

## THE PRINCE AND THE PIRATE

"The ancient defender of the principle of self-determination of peoples threw the elite of its diplomatic shock troops into the fight when local tradition was threatened at Elora. Holding himself aloof from internal bickering, Ambassador Hidebinder dealt shrewdly with diverse elements of the power picture, to forge a bright new page in Corps history . . ."

—Vol. VIII, Reel 7, 450 AE (AD 2951)

Retief reined in the tall-shouldered urze-beast with a jangle of the hunting-bells attached to the long-legged mount's harness. The trail of the dirosaur led straight ahead, into a dense thicket of iron-rod trees fifty feet distant, now bent and twisted by the passing of the wounded monster. Far away, the hunting horns of the main party sounded; Retief smiled. Prince Tavilan would employ a choice selection of royal oaths when he learned that a mere diplomat had beaten him to the quarry's turn-at-bay . . .

A windy screech sounded from the depths of the thicket; Retief raised his saddle-horn, blew an answering blast. There was a clanging of branches, a scraping of armored hide on metallic bark. Retief dropped the horn to swing at the pommel; with a pull of a lever, he cocked his cross-bow, sat his mount, waiting. A tiny head, mostly jaws, armed with a foot-long spike below the mouth, snaked out from the grove, hissing a ferocious warning. Retief's urze-beast stirred, tossed its head at the scent of the dirosaur. Trees shuddered aside as the great carnivore forced its bulk between them, its golden-yellow eyes fixed on the man. A clawed foreleg as big as a man's body set with rusty scales raked the ground, dragging the predator's multi-ton bulk into the clear. With a final clangorous flick of its log-like tail, the dirosaur broke free, reared its head into striking position, and charged. Retief raised the cross-bow, took aim—

The cross-bow bucked; Retief spurred aside; he had a momentary glimpse of a two-foot shaft of polished steel protruding from the eye socket of the monster as it blundered past, the long neck falling, to collapse in a cloud of dust, lie twitching, then still.

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It was five minutes before the hunt galloped into view, Prince Tavilan's black crested urze-beast in the lead. He slowed to a canter, rode up beside the fallen dirosaur, sat looking down at the open-jawed head, the yellow eyes, glazing in death.

"That's another barrel of royal vintage I owe you, Retief," he said. "If I ever see the palace cellars again." He was a tall, wide, sandy-haired man with a turned-up sunburned-nose. His leather forest garb was well worn; there were cockleburrs in the snow-tiger facings of his royal Eloran blue cape. The cross-bow slung across his back was his only weapon.

"We're wasting time hunting game," a rider at the prince's side said. "There's a plentiful supply of cross-bow bolts at the lodge; I propose we ride down to Elora City and distribute them among the good Prime Minister's Greenbacks—point first."

"The King still has hopes the CDT will revise its policy," Tavilan glanced at Retief. "If the triple-damned embargo were lifted, Minister Prouch and his talk of a regency would evaporate faster than the royal treasury has under his control."

"Oh, it's not an Embargo, Your Highness," Retief said. "I believe Ambassador Hidebinder refers to it as a unilateral shift in emphasis balance-of-trade-wise to a more group-oriented—"

"What it adds up to is the Royal Eloran Navy grounded, while traitors plot in the palace and Dangredi's pirates raid shipping at the edge of Eloran atmosphere!" Tavilan smacked a fist into his palm. "I've got the finest corps of naval-combat commanders in the Eastern Arm, forty-five battle-ready ships of the line—and, thanks to CDT policy, no fuel! So much for my co-operation with your Ambassador, Retief!"

"Didn't he explain that, Your Highness? If you had the Big Picture, it would all make sense. Of course, I'm a Small Picture man myself, so I'm afraid I can't be of much help."

"It's not your doing, Retief. But ten million Elorans are about to have a dictatorship clamped on them because I lack a few megaton/seconds of firepower . . ."

"Your great-grandfather's mistake was in being a romantic. If he'd named his planet Drab Conformity, set up a committee of bureaucrats to run it and used the forest to supply paper mills instead of hunting in them, you'd be the apple of the collective CDT eye today."

"The old man led a hard life; when he found Elora it was a wilderness. He made his fortune—and then arranged matters here to suit himself—and we Elorans still like parties!"

Retief glanced at the sun. "Speaking of which, I'd better be starting back; the Grande Balle d'Elore is tonight and Mr. Magnan will be upset if I'm not there to help him hover nervously for at least an hour before the Ambassador comes down."

"Retief, you're not riding back to the city . . . ?" Count Arrol looked up from cutting out the dirosaur's chin-horn. He stood. "I told you what my man reported. Your sympathies are too well-known to suit Prouch. Tonight, at the ball—"

"I don't think the worthy Prime Minister will go that far. He's dependent on the good will of the CDT—and diplomat-killing is bad publicity."

"The Palace Guard is still loyal," Tavilan said. "And remember the lad, Aric; you can trust him with any mission within his strength. He's working in the palace as a mess-servant." He laughed bitterly. "Think of us as you dance with the fair ladies of the court, Retief. If you see my father, tell him that my Invincibles and I will continue to skulk here in the Deep Forest as he commands—but we long for action."

"I'll get word to you, Tavilan," Retief said. "My conspiratorial instinct tells me that there'll be action enough for everybody before sunrise tomorrow."

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In the Grand Ballroom at the Palace of Elora, Retief cast an eye over the chattering elite of the court, the gorgeously gowned and uniformed couples, the glum representatives of the People's Party, the gaudily uniformed diplomats from Yill, Fust, Flamme, and half a hundred other worlds. A cluster of spider-lean Groaci whispered together near a potted man-eating plant, one leaf of which quivered tentatively, seemed to sniff the aliens, withdrew hastily. Retief plucked a glass from a wide silver tray offered by a bright-eyed mess-boy in a brocaded bolero jacket and a cloth-of-gold turban, who glanced quickly around the crowded ballroom, then stepped close to whisper:

"Mr. Retief—the rascals are forcing the lock on your room!"

Retief passed the glass under his nose, sipped.

"Exactly which rascals do you mean, Aric?" he murmured. "We've got about four sets to choose from."

Aric grinned. "A couple of the Groaci Ambassador's boys," he whispered. "The ones he usually uses for high-class back-alley work."

Retief nodded. "That would be Yilith and Sith, formerly of the Groaci Secret Police. Things must be coming to a head. It's not like old Lhiss to take such direct action." He finished the drink in his hand, put the empty glass on a black marble table.

"Come on, Aric. Ditch that tray and let's take a walk."

In the broad mirror-hung corridor, Retief turned to the right.

"But, Mr. Retief," Aric said. "Your apartment's in the other direction . . ."

"They won't find anything there, Aric—and it would be embarrassing for all concerned if I caught them red-handed. So while they're occupied, I'll just take this opportunity to search their rooms."

\* \* \*

At the top of the wide spiral staircase that led from the public areas of the palace to the living quarters assigned to foreign diplomatic missions, Retief paused.

"You wait here, Aric." He went along the corridor to the third door, a simple white-painted panel edged with a tiny carved floral design. He tried the large gold doorknob, then took a slender instrument from an inner pocket of his silver-epauletted tangerine mess jacket and delicately probed the lock. The bolt snicked back. He eased the door open, glanced around, then stepped back out and beckoned Aric to him.

"How'd you get it open, Mr. Retief?"

"Locks are a hobby of mine. Patrol the corridor, and if you see anybody, cough. If it's one of my Groaci colleagues, have a regular paroxysm. I won't be long."

Inside the room, Retief made a fast check of the desk, the dresser drawers, the undersides of furniture. He slapped sofa cushions, prodded mattresses for telltale cracklings, then opened the closet door. Through the wall, faint voices were audible, scratchy with the quality of narrow-range amplification. He stooped, plucked a tiny earphone from a miniature wall bracket. Ambassador Lhiss, it appeared, was not immune from eavesdropping by his own staff.

Retief put the 'phone to his ear.

". . . agreed, then," Ambassador Hidebinder's voice was saying. "Seventy-two hours from now, and not a moment before."

"Just see that you keep your end of the bargain," a thin Groaci voice lisped. "This would be a poor time for treachery . . ."

"I want it clearly understood that our man will be treated in a reasonably civilized fashion, and quietly released to us when the affair is completed."

"I suggest you avoid over-complicating the arrangements with last minute conditions," the Groaci voice said.

"You've done very well in this affair," Hidebinder came back. "Your profits on the armaments alone—"

"As I recall, it was you who proposed the scheme; it is you who wish to place homeless Soetti rabble on Elora, not we . . ."

Retief listened for another five minutes before he snapped the phone back in its bracket, stepped quickly to the door; in the hall, Aric came to meet him.

"Find anything, Mr. Retief?"

"Too much . . ." Retief took a pen from his pocket, jotted a note.

"See that this gets to Prince Tavilan at the lodge; tell him to get the Invincibles ready, but to do nothing until I get word to him—no matter what."

"Sure, Mr. Retief, but—"

"Let's go, Aric. And remember: you're more help to me outside than inside . . ."

"I don't follow you, Mr. Retief . . ." Aric trotted at his side. "Outside what . . . ?"

"We'll know in a few minutes; but wherever I wind up, watch for a signal . . ."

From the head of the Grand Staircase, Retief saw the glint of light on steel. Two men in the dull black and green of the People's Volunteers stood in the corridor.

"Hey, Mr. Retief," Aric whispered. "What are Greenbacks doing in the palace

. . . ?"

"Simple, Aric. They're standing guard over my door."

"Maybe somebody caught those Groaci trying to break in . . ."

"Drop back behind me, Aric—and remember what I said . . ."

Retief walked up to his door, took out an old-fashioned mechanical key, inserted it in the lock. One of the two armed soldiers stepped up, made a threatening motion with his rifle butt.

"Nobody goes in there, you," he growled. He was a broad-faced blonde, a descendant of the transported felons who had served as contract labor on Elora a century earlier.

Retief turned casually, moved to one side far enough that the man before him was between him and his companion, then moved suddenly, caught the stock of the rifle in his left hand and with his right yanked the barrel forward; the butt described a short arc, smashed against the soldier's chin. He gave a choked yell, stumbled back. Retief jerked the door open, slipped inside, slammed it behind him. He shot the bolt, then started a fast check of his room. The door rattled; heavy poundings sounded. Retief pulled open the desk; a loose heap of unfamiliar papers lay there. A glance at one showed the letterhead of the Office of the Commercial Attaché, Terrestrial Embassy. It appeared to be a delivery order for one hundred thousand rounds of fractional-ton ammunition made out to a Bogan armaments exporter. Another was an unsigned letter referring to drop-points and large sums of money. A heavy parchment caught Retief's eye. It was stamped in red: UTTER TOP SECRET. Below the seal of the Eloran Imperial Department of War was a detailed break-out of the disposition of units of the Imperial Fleet and the Volunteer Reserve.

The telephone buzzed. Retief picked it up. There was a sound of breathing at the other end.

"Yilith . . . ?" a faint voice inquired.

"No, you damned fool!" Retief snapped. "They finished up ten minutes ago. When do the Greenbacks arrive?"

"Why, they should be there now. The pigeon has left the ballroom—" There was a pause. "Who is this?"

Retief slammed down the phone, whirled to the wide fireplace, flipped the switch that started a cheery blaze licking over the pseudo-logs. He grabbed up a handful of papers from the desk, tossed them into the fire, started back for another—

With a rending of tough plastic panels, the door bulged, then slammed open. Half a dozen Greenbacks charged into the room, short bayonets fixed and leveled. Retief's hand went behind him, felt over the small table at his back, plucked open the drawer, fished out a tiny slug gun, dropped it into a back pocket.

A tall man with a small head, a body like a bag of water, and tiny feet

bellied his way through the armed men. He wore a drab cutaway of greyish-green adorned with the star of the Order of Farm Production. Behind him, the small, spindle-armed figure of the Groaci Military Attaché was visible, decked out in formal jewel-studded eyeshields and a pink and green hip-cloak.

"Don't touch anything!" the water-bag man called in a high, excited voice. "I want everything undisturbed!"

"What about the fire, Mr. Minister?" the Groaci lisped. "The miscreant seems to have been burning something . . ."

"Yes, yes. Rake those papers out of there!" The large man wobbled his chin agitatedly. He fixed Retief with eyes like peeled eggs. "I'm warning you, don't make any violent moves—"

"Let me have a crack at him," a Greenback said. "He fixed Horney so he won't be able to eat nothing but mush for six months—"

"None of that!" the big-bellied man folded his arms. A striped vest bulged under his voluminous frock coat like a feather mattress. "We'll just hold him for the criminal authorities."

"Any particular reason why you and your friends came to play in my room?" Retief inquired mildly. "Or were you under the impression it was my birthday?"

"Look here," a man called from across the room. "Under the mattress . . ." He held up a paper. "A letter from the pirate, Dangredi, addressed to Retief, thanking him for the latest consignment of arms and supplies!"

"If you'll wait just a minute," Retief said, "I'll get my scrapbook; it's full of all kinds of incriminating evidence I've been saving for just this occasion."

"Ah, then you confess! Where is it?" the Groaci whispered hoarsely, pushing to the fore.

"Oh, I forgot; when I heard you coming, I ate it."

There was a stir at the rear of the group. The ranks parted and a short, round Terrestrial with a stiff white moustache and a mouth like a change-purse pushed through. He yanked at the overlapping lapels of a grape-juice colored mess-jacket caked with decorations.

"Here, what's this, Mr. Retief! Contraband? Pilfered documents? Evidence of traffic with piratical elements?"

"No, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said, "I'm only charging them with breaking and entering, assault with a deadly weapon, abuse of diplomatic privilege, and loitering. If you'll—"

"Here, don't let him confuse the issue, Ambassador Hidebinder!" The egg-like eyes rolled toward the stout diplomat. "He stands self-convicted—"

"Don't say too much, Mr. Minister," Retief cut in. "After all, you haven't had time yet to read those scraps the boys are fishing out of the fire, so it

wouldn't do for you to know what they are."

"Enough of this pointless chatter!" Prime Minister Prouch piped. "Obviously, there's treason afoot here!" He jabbed a finger at the Terrestrial Ambassador. "In view of the seriousness of the offense—in a time of grave crisis in inter-world affairs—I demand that you suspend this criminal's diplomatic immunity!"

The Groaci spoke up: "As a neutral party, I propose that he be turned over to my mission for restraint until the time of trial."

"Well . . ." Ambassador Hidebinder blinked. "I'm not at all sure . . ."

"We'll tolerate no stalling tactics!" the Minister squeaked. "The security of Elora is at stake!" He motioned. The troops closed in around Retief.

"I propose to take this man into custody at once," he bulged his eyes at Hidebinder. "I trust there will be no protest . . . !"

Hidebinder looked around at the room, the scattered papers, the smoldering fire, then past Retief's ear.

"Your penchant for mischief is well-known, Mr. Retief," he said solemnly. "I'm sure this fits the pattern nicely."

"Not as nicely as you seem to imagine," Retief said. "Maybe you'd better think it over—without any help from Ambassador Lhiss."

Hidebinder purpled; he sputtered. "The man's insane! You have my permission to place him under protective restraint!" He stamped from the room.

General Hish stepped forward. "Soldiers, you heard the order of the Minister," he hissed. "Take the criminal away . . ."

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The cell was ten feet square, with a twelve by eighteen inch opening just under the ten-foot high ceiling. The furnishings included a plastic cot with one blanket, the minimum in plumbing facilities, one small, unshielded neon lamp, numerous large roaches, and a bristly rat over a foot long, which sat by the open floor drain from which it had emerged, regarding Retief with beady eyes.

Retief's hand went slowly to the small, hard pillow on the cot beside him. He picked it up, pegged it suddenly; with a squeal of rage, the rat dove for cover, scrabbled for a moment in a frantic attempt to squirm past the cushion, now wedged in the drain; then it darted for the darkest corner of the cell.

Retief picked up the blanket and a length of yarn worked from it earlier, moved toward the rat. It crouched, making a sound like a rusty-bed-spring. Suddenly it leaped—straight at Retief's face—and met the enveloping blanket in mid-air. Cautiously, Retief folded back the blanket to expose the chinless, snouted face, armed with back-slanting yellow fangs half an inch long. He looped the string over the vicious head, drew it snug, and knotted

it.

He went to the drain, kicked the obstruction from it, then released the tethered rat. It dived down the dark opening and was gone. The carefully coiled string paid out rapidly, loop after loop. It slowed, then fed down the drain more slowly as the rat traveled through the piping. The guard's footsteps approached, Retief jumped for the cot; he was stretched out at ease when the sentry looked in. When he had passed, Retief looped the end of the string over his finger, pulled in the slack. In the gloomy light of the neon lamp, the thread was invisible against the dark floor. He sat on the bunk and waited.

\* \* \*

An hour passed. The barred rectangle of moonlight slanting through the window crept across the floor. Regularly, at nine minute intervals, feet sounded in the passage outside the metal slab door. Suddenly the string in Retief's hand twitched, once, twice, three times. He gave three answering tugs. For a moment there was no response; then there was a single firm tug. Aric was on the job . . .

Retief pulled at the string; it dragged heavily. He hauled it in slowly, hand over hand. Twice it caught on some obstruction far away in the drain line; he tugged gently until it came free. He thrust the accumulating pile of thread under the mattress. Each time the guard looked in, he was sitting quietly, staring at the wall. Suddenly, the end of a half-inch rope appeared, securely tied to the end of the string. Retief let it slip back a few inches, waited until the sentry passed, then quickly began hauling in the rope.

Five minutes later, a hundred feet of polyon cable was tucked out of sight under the mattress. Retief slipped the bundle of hacksaw blades which had been tied to the end of the rope into the pocket of the gold-braided white trousers which he had been allowed to retain along with his short boots. He stood under the window, gauged the distance, then jumped; he pulled himself up, got a firm grip on the bars, then took out a saw and started in.

An hour later, both bars were cut through, ready to be removed by a single firm twist. Retief waited for the guard to pass, then dropped the blades down the drain, looped the cable over his shoulder and leaped up to the window again. Far below, he could see the moonlight sparkling on a fountain in the palace garden; the shadows of trees and hedges were dark against the grass. On the graveled walks, armed sentries passed.

Retief wrenched the bars free, tied the rope to one, tossed the coil of rope through the window, then pulled himself up, and carefully fitted the short bar across the corner of the window opening on the inside. Keeping pressure on the rope, he eased out, then slid quickly down.

\* \* \*

Twenty feet below, Retief dropped onto a narrow balcony before a rank of darkened glass doors. With a flick, he freed the upper end of the rope; the bar clattered against the stone wall as it fell; he pulled the rope in, dropped it in a heap, then tried door handles, found one that turned. He stepped in through heavy drapes, felt his way across to a door, opened it



and looked out into a wide corridor. At the far end, two ornately uniformed guards stood stiffly at attention. There was no one else in sight. Retief slipped the slug gun into the palm of his hand, stepped out, walked boldly toward the guards. They stood unmoving. As he passed, one spoke quietly from the corner of his mouth:

"Greenback patrolling one flight up . . ."

"They're on the look-out for any suspicious activity," the other sentry added.

"If you see any, let us know," the first said.

"I'll do that," Retief said softly. "If you hear any loud noises, pay no attention. General Hish will be entertaining a guest . . ."

Retief followed the corridor, took a turn to the left, then a right, found the passage housing the Groaci Embassy, now brightly lit. The apartment of the Military Attaché was on the left, four doors along . . .

A black-booted Greenback officer stepped into view from the far end of the passage, paused at sight of Retief striding unconcernedly toward him. The Greenback narrowed his eyes uncertainly, started along the corridor toward Retief. At fifteen feet, sure now of the identity of the intruder, he snapped back the flap covering his sidearm, tugged at the heavy power pistol. Retief brought the slug gun up, fired at point-blank range. At the muffled whoomp! the officer slammed back, hit the floor and lay sprawled; his gun bounced against the wall. Retief scooped it up, turned to the door of the Groaci General's quarters, needle-beamed the lock at low power. The hardware dissolved in a wash of blue flame, an acrid stink of burned plastic and metal. He kicked the door wide, caught the fallen Greenback by the ankles, dragged him inside. A swift examination of the room revealed that it was deserted. He picked up the phone, dialed.

"Post number twenty-nine," a crisp voice answered promptly.

"This is the General's guest," Retief said. "The light in the hall might hurt the General's eyes; corridor 9-C. Think you could douse it?"

"We've had some trouble with fuses in that wing lately; I've got a feeling one might go out any minute now—and it will take maybe an hour to fix." The phone clicked off.

Retief flipped off the lights in the room, went into the small, lavishly equipped kitchen, rummaged through the supplies of Groaci delicacies, found a one-pound jar of caviar and a package of grain wafers. He ate hurriedly, keeping an eye on the door, drank a small bottle of Green Yill wine, then returned to the living room. He stripped the Greenback, donned the drab uniform.

The phone buzzed. Retief went to it, lifted the receiver.

"Two minute alert," a low voice said. "He's alone . . ."

Retief went to the door, opened it half an inch, stood in the shadows beside it. He heard the soft approach of mincing Groaci footsteps, then a

soft exclamation—

He swung the door open, reached out, caught the Groaci by the throat and dragged him inside. He grunted as a booted foot caught him in the ribs; then he jammed the pistol hard against the Groaci's horny thorax.

"No loud noises, please, General; it's my hour for meditation . . ."

Retief pushed the door shut with a foot, leaned against the light button; a soft glow sprang up. Retief released the Groaci, holding the gun aimed at a three-inch broad Grand Cordon of the Legion d'Cosme crossing the bulging abdomen.

"I'm going out; you're coming with me. Better hope we make it."

He holstered the pistol, showed the small, smooth-stone-shaped slug gun. "This will be a foot from your back, so be a good little soldier and give all the right answers."

The Groaci's throat sacs dilated, vibrating. He cast a sidelong glance at the stripped body of the Greenback.

"The swift inevitability of your death," he hissed in Groaci. "To anticipate with joy your end in frightful torment . . ."

"To button your mandible and march," Retief interrupted. He pulled the door open. "After you, General . . ."

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The blaze of stars scattered from horizon to horizon above the palace roof gleamed on the polished fittings of a low-slung heli parked on the royal pad. As Retief and his prisoner emerged from the service stair into the cold night air, there was a crunch of boots on gravel, the snick! of a power gun's action. A dark shadow moved before Retief. Abruptly a searchlight's beam glared in his eyes.

"Stand aside, idiot!" the Groaci hissed. The light flashed across to him; five beady, stemmed eyes glinted angrily at the guard.

"General Hish, sir . . ." The guard snapped off the light, presented arms hurriedly. Other boots sounded, coming across the rooftop helipad.

"What's going on here? Tell these—" the voice broke off. In the gloom, barely relieved by starlight, Retief saw the newcomer start, then put a hand to his pistol butt.

"We require the use of the royal gig," Hish whispered. "Stand aside!"

"But the orders—" the first guard started.

"General, drop!" the second bawled, hauling his gun out. Retief shot him, took a short step and drove a hard punch to the jaw of the first Greenback, then caught the Groaci's arm, jumped for the heli. Yells sounded across the roof. A yard-wide light-cannon, gymbal-mounted atop the guard shack, winked on, throwing a grey-blue tunnel of light into the sky; it pivoted,

depressed, swept a burning disc across to Retief—

He drew the power pistol, thumbed it to narrow beam, blasted the light; it exploded in a shower of tinkling glass, a billow of orange smoke that faded, winked out.

Retief shoved the slender Groaci ahead of him, yanked wide the heli's entry hatch, tumbled his prisoner in, jumped after him. He flipped switches, rammed the control lever to EMERGENCY FULL CLIMB. With a whine of power, the finely-engineered craft leaped from the roof, surged upward in a buffet of suddenly stirred air. From below, the blue and yellow flashes of blasters winked briefly against the discs of the screaming rotors; then they dwindled away and were gone.

\* \* \*

Half an hour later, Retief dropped the heli in low over the black tree-tops of the Deep Forest. A gleam of light reflected across rippling water. He edged the machine forward, swung out over the lake; below, the water churned in the down-draft from the rotors as the heli settled gently into two feet of water. Retief cut the engine and popped the hatch. Cold mountain air swirled in; somewhere, water lizards shrilled.

"What place of infamy is this?" the captive general hissed. He stared out into the darkness. "Do you bring me here to slay me unseen, vile disrespector of diplomatic privilege?"

"The idea has merit," Retief said, "but I have other plans for you, General." He climbed down, motioned the Groaci out. Hish grumbled, scrambling down into the icy water of the lake, slogging to shore. From the darkness, a night-fowl called. Retief whistled a reply. There was the sound of a footstep in the brush, the click! of a cross-bow's cocking mechanism.

"It's Retief," he called. "I have a guest: General Hish, of the Groaci Embassy."

"Ah, welcome, Retief," a soft voice drawled. "We're honored, General. Good of you to call. His Highness was hoping you'd be along soon . . ."

\* \* \*

Inside the high-beamed lodge, Prince Tavilan came across the room; behind him, Aric grinned.

"I caught the rat all right, Mr. Retief—"

"Retief!" Tavilan clapped him on the shoulder. "Aric reached me with your message an hour ago. I heard the news of your arrest on Tri-D; they broke into a concert to announce that a plot involving the CDT and reactionary Royalist elements had been uncovered."

"Hidebinder will be very unhappy with that version of events," Retief said. "The agreement was that it was all to be blamed on a rotten apple in the Corps barrel, namely me—"

"We were saddling up to storm the palace and free you, when your

message reached me—"

"How many reliable men do you have available on short notice, Your Highness?" Retief cut in.

"I have thirty-eight of the Invincibles with me here; at least three others are under arrest on various pretexts. Four more managed to report in that they're pinned down by `protective escorts' but we can still strike—"

Retief shook his head. "That was the idea of arresting me, Your Highness—as a personal challenge to you, since my sympathies are well-known. Prouch wanted to bring you out into the open. An armed attack was just what he needed—and he was ready for you. He has at least two hundred Greenbacks in the palace—armed to the nines. Your raid would have been the signal for his take-over—to preserve the domestic tranquility, of course—and your death in the fighting would have left him a clear field."

"What about the Palace Guard? They haven't gone over . . . ?"

"Of course not . . ." Retief accepted a cigar, took a seat by the fire. "They're standing fast, playing it by ear. The Grand Ball tonight gave them an excuse for full dress, including weapons, of course. The Greenbacks aren't quite ready to start anything with them—yet."

Tavilan stamped across the fire-beast-hide rug. "Blast it, Retief, we can't sit here and watch Prouch and his mob move in unopposed! If we hit them now—before they've had time to consolidate—"

"—you'll get every Royalist supporter in Elora City killed," Retief finished for him. "Now, let's consider the situation. Item: the Royal Fleet is grounded, courtesy of CDT policy. Item two: Prouch's People's Volunteer Naval Reserve Detachment of late-model Bogan destroyers is sitting in its launch-cradles at Grey Valley, fifteen miles from here—"

"They're no threat to us; they can't operate without fuel either."

"They won't have to," Retief said, pulling out smoke. "Corps policy is nothing if not elastic. It seems that the Big Picture called for the supplying of the Volunteer Reserve with full magazines—"

"What!"

"—and the topping off of all tanks."

Tavilan's face was pale. "I see," he said quietly, nodding. "The CDT talked disarmament to me while it was arming Prouch's revolutionaries. It never intended to see the monarchy survive."

"Well, Your Highness, the CDT is a very clean-minded organization, and it heard somewhere that `monarchy' was a dirty word—"

"All right!" Prince Tavilan turned to Count Arrol. "We have mounts for every man—and plenty of cross-bow bolts. There'll be Greenback blood on the palace floors before the night is out—"

"If I might make a suggestion . . . ?"

"You're not involved in this, Retief. Take the copter and get clear—"

"Clear to where? I've been disowned by my colleagues and slapped in jail by the Prime Minister. To get back to the Little Picture: I see no point in our riding into Elora City and being shot down at long range by Greenbacks—"

"We'll ride in at the Marivale Gate, move up through the fire-lanes—"

"If you'll pardon my saying so," Retief said, "I've got a better idea. It's only fifteen miles to the Grey Valley . . ."

"So?"

"So I suggest we take a ride over and look at the Volunteer Navy."

"You just told me Prouch's renegades are armed to the teeth . . ."

Retief nodded. "Since we need guns, Your Highness, I can't think of a closer place to get 'em . . ."

\* \* \*

At the head of the troop of thirty-eight riders, including General Hish, lashed to a mount, Retief and Tavilan reined in at the crest of the slope that faced the barracks of the Peoples' Volunteer Naval Reserve, a blaze of light all across the narrow valley. On the ramp a quarter of a mile beyond the administrative and shop areas, fifty slim destroyers loomed, bathed in the glare of polyarcs. Prince Tavilan whistled.

"Prouch and the CDT seem to have struck it off even better than I thought. That's all brand-new equipment."

"Just defensive, of course," Retief said. "I believe Minister Prouch has given assurances that the elimination of Dangredi's free-booters will be carried out with dispatch—just as soon as the CDT recognizes his regime."

Tavilan laughed shortly. "I could have swept Dangredi off the space lanes six months ago—if the CDT hadn't blockaded me."

"Such are the vagaries of Galactic policy—"

"I know: the Big Picture again." Tavilan turned to Arrol. "We'll split into two parties, work around both ends of the valley, and pick our targets at close range. Retief, you ride with me. Let's move out."

\* \* \*

It was a forty-minute ride along the forested slopes walling the valley to the rendezvous point Prince Tavilan had designated, a sheltered ravine less than a hundred yards from the nearest of the parked war vessels. The access ladder was down, and light spilled from the open entry port. A Reservist in baggy grey and green lounged in the opening. Two more stood below, power rifles slung across their backs.

"You could pick those three off from here," Retief remarked. "Cross-bows are a nice quiet weapon—"

Tavilan shook his head. "We'll ride down in formal battle-order. No war's been declared. They won't fire on the Prince Royal."

"There may be forty more inside—to say nothing of the crews of the next ships in line, sentries, stand-by riot squads, and those two pill-boxes commanding the ends of the valley."

"Still—I must give those men their chance to declare themselves."

"As the Prince wishes—but I'll keep my blaster loose in its holster—just in case . . ."

\* \* \*

The Prince rode in the lead with his guidon at his left, followed by thirty-five men, formed up in a precise triangle of seven ranks, with two honor guards out on the flanks. The rear guard followed, holding the reins of the mount to which General Hish, still hissing bitter complaints, was lashed.

The Invincibles moved down the slope and out onto the broad tarmac, hooves clattering against the paved surface. The two men on the ramp turned, stoop gaping. The one above at the ship's entry port whirled, disappeared inside.

The troop rode on; they were halfway to the ship now. One of the waiting Greenbacks unlimbered his power gun, cranked the action, the other followed suit. Both stepped forward half a dozen paces, brought their weapons up uncertainly.

"Halt! Who the Hell's there!" one bawled.

Tavilan flipped the corner of his hunting cape forward over his shoulder to show the royal Eloran device, came on in silence.

The taller of the two Greenbacks raised his rifle, hesitated, half-lowered it. Riding half a pace behind Tavilan, Retief eased his pistol from its holster, watching the doorway above. On his right, Count Arrol held his crossbow across his knee, a bolt cocked in the carriage, his finger on the trigger.

Ten feet from the two Greenback sentries, Prince Tavilan reined in.

"Aren't you men accustomed to render a proper salute when your Commander makes a surprise inspection?" he said calmly.

The Greenbacks looked at each other, fingering their guns.

"It looks as though the word had gone out," Arrol whispered to Retief.

"You cover the Prince; I'll handle the entry port," Retief murmured.

At that moment a figure eased into view at the port; light glinted from the front sight of a power gun as it came up, steadied—

Retief sighted, fired; in the instantaneous blue glare, the man at the port whirled and fell outward. The Greenback nearest Tavilan made a sudden move to swing his gun on the Prince—then stumbled back, a steel quarrel from Arrol's cross-bow standing in his chest. The second Greenback dropped his weapon, stood with raised hands, his mouth open and eyes wide, then turned and ran.

Tavilan leaped down from his steed, dashed for the access ladder, his cross-bow ready. As though on command, four men followed him, while others scattered to form a rough semi-circle at the base of the ladder. Sheltered behind a generator unit, Retief and Arrol covered the port. Tavilan disappeared inside, the men at his heels. There was a long half-minute of dead silence. Then a shout sounded from the next vessel in line, a hundred yards distant. Tavilan reappeared, gestured.

"Everybody in," Arrol called. The men went for the ladder, sprang up in good order; those waiting on the ramp faced outward, covering all points.

A light flashed briefly from the adjacent vessel; a sharp report echoed. A man fell from the ladder; others caught him, lifted him up. Far away, a harsh voice bellowed orders.

"They aren't using any heavy stuff," Arrol said. "They wouldn't want to nick the paint on their new battle wagon . . ."

A squad of men appeared, running from the shadows at the base of the ship from which the firing had come. Most of the troop were up the ladder now; two men hustled the struggling Groaci up. Beside Retief, Arrol launched three bolts in rapid-fire order. Two of the oncoming men fell. The blue flashes of power guns winked; here and there, the surface of the tarmac boiled as wild shots struck.

"Come on . . ." The two men ran for the ladder; Arrol sprang for it, swarmed up. Retief followed; molten metal splattered as a power-gun bolt vaporized the handrail. Then hands were hauling him inside.

"Hit the deck," Arrol yelled. "We're lifting . . . ?"

\* \* \*

"We took one burst from an infinite repeater," an officer reported, "but no serious damage was done. They held their fire just a little too long."

"We were lucky," Prince Tavilan said. "One man killed, one wounded. It's fortunate we didn't select the next ship in line; we'd have had a hornet's nest on our hands."

"Too bad we broke up the battalion crap game," Retief commented. "But by now they'll be lifting off after us—a few of them, anyway."

"All right—we'll give them a warm welcome before they nail us—"

"If I may venture to suggest—"

Tavilan waved a hand, grinning. "Every time you get too damned polite, you've got some diabolical scheme up your sleeve. What is it this time,

Retief?"

"We won't wait around to be nailed. We'll drive for Deep Space at flank speed—"

"And run into Dangredi's blockage? I'd rather use my firepower on Prouch's scavengers."

"That's where our friend the General comes in." Retief nodded toward the trussed Groaci. "He and Dangredi are old business associates. We'll put him on the screen and see if he can't negotiate a brief truce. With the approval of Your Highness, I think we can make an offer that will interest him . . ."

\* \* \*

The flagship of the pirate fleet was a four-hundred-year-old, five-hundred-thousand-ton dreadnought, a relic of pre-Concordiat times. In the red-lit gloom of its cavernous Command Control deck, Retief and Prince Tavilan relaxed in deep couches designed for the massive frames of the Hondu corsairs. Opposite them, Dangredi, the Hondu chieftain, lounged at ease, his shaggy, leather-strapped, jewel-spangled 350-pound bulk almost overflowing his throne-like chair. At Retief's side, General Hish perched nervously. Half a dozen of Tavilan's Invincibles stood around the room, chatting with an equal number of Dangredi's hulking officers, whose greenish fur looked black in the light from the crimson lamps.

"What I failing to grasp," Dangredi rumbled, "is reason for why suddenly now changing of plan previously okayed."

"I hardly think that matters," Tavilan said smoothly. "I've offered to add one hundred thousand Galactic Credits to the sum already agreed on."

"But the whole idea was compensate me, Grand Hereditary War Chief of Hondu people, for not fight; now is offering more pay for stand and give battle . . ."

"I thought you Hondu loved war," an Eloran officer said.

Dangredi nodded his heavy green-furred head, featureless but for two wide green-pupiled eyes. "Crazy mad for warring, and also plenty fond of cash. But is smelling rodent somewhere in woodpile . . ."

"It's very simple, Commodore," Retief said. "General Hish here had arranged with you to flee when the People's Volunteer forces attacked; now changing conditions on Elora make it necessary that you fight—and in place of the loot you would otherwise so rightly expect, you'll collect a handsome honorarium—"

Suddenly the Groaci leaped to his feet, pointed at Retief. "Commodore Dangredi," he hissed. "This renegade diplomat beside me holds a gun pointed at my vitals; only thus did he coerce me to request this parley. Had I guessed his intention, I would have dared him to do his worst. Seize the traitor, Excellency!"

Dangredi stared at the Groaci.



"He—and these strutting popinjays—plot against the security of the People's State of Elora!" Hish whispered urgently. "The plan remains unchanged! You are to flee engagement with the forces of Minister Prouch!"

The great green head bobbed suddenly; hooting laughter sounded. A vast hand slapped a thigh like a shaggy beer keg.

"Aha! At last is getting grasp of situation," Dangredi bellowed. "Now is little honest treachery, kind of dealing Hondu understanding!" He waved a hand at a servitor standing by. "Bringing wassail bowl, plenty meat!" He brought his hands together with a dull boom, rubbed them briskly. "Double-cross, plenty fighting, more gold at end of trail! Is kind of operation I, Dangredi, Hereditary War chief, dreaming of in long nights of tooth-shedding time!"

"But these—these criminal kidnappers have no authority to deal—"

"Groaci-napping is harmless pastime—like stealing wine-melons when cub. Unless, maybe . . ." he cocked a large emerald eye at Hish " . . . you maybe raising ante?"

"I . . . I will match the offer of the saboteurs of interplanetary amity! One hundred thousand in Groaci gold!"

Dangredi considered briefly. "No good. What about fighting? You give Hondu gunners targets in sights? Or maybe chance for rough-and-tumble, hand-to-hand, cold steel against enemy blades?"

General Hish shuddered. "In the name of civilization, I appeal—"

"Shove civilization in ventral orifice! Hondu taking good, crooked, blood-thirsty barbarians every time. Now disappearing quietly, Groaci, while I and new buddies planning strategy. Maybe later I sending for you and bending arms and legs until you tell all about enemy battle plan . . ."

"The Groaci is our hostage," Tavilan said as the general was led away. "He's not to be bent without my prior approval."

"Sure; just having little joke." Dangredi leaned back, accepted a vast drumstick and a tank of wine, waited while his guests accepted proffered delicacies.

"Now, Retief, you say attack coming when . . . ?"

\* \* \*

"I must confess," Counselor Magnan said, "I don't quite understand how it happened that after trouncing the Eloran Volunteers, the pirate Dangredi voluntarily gave himself up and offered the services of his entire fleet as a reserve force to replace the very units he destroyed."

"Never mind that, Magnan," Ambassador Hidebinder said. "As seasoned campaigners must, we shall accept the fait accompli. Our resettlement plans are set back a year, at least. It's doubly unfortunate that Prime Minister Prouch suffered a fall just at this time. Magnan, you'll attend the funeral."

"With pleasure, Mr. Ambassador," Magnan said. "That is, I'll be honored—"

"Retief . . ." Hidebinder glared across the table. "I'm not going to press civil charges, since the Eloran government, at the behest of Prince Tavilan, has dropped the case. However, I may as well tell you at once—your future with the Corps is non-existent. A trifling embezzlement of official funds, I could wink at. Embellished reports, slack performance of duty, cowardice in the face of the enemy—these I could shrug off as youthful peccadilloes. But foot-dragging in the carrying out of Corps policy—" his fist thumped the desk. "Intolerable!"

A messenger entered the conference room, handed a note to Magnan, who passed it to Hidebinder; he opened it impatiently, glanced at it. His jaw dropped. He read it through again. His mouth closed; his jowls paled, quivering.

"Mr. Ambassador—what is it?" Magnan gasped.

Hidebinder rose and tottered from the room. Magnan snatched up the paper, read it through, then stared at Retief.

"He's been—declared persona non grata—The Imperial government gives him twelve hours to leave Elora . . . !"

Retief glanced at the wall clock. "If he hurries, he can catch the mail boat."

"And you, Retief . . . !"

Retief raised his eyebrows. Magnan glanced around the table. "If you gentlemen will excuse us for a few moments . . . ?" Half a dozen frowning diplomats filed from the room. Magnan cleared his throat. "This is most irregular, Retief! The imperial government requests that you present credentials as Minister Plenipotentiary and Ambassador Extraordinary at once . . . they will accept no other appointee . . ."

Retief tsked. "I told Prince Tavilan I wouldn't have time for a ceremonial job. I have a suggestion, Mr. Magnan: suppose I nominate you for the post?"

"Over the heads of a hundred senior officers?" Magnan gasped. "Retief, dear boy . . ."

"That is, if your distaste for monarchies isn't overwhelming . . . ?"

"Eh? Oh, well, as to that," Magnan sat erect, tugged his lapels into place. "I've always had a sneaking admiration for absolute royalty."

"Fine. Dangredi will be along in a few minutes to arrange for supplies; it seems there are a few shiploads of CDT-sponsored undesirables already landing on the northern continent who'll have to be warned off. It's probably just a slip. I'm sure our former Ambassador wouldn't have jumped the gun in violation of solemn treaties."

"Ah," Magnan said.

"And, of course, the Royal Navy will require provisioning—just to be sure

the new Reservists don't get any large ideas . . ."

"Uh . . ."

"And, of course, a new treaty plainly guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Elora will have to be worked up at once . . ."

"Oh . . ."

Retief rose. "All of which I'm sure you'll handle brilliantly, Mr. Ambassador. And by the way—I think I could best serve the mission in some other capacity than as Admin Officer . . ."

Magnan pulled at his collar, waiting . . .

"I think I'd better work closely with Prince Tavilan, the heir apparent," Retief said blandly. "He does a lot of hunting, so perhaps you'd better designate me as Field and Stream Attaché . . ." He picked up his cross-bow from the corner.

"I leave the details to you, Mr. Ambassador. I'm going hunting."