. I told them to let him go. As you pointed out, he had a blaster . . . He's several hundred miles out by now . . ."

Retief folded his arms. "There's something funny going on here, Yum. What about the bomb? It's probably timed to go off at the height of the storm—say in another ten minutes."

"Oh, that. I found it. It's taken care of."

"Found it where? And how do you take care of a sealed titanite charge . . . ?"

"It was aboard the boat. You were right about that—"

"Come on, Yum. Give!"

"Well, Retief, I was a little curious; you can't blame me, after meeting you under such—unusual circumstances. I took a look through your clothes. I found this . . ." He held up the document Retief had extracted from the consulate files. "A fancy piece of paper laying claim to the whole damned planet of Poon—which it states is uninhabited—which it would have been if the bomb idea had worked out. The Mat would have broken up in the wind, and when the sky cleared, it would look like just another natural disaster. And in a few months, all five continents would be one big gold mine."

"So?"

"So I held out on you. Our slumbering pal had keys, all right. I went back and opened up the boat. There sat the bomb—a nice little ten-kilo charge of titanite, all labeled and ready to go—"

"Except for the detonator; that was wired to the root—"

"Uh-huh. A safety precaution. But I found another one. It wasn't hard to install. I had an idea the owner would be along to see about it before zero hour; but I didn't like the sight of the thing sitting out in the middle of the floor, so I tucked it away."

"Where?"

"In the chart storage bin."

Retief whirled to the discarded Terran uniform, jerked the communicator from the lapel clip, keyed it on the official frequency.

"Klamper, if you can hear me, answer—fast!"

After a moment, Klamper's voice came back, a thin piping in the miniature ear-phone. Yum and Dools leaned close.

"Klamper here. Who're you?"

"This is Retief, Klamper—"

"Oh, yeah, the bright young official. Well, I predict a big change in the near

future for you. In about thirty seconds, to be exact."

"Klamper, there's a bomb—"

"Well, well, so you found out about that, too. Sorry I can't help you. So long, su—" The earphones went dead.

"Klamper!"

Yum looked at his watch. "Right on the button," he said.

"At least," Dools said, "he lived long enough to exonerate Mr. Retief . . ."

There was a patter of hurried footsteps. Retief and Yum turned. In the door, Wimperton and Pird stood like ruffled birds, staring.

"I'm afraid you lads missed the boat," Retief called. Yum signaled with his hand. Half a dozen local citizens fanned out to hem in the newcomers.

"Ah, why, Mr. Retief . . . what are you doing out of bed?" Pird squeaked.

"Oh, I just dropped down to offer you boys a crack at a peachy new opportunity in the Achievement Corps. Consul-General Dools here has need of two volunteers to man the new wildlife census stations over on continents One and Two. I'm going to give you first grabs at it. We'll go over to the Shelter and type out your resignations from the CDT, and a couple of five-year enlistment contracts in the A.C.—on a non-compensatory basis, of course."

Wimperton's mouth sagged open.

"And I have a number of micro-tape recordings I'll contribute," Dools said. "They're quite exciting—all about bombs and land claims and gold mines. You can play them over during your leisure time—during sandstorms, perhaps."

"But—Mr. Retief," Pird cried. "We—we've found conditions here somewhat less than congenial . . ."

"What if—if we refuse?" Wimperton gulped.

"In that case, Yum and his associates would like to interview you on the subject of homesteading . . ."

"Your pen or mine?" Pird said hastily.

"I'll ask a couple of the boys to help these two philanthropists over to the consulate," Yum said. "Let the business wait till morning. You and I have a bottle of yiquil to finish, Retief."

"Show Mr. Dools a few of those pearls we netted, Yum."

Yum fished out the stones, handed them to Dools, who canted two pairs of eye-stalks at the lustrous one-inch spheres.

"Gentlemen—this is precisely the product I need to qualify Poon as a Class One commercial world! Can these be supplied in any volume? Say, a dozen

a month?"

"I think it could be arranged," Yum said in heavily accented Terran. "Why don't you join Retief and the boys and me in a snort?"

"Well, I really don't think . . ."

"I know a barman who can concoct a suitable booze for any metabolism," Yum urged. "And a hangover cure afterward."

Retief linked arms with the slender Groaci. "Come along, Mr. Consul-General," he said. "We won't take no for an answer."