

THE FOREST IN THE SKY

As Second Secretary of Embassy Jame Relief stepped from the lighter which had delivered the Terran Mission to the close-cropped turquoise sward of the planet Zoon, a rabbit-sized creature upholstered in deep blue-violet angora bounded into view from behind an upthrust slab of scarlet granite. It sat on its oddly arranged haunches a few yards from the newcomers, twitching an assortment of members as though testing the air for a clue to their origin. First Secretary Magnan's narrow face registered apprehension as a second furry animal, this one a yard-wide sphere of indigo fuzz, came hopping around the prow of the vessel.

"Do you suppose they bite?"

"They're obviously grass-eaters," Colonel Smartfin-ger, the Military Attache, stated firmly. "Probably make most affectionate pets. Here, ah, kitty, kitty." He snapped his fingers and whistled. More bunnies appeared.

"Ah-Colonel." The Agricultural Attache touched his sleeve. "If I'm not mistaken-those are immature specimens of the planet's dominate life-form!"

"Eh?" The colonel pricked up his ears. "These animals? Impossible!"

"They look just like the high-resolution photos the Sneak-and-peek teams took. My, aren't there a lot of them!"

"Well, possibly this is a sort of playground for them. Cute little fellows-" Smartfinger paused to kick one which had opened surprising jaws for a nip at his ankle.

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"That's the worst of these crash operations," the Economic Officer shied as a terrier-sized fur-bearer darted in close and crunched a shiny plastic button from the cuff of his mauve late-midmorning semi-informal hip-huggers. "One never knows just what one may be getting into."

"Oh-oh." Magnan nudged Relief as a technician bustled from the lock, heavy-laden. "Here comes the classified equipment the Ambassador's been sitting on since we left Sector HQ."

"Ah!" Ambassador Oldtrick stepped forward, rubbing his small, well-manicured hands briskly together. He lifted an article resembling a Mae West life jacket from the stack offered.

"Here, gentlemen, is my personal contribution to, ahem, high-level negotiations!" He smiled proudly and slipped his arms through a loop of woven plastic. "One-man, self-contained, power-boosted aerial lift units," he announced. "With these, gentlemen, we will confront the elusive Zooner on his home ground!"

"But-the post report said the Zooners are a sort of animated blimp!" the Information Officer protested. "Only a few have been seen, cruising at high altitude! Surely we're not going after them!"

"It was inevitable, gentlemen." Oldtrick winced as the technician tugged the harness strap tight across his narrow chest. "Sooner or later man was bound to encounter lighter-than-air intelligence-a confrontation for which we of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestri-enne are eminently well qualified!"

"But, Your Excellency," First Secretary Magnan spoke up, "couldn't we have arranged to confront these, er, gaseous brains here on solid land?"

"Nonsense, Magnan! Give up this superb opportunity to display the adaptability of the trained diplomat? Since these beings dwell among the clouds of their native world, what more convincing evidence of good will could we display than to meet them on their own ground, so to speak?"

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"Of course," the corpulent Political Officer put in, "we aren't actually sure there's anyone up there." He squinted nervously up at the lacy mass of land-coral that reached into the Zoonian sky, its lofty pinnacles brushing a seven-thousand-foot stratum of cumulonimbus.

"That's where we'll steal a march on certain lag-gards," Oldtrick stated imperturbably. "The survey photos clearly show the details of a charming aerial city nestled on the peak. Picture the spectacle, gentlemen, when the Mission descends on them from the blue empyrean to open a new era of Terran-Zoon relations!"

"Yes-a striking mise-en-scene indeed, as Your Excellency points out." The Economic Officer's cheek gave a nervous twitch. "But what if something goes wrong with the apparatus? The steering mechanism, for example, appears a trifle insubstantial-"

"These devices were designed and constructed under my personal supervision, Chester," the Ambassador cut him off coolly. "However," he continued, "don't allow that circumstance to prevent you from pointing out any conceptual flaws you may have detected,"

"A marvel of light-weight ingenuity," the Economic Officer said hastily. "I only meant . . ."

"Chester's point was just that maybe some of us ought to wait here, Mr. Ambassador," the Military Attache said hastily. "In case any, ah, late despatches come in from Sector, or something. Much as I'll hate to miss participating, I volunteer-"

"Kindly rebuckle your harness, Colonel," Oldtrick said through thinned lips, "I wouldn't dream of allowing you to make the sacrifice."

"Good Lord, Relief," Magnan said in a hoarse whisper behind his hand. "Do you suppose these little tiny things will actually work? And does he really mean ..." Magnan's voice trailed off as he stared up into the bottomless sky.

"He really means," Relief confirmed. "As for His Excellency's invention, I suppose that given a large-

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diameter, low-density planet with a standard mass of 4.8 and a surface G of .72, plus an atmospheric pressure of 27.5 P.S.I, and a superlight gas-it's possible,"

"I was afraid of that," Magnan muttered. "I don't suppose that if we all joined together and took a firm line . . .?"

"Might be a savings at that," Relief nodded judiciously. "The whole staff could be court-martialed as a group."

". . . and now," Ambassador Oldtrick's reedy voice paused impressively as he settled his beret firmly in place. "If you're ready, gentlemen-inflate your gas-bags!"

A sharp hissing started up as a dozen petcocks opened as one. Bright-colored plastic bubbles inflated with sharp popping sounds above the shoulders of the Terran diplomats. The Ambassador gave a little spring and bounded high above the heads of his staff, where he hung, supported by the balloon, assisted by a softly snorting battery of air jets buckled across his hips. Colonel Smartfinger, a large bony man, gave a half-hearted leap, fell back, his toes groping for contact as a gust of air bumped him across the ground. Magnan, lighter than the rest, made a creditable spring, rose to dangle beside the Chief of Mission. Retief adjusted his bouyancy indicator carefully, jumped off as the rest of the staff scrambled to avoid the distinction of being the last man airborne.

"Capital, gentlemen!" Oldtrick beamed at the others as they drifted in a ragged row, roped together like alpinists, five yards above the surface. "I trust each of you is ready to savor the thrill of breaking new ground!"

"An unfortunate turn of phrase," Magnan quavered, looking down at the rocky outcropping below. The grassy plain on which the lighter had deposited the mission stretched away to the horizon, interrupted only by the upthrusting coral reefs dotted across it like lonely castles in the Daliesque desert, and a distant smudge of smoky green.

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"And now-onward to what I hope I may, without charges of undue joculariry, term a new high in diplomacy," Oldtrick cried. He advanced his jet con-trol lever and lifted skyward, trailed by the members of his staff.

Five hundred feet aloft, Magnan clutched the arm of Retief, occupying the adjacent position in the line.

"The lighter is lifting off!" He pointed to the slim shape of the tiny Corps vessel, drifting upward from the sands below. "It's abandoning us!"

"A mark of the Ambassador's confidence that we'll meet with a hospitable reception at the hands of the Zooners," Retief pointed out.

"Frankly, I'm at a loss to understand Sector's eagerness to accredit a Mission to this wasteland." Magnan raised his voice above the whistling of the sharp wind and the polyphonous huffing of the jato units. "Retief, you seem to have a way of picking up odd bits of information; any idea what's

behind it?"

"According to a usually reliable source, the Groaci have their eyes-all five of them-on Zoon. Naturally, if they're interested, the Corps has to beat them to it."

"Aha!" Magnan looked wise. "They must Know Something. By the way," he edged closer. "Who told you? The Ambassador? The Undersecretary?"

"Better than that; the bartender at the Departmental snackbar."

"Well, I daresay our five-eyed friends will receive a sharp surprise when they arrive to find us already on a cordial basis with the locals. Unorthodox though Ambassador Oldtrick's technique may be, I'm forced to concede that it appears the only way we could have approached these Zooners." Magnan craned upward at the fanciful formation of many-fingered rock past which

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they were rising. "Odd that none of them have sallied forth to greet us."

Relief followed his gaze. "We still have six thousand feet to go," he said. "I suppose we'll find a suitable reception waiting for us at the top."

Half an hour later, Ambassador Oldtrick in the lead, the party soared above the final rampart to look down on a wonderland of rose and pink and violet coral, an intricacy of spires, tunnels, bridges, grottos, turrets, caves, avenues, as complex and delicately fragile as spun sugar.

"Carefully, now, gentlemen." Oldtrick twiddled his jato control, dropped in to a gentle landing on a graceful arch spanning a cleft full of luminous gloom produced by the filtration of light through the translucen coral. Other members of his staff settled in around him, gazing with awe at the minarets rising all around them.

The Ambassador, having twisted a knob to deflate his gasbag and laid aside his flying harness, was frowning as he looked about the silent prospect.

"I wonder where the inhabitants have betaken themselves?" he lifted a finger, and six eager under-lings sprang to his side.

"Apparently the natives are a trifle shy, gentlemen," he stated. "Nose around a bit, look friendly, and avoid poking into any possibly taboo areas such as temples and public comfort stations."

Leaving their deflated gasbags heaped near their point of arrival, the Terrans set about peering into caverns and clambering up to gaze along twisting alleyways winding among silent coral palaces. Relief followed a narrow path atop a ridge which curved upward to a point of vantage. Magnan trailed, mopping at his face with a scented tissue.

"Apparently no one's at home," he puffed, coming up to the tiny platform from which Relief surveyed the prospect spread below. "A trifle disconcerting, I must say. I wonder what sort of arrangements have been laid on for feeding and housing us?"

"Another odd thing," Relief said. "No empty beer bottles, tin cans, old newspapers, or fruit rinds. In fact, no signs of habitation at all."

"It rather appears we've been stood up," the Eco-nomic Officer said indignantly. "Such cheek! And from a pack of animated intangibles, at that!"

"It's my opinion the town's been evacuated," the Political Officer said in the keen tones of one delivering an incisive analysis of a complex situation. "We may as well leave."

"Nonsense!" Oldtrick snapped. "Do you expect me to trot back to Sector and announce that I can't find the government to which I'm accredited?"

"Great heavens!" Magnan blinked at a lone dark cloud drifting ominously closer under the high over-cast. "I thought I sensed something impending! Oh, Mr. Ambassador . . . !" he called, starting back down. At that moment, a cry from an adjacent cavern focused all eyes on the Military Attaché, emerging therefrom with a short length of what appeared to be tarred rope, charred at one end.

"Signs of life, Your Excellency!" he announced. "A dope stick butt!" He sniffed it. "Freshly smoked."

"Dope sticks! Nonsense!" Oldtrick prodded the exhibit with a stubby forefinger. "I'm sure the Zooners are far too insubstantial to indulge in such vices."

"Ah, Mr. Ambassador," Magnan called. "I suggest we all select a nice dry cave and creep inside out of the weather-"

"Cave? Creep? Weather? What weather?" Oldtrick rounded on the First Secretary as he came up. "I'm here to establish diplomatic relations with a newly discovered race, not set up housekeeping!"

"That weather," Magnan said stiffly, pointing at the giant cloud sweeping swiftly down on them at a level which threatened to shroud the party in fog in a matter of minutes.

"Eh? Oh ..." Oldtrick stared at the approaching munderhead. "Yes, well, I was about to suggest we seek shelter-"

"What about the dope stick?" The Colonel tried to recapture the limelight. "We hadn't finished looking at my dope stick when Magnan came along with his cloud."

"My cloud is of considerably more urgency than your dope stick, Colonel," Magnan said loftily. "Particularly since, as His Excellency has pointed out, your little find couldn't possibly be the property of the Zooners."

"Ha! Well if it isn't the property of the Zooners, then whose is it?" The officer looked at the butt suspiciously, passed it around. Relief glanced at it, sniffed it.

"I believe you'll find this to be of Oroaci manufacture, Colonel," he said.

"What?" Oldtrick clapped a hand to his forehead. "Impossible!" Why I myself hardly know-that is, they couldn't-I mean to say, drat it, the location of the town is Utter Top Secret!"

"Ahem." Magnan glanced up complacently at his cloud, now a battleship-sized shape only a few hundred feet distant. "I wonder if it mightn't be as well to hurry along now before we find ourselves drenched."

"Good Lord!" The Political Officer stared at the gray-black mass as it moved across the hazy sun, blotting it out like an eclipse. In the sudden shadow, the wind was abruptly chill. The cloud was above the far edge of the reef now; as they watched, it dropped lower, brushed across a projecting digit of stone with a dry squee!, sent a shower of tiny rock fragments showering down. Magnan jumped and blinked his eyes hard, twice.

"Did you see . . . ? Did /see ... ?"

Dropping lower, the cloud sailed between two lofty minarets, scraped across a lower tower topped with a series of sharp spikes. There was a ripping sound, a crunch of stone, a sharp powf, a blattering noise of escaping gas. A distinct odor of rubberized canvas floated across to the diplomats, borne by the brisk breeze.

"Ye Gods!" the Military Attache shouted. "That's

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no cloud! It's a Trojan Horse! A dirigible in camou-flage! A trick-" He cut off and turned to run as the foundering four-acre balloon swung, canted at a sharp angle, and thundered down amid gratings and crunch-ings, crumbling bridges, snapping off slender towers, settling in to blanket the landscape like a collapsed circus tent. A small, agile creature in a flared helmet and a black hip-cloak appeared at its edge, wading across the deflated folds of the counterfeit cloud, cradling a formidable blast gun in its arms. Others followed, leaping down and scampering for strategic positions on the high ground surrounding the Terrans.

"Groaci shock troops!" the Military Attach6 shout-ed. "Run for your lives!" He dashed for the conceal-ment of a shadow canyon; a blast from a Groaci gun sent a cloud of coral chips after him. Retief, from a position in the lee of a buttress of rock, saw half a dozen of the Terrans skid to a halt at the report, put up their hands as the invaders swarmed around them, hissing soft Groaci sibilants. Three more Terrans, attempting flight, were captured within forty feet, prodded back at gunpoint. A moment later a sharp oof! and a burst of military expletives announced the surrender of Colonel Smartfinger. Retief made his way around a rock spire, spotted Ambassador Oldtrick being routed from his hidingplace behind a cactus-shaped outcropping.

"Well, fancy meeting you here, Hubert." A slightly built, splendidly dressed Groaci strolled forward, puff-ing at a dope stick held in silver tongs. "I regret to submit you to the indignity of being trussed up like a gerp-fowl in plucking season, but what can one expect when one commits aggravated

trespass, eh?"

"Trespass? I'm here in good faith as Terran envoy to Zoon!" Oldtrick sputtered. "See here, Ambassador Shish, this is an outrage! I demand you order these bandits to release me and my staff at once!"

"Field Marshal Shish, if you please, Hubert," Shish whispered. "These are a duly constituted constabulary.

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If you annoy me, I may just order them to exercise the full rigor of the law which you have so airily disregard-ed!"

"What law? Your confounded dacoits have assaulted peaceful diplomats in peaceful pursuit of their duties!"

"Interplanetary law, my dear sir," Shish hissed. "That section dealing with territorial claims to uninhab-ited planets."

"But-but the Zooners inhabit Zoon!"

"So? An exhaustive search of the entire planetary surface by our Scouting Service failed to turn up any evidence of intelligent habitation."

"Surface? But the Zooners don't occupy the surface-"

"Exactly. Therefore we have assumed ownership. Now, about reparations and damages in connection with your release; I should think a million credits would be about right-paid directly to me, of course, as Planetary Military Governor, pro tern. . . ."

"A million?" Oldtrick swallowed hard. "But . . . but . . . see here!" He fixed Shish with a desperate eye. "What is it you fellows are after? This isn't the kind of sandy, dry real estate you Groaci prefer-and the world has no known economic or strategic value. . . ."

"Hmmm." Shish flicked his dope stick butt aside. "No harm in telling you, I suppose. We intend to gather a crop."

"Crop? There's nothing growing here but blue grass and land coral!"

"Wrong again, Hubert. The crop that interests us is this . . ." He fingered the edge of his shaggy violet cape. "A luxury fur, light, colorful, nonallergic . . ." He lowered his voice and leered with three eyes. "And with reportedly fabulous aphrodisiac effects; and there are millions of credits worth of it, leaping about the landscape below, free for the harvesting!"

"But-surely you jest, sir! Those are-"

There was a sudden flurry as one of the Terrans broke free and dashed for a cave. The Groaci constabu-

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lary gave chase. Shish made an annoyed sound and hurried away to oversee the recapture. Oldtrick, left momentarily alone, eyed the flying harness

lying in a heap ten yards from him. He took a deep breath, darted forward, snatched up a harness. As he turned to sprint for cover, a breathy cry announced his discovery. Desperately, the Chief of Mission struggled into his straps as he ran, twisted the valve, fired his jato units, and shot into the air over the heads of a pair of fleet-footed aliens who had been about to lay him by the heels. He passed over Reliefs head at an altitude of twenty feet, driven smartly by the brisk breeze. Retief ducked his head, hugged the shadows as Groaci feet pounded past at close range, pursuing the fleeing Terran. Retief saw half a dozen marksmen taking aim at the airborne diplomat as the wind swept him out over the reefs edge. Shots rang. There was a sharp report as a round pierced the gasbag. With a despairing wail, the Ambassador sank swiftly out of sight.

Retief rolled to his feet, ran to the pile of flight harnesses, grabbed up two, whirled and sprinted for the edge over which Oldtrick had vanished. Two Groaci, turning to confront the new menace descending on their rear, were bowled aside by Reliefs rush. Another sprang to intercept him, bringing his gun around. Retief caught the barrel in full stride, swung the gun with its owner still clinging desperately to it, slammed the unfortunate alien into the faces of his astounded comrades. Shots split the air past Reliefs ear, but without slowing, he charged to the brink and dived over into seven thousand feet of open air.

The uprushing wind shrieked past Reliefs ears like a typhoon. Gripping one of the two harnesses in his teeth, he pulled the other on as one would don a

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vest, buckled the straps. He looked down, squinting against the rush of air. The Ambassador, falling free now with his burst balloon fluttering at his back, was twenty feet below. Relief tucked his arms close, kicked his heels up to assume a diver's attitude. The distance between the two men lessened. The rock face flashed past, dangerously close. Reliefs hand brushed Old-trick's foot. The Ambassador twisted convulsively to roll a wild eye at Relief, suspended above him in the hurtling airstream. Relief caught the senior diplomat's arm, shoved the spare harness into his hand. A moment later Oldrick had shed his ruined gasbag and shrugged into the replacement. With a twist of the pelcock, he inflated his balloon and at once slowed, falling behind Relief, who opened his own valve, fell the sudden lug of the harness. A moment later, he was floating lightly a hundred feet below the Ambassador.

"Quick thinking, my boy ..." Oldrick's voice came faintly. "As soon as I'm back aboard the transport, I shall summon a heavy PE Unit to deal with those ruffians! We'll thwart their inhuman scheme to massacre helpless infant Zooners, thus endearing ourselves to their elders!" He was close now, dropping as Relief rose. "You'd better come along with me," he said sharply as they passed, ten feet apart. "I'll want your corroborative statements, and-

"Sorry, Mr. Ambassador," Relief said. "I seem to have gotten hold of a heavy-duty unit. It wants to go up, and the valve appears to be stuck."

"Come back," Oldrick shouted as he dropped away below the younger man. "I insist that you accompany me ..."

"I'm afraid it's out of my hands now, sir," Relief called. "I suggest you slay out of sight of any colonist who may have settled in down below. I have an idea they'll be a little trigger happy when they discover their police force is stranded on the reef; and a dangling diplomat will make a tempting target."

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The southwest breeze bore Relief along at a brisk twenty-mile-per-hour clip. He twisted the buoyancy control lever both ways, to no avail. The landscape dwindled away below him, a vast spread of soft aquamarine hills. From this height, immense herds of creatures were visible, ranging in color from pale blue to deep grapejuice. They appeared, Relief noted, to be converging on a point not far from the base of the coral reef, where a number of black dots might have been small structures. Then the view was obscured, first by whipping streamers of fog, then by a dense, wet mist which enveloped him like a cool Turkish bath.

For ten minutes he swirled blindly upward; then watery sunshine penetrated, lighting the vapor to a golden glow; a moment later he burst through into brilliance. A deep blue sky arched above the blinding white cloud-plain. Squinting against the glare, he saw a misty shape of pale green projecting above the clouds at a distance he estimated at five miles. Using steering jets, he headed for it.

Fifteen minutes later, he was close enough to make out thick, glossy yellow columns, supporting masses of chartreuse foliage. Closer, the verdure resolved into clusters of leaves the size of tablecloths, among which gaudy blossoms shone scarlet and pink. In the leafy depths, the sun striking down from zenith was filtered to a deep, green-gold gloom. Relief maneuvered toward a sturdy-looking branch, only at the last moment saw the yard-long thorns concealed in the shadow of the spreading leaves. He ducked, twisted aside from the savage stab of a needlepoint, heard the rip and ker-pow! as his gasbag burst, impaled; then he slammed hard against a thigh-thick, glass-smooth branch, grabbed with both hands and both legs, and braked to a halt inches from an upthrust dagger of horny wood.

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All around, life swarmed, humming, buzz-ing, chattering in a hundred oddly euphonious keys. There were fluffy, spherical bird-things in vivid colors; darting scaled runners like jeweled ferrets; swarms of tiny golden four-winged butterflies. Once something hooted, far away, and for a moment the chorus was stilled, to resume a moment later.

Looking down, Relief could see nothing but level after level of leafy branches, blotting out the swirling clouds two hundred feet below. The ground, he estimated, was a mile and a half farther-not what could be described as an easy climb. Still, it looked like the only way. He divested himself of the ruined altitude harness, picked a route and started down.

Relief had covered no more than fifty feet when a sudden flurry of motion caught his eye through the foliage. A moment later, a clump of leaves

leaned aside, pushed by a gust of wind, to reveal a bulky, ghost-pale creature, its body covered with short white bristles, its head a flattened spheroid. Its multiple shiny black limbs thrashed wildly against the restraint of a web of silky, scarlet threads, stretched between limbs in an intricate spiral pattern. A flat pouch, secured by a flat strap, bobbed against the trapped creature's side. The web, Retief saw, was constructed at the very tip of a pair of long boughs which leaned in a deep curve under the weight of the victim-and of something else.

Peering into the shadows, he saw a foot-long claw like a pair of oversized garden shears poised in the air two feet from the trapped being; then he noted that the claw was attached to an arm like a six-foot length of stainless-steel pipe, which was attached, in turn, to a body encased in silvery-blue armor-plate, almost invisible in the leafy gloom.

As Retief watched, the arm lunged, sheared through a cluster of awning-sized leaves, snipped off a tuft of

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stiff white hairs as the snared one made a desperate bound sideways. The aggressor, it appeared, had advanced as far along the fragile support as possible; but it was only a matter of time until the murderous pincer connected with its target.

Relief checked his pockets, produced a pocketknife with a two-inch blade, useful chiefly for cutting the tips from hand-rolled Jorgensen cigars. He used it to saw through a half-inch-thick vine drooping near him.. He coiled the rope over his shoulder and started back up.

From a branch far above, Retief peered down through the leafy shadows at the twelve-foot monstrosity clinging, head down, from a six-inch stem. The predator had stretched itself out to its utmost length in its effort to reach its victim trapped below.

Retief slid down to a crouch within touching distance of the monster's hind leg. He flipped out the lariat he had fashioned hastily from the length of pliable vine, passed its end under the massive ankle joint, whipped it quickly into a slip knot which would tighten under pressure. He tied the other end of the rope to a sturdy bole at his back, pulling it up just short of taut. Then he slid around the trunk and headed back for the scene of the action, paying out a second rope, the end of which was secured to a stout limb.

The trapped creature, huddled at the extreme extent of the rein given it by the binding strands of silk, saw Retief, gave a convulsive bound which triggered another snap of the giant claw hovering above.

"Stand pat," Retief called softly. "I'll try to distract his attention." He stepped out on a slender branch, which sagged but held. Holding the end of the rope in his free hand, he made his way to within ten feet of the web.

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Above, the claw-creature, sensing movement near-by, poked out a glittering

eye at the end of a two-foot rod, studied Retief from a distance of five yards. Retief watched the claw, which hovered indecisively, ready to strike in either direction.

A baseball-sized fruit was growing within easy reach. Retief plucked it, took aim, and pitched it at the monster's eye. It struck and burst, spattering the surrounding foliage with a sticky yellow goo and an odor of overripe melon. Quick as thought, the claw struck out at Retief as he jumped, gripping the vine, and swung in a graceful Tarzan-style arc across toward a handy landing platform thirty feet distant. The armored meat-eater, thwarted, lunged after him. There was a noisy rasping of metal-hard hooks against wood, a frantic shaking of branches; then the barrel-shaped body halted in mid-swing with a tremendous jerk as the rope lashed to its leg came up short. Retief, safely lodged in his new platform, caught a momentary glimpse of an open mouth lined with ranks of multi-pronged teeth; then, with a sharp zong! the rope supporting the monster parted. The apparition dropped away, smashing its way downward with a series of progressively fainter concussions until it was lost in the depths below.

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The bristled Zoonite sagged heavily in the net, watching Retief with a row of shiny eyes like pink shirt buttons as he sawed through the strands of the web with his pocketknife. Freed, it dipped into its hip-pouch with a four-fingered hand encased in a glove ornamented with polished, inch-long talons, brought out a small cylinder which it raised to its middle eye.

"Hrikk," it said in a soft rasp. A mouth like Jack Pumpkinhead's gaped in an unreadable expression.

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There was a bright flash which made a green after-image dance on Retief's retinas. The alien dropped the object back in the pouch, took out a second artifact resembling a footlong harmonica, which it adjusted on a loop around its neck. At once, it emitted a series of bleeps, toots and deep, resonant thrums, then looked at Retief in a way which seemed expectant.

"If I'm not mistaken, that's a Groaci electronic translator," Retief said. "Trade goods like the camera, I presume?"

"Correct," the device interpreted the small alien's rasping tones. "By George, it works!"

"The Groaci are second to none, when it comes to miniaturized electronics and real estate acquisition," Retief said.

"Real estate?" the Zoonite inquired with a rising inflection.

"Planetary surfaces," Retief explained.

"Oh, that. Yes, I'd heard they'd settled in down below. No doubt a pre-germination trauma's at the root of the matter. But, every being to his own form of self-destruction, as Zerd so succinctly put it before he dissolved himself in fuming nitric acid." The alien's button eyes roved over

Retief. "Though I must say your own death wish takes a curious form."

"Oh?"

"Teasing a vine-jack for a starter," The Zoonite amplified. "That's dangerous, you know. The claw can snip through six inches of gilv as though it were a zoob-patty."

"Actually, I got the impression the thing was after you," Retief said.

"Oh, it was, it was. Almost got me, too. Hardly worth the effort. I'd make a disappointing meal." The Zoonite fingered its translator, the decorative claws clicking tinnily on the shiny plastic. "Am I to understand you came to my rescue intentionally?" it said.

Retief nodded.

"Whatever for?"

"On the theory that one intelligent being should

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keep another from being eaten alive, whenever he conveniently can."

"Hmmm. A curious concept. And now I suppose you expect me to reciprocate?"

"If it doesn't inconvenience you," Retief replied.

"But you look so, so edible . . ." Without warning, one of the alien's ebon legs flashed out, talons spread, in a vicious kick. It was a fast stroke, but Retief was faster; shifting his weight slightly, he intercepted the other's shin with the edge of his shoe, eliciting a sharp report. The Zooner yelped, simultaneously lashed out, left-right, with a pair of arms, to meet painful intercep-tions as Retief struck upward at one, down at the other. In the next instant, a small hand gun was pressing into the alien's paunch-bristles.

"We Terries are handy at small manufacturing, too," Retief said easily.

"This item is called a crater gun. You'll understand why when you've seen it fired."

"... but appearances can be so deceiving," the Zooner finished its interrupted sentence, wringing its numbed limbs.

"A natural mistake," Retief commiserated. "Still, I'm sure you wouldn't have found me any more nourishing than the vine-jack would have found you: incompatible body chemistry, you know."

"Yes. Well, in that case, I may as well be off." The Zooner backed a step.

"Before you go," Retief suggested, "there are some matters we might discuss to our mutual profit."

"Oh? What, for example?"

"The invasion of Zoon, for one. And ways and means of getting back down to Zoona Firma for another."

"You are a compulsive-and it's a highly channelized neurosis: a vine-jack or my humble self won't do; it has to be the hard way."

"I'm afraid your translator is out of adjustment," Retief said. "That doesn't seem to mean anything."

"I find your oblique approach a trifle puzzling, too,"

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the alien confided. "I sense that you're trying to tell me something, but I can't for the life of me guess what it might be. Suppose we go along to my place for an aperitif, and possibly we can enlighten each other. By the way, I'm known as Qoj, the Ready Biter."

"I'm Retief, the Occasional Indulger," the Terran said. "Lead the way, Qoj, and I'll do my best to follow."

It was a breathtaking thirty-minute journey through the towering treetops. The alien progressed by long, curiously dream-like leaps from one precarious rest to another, while Retief made his way as rapidly as possible along interlacing branches and bridges, of tangled vine, keenly aware of the bottomless chasm yawning below.

The trip ended at a hundred-foot spherical space where the growth had been cleared back to create a shady, green-lit cavern. Bowers and leafy balconies were nestled around its periphery; tiny, fragile-looking terraces, hung suspended under the shelter of sprays of giant fronds. There were several dozen Zooners in sight, some lounging on the platforms or perched in stem-mounted chairs which swayed dizzily to the light breeze; others sailed gracefully from one roost to another, while a few hung by one or more limbs from festooning vines, apparently sleeping.

"I'll introduce you around," the Zooner said. "Otherwise the fellows will be taking experimental cracks at you and getting themselves hurt. I'm against that, because an injured Zooner is inclined to be disa-greeable company." He flipped a switch on the translator and emitted a sharp cry. Zooner heads turned. Qoj spied off a short speech, waved a hand at Retief, who inclined his head courteously. The locals eyed the

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Terran incuriously, went back to their previous activities. Qoj indicated a tiny table mounted atop a ten-foot rod, around which three small seats were arranged, similarly positioned. Retief scaled the support, took up his seat like a flagpole sitter. Qoj settled in opposite him, the stem quivering and swaying under his weight. He whistled shrilly, and a black-spotted gray creature came sailing in a broad leap, took orders, bounded away, returned in a moment with aromatic flagons. |

"Ah," Qoj leaned back comfortably with two pairs * of legs crossed.

"Nothing like a little bottled Nirvana, eh?" He lifted his flask and poured the

contents in past a row of pronged teeth rivaling those of the vine-jack,

"Quite an interesting place you have here." Retief unobtrusively sniffed his drink, sampled it. The fluid evaporated instantly on his tongue, leaving a fruity aroma.

"It's well enough, I suppose," Qoj assented, "under the circumstances."

"What circumstances are those?"

"Not enough to eat. Too many predators-like that fellow you dispatched. Cramped environment-no place to go. And of course, cut off as we are from raw materials, no hope for technological advancement. Let's face it, Retief: we're up the tree without a paddle."

Retief watched a bulky Zooner sail past in one of the feather-light leaps characteristic of the creatures.

"Speaking of technology," he said. "How do you manage that trick?"

"What trick?"

"You must weigh three hundred pounds-but when [you want to, you float like a dandelion seed."

"Oh, that. Just an inherent knack, I guess you'd call it. Even our spore-pods have it; otherwise, they'd smash when they hit the ground."

"Organic antigravity," Retief said admiringly. "Or perhaps teleportation would be a better name."

"The gland responds to mental impulses" Qoj said.

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"Fortunately, our young have no mentality to speak of, so they're grounded. Otherwise, I suppose we'd never have a moment's peace."

"He tossed another shot down his throat, lounging back in his chair as it swayed past Relief, rebounded to swing in the opposite direction, while Reliefs perch waved in a gentle counterpoint, a motion which tended to cross the eyes and bring a light sweat to the forehead.

"I wondered why there were no little ones gamboling about your doorstep," Relief said.

"Doorstep?" Qoj jerked upright and stared in alarm toward the shaded entrance to his bower. "Great slaving jaws, Relief, don't give me a start like that! The little monsters are down on the surface where they belong!"

"Unattended?"

Qoj shuddered. "I suppose we really ought to be doing something about them, but frankly-it's too dangerous."

Relief raised an eyebrow in polite inquiry.

"Why, the little fiends would strip the very crust off the planet if they weren't able to assuage their voracity by eating each other."

"So that's why you don't occupy the surface."

"Um. If our ancestors hadn't taken to the trees, we'd be extinct by now-devoured by our own offspring."

"And I suppose your apparent indifference to the arrival of the Groaci is based on the same reasoning."

"Feeding season's about to begin," Qoj said offhandedly. "Those fellows won't last a day. Not much juice in them, though-^-at least not in the one I met-"

"That would be the previous owner of the camera and the translator?"

"Correct. Interesting chap. He was buzzing about in an odd little contrivance with whirling vanes on top, and ran afoul a loop of siring vine. My, wasn't he full of plans . . ." The Zooner sipped his flask, musing.

"The Groaci, individually, don't look like much, I'll agree," Relief said. "But they have a rather potent

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subnuclear arsenal at their command. And it appears they're about to launch a general offensive against your young." !

"So? Maybe they'll clear the little nuisances out.' Then we can descend to the ground and start living like gentlebeings."

"What about the future of the race?" j

""That for the future of the race," Qoj made a complicated gesture with obscure biological implications. "We're only concerned about ourselves." |

"Still," Retief countered, "you were young once-" \

"If you're going to be crude," the Zooner said with | inebriated dignity, "you may leave me."

"Sure," Retief said. "But before I go, would you mind describing these little fellows?" ;

"In shape, they're not unlike us adults; they come in all sizes, from this"-Qoj held two taloned fingers an inch apart-"to this." He indicated a yard and a half. j "And of course, the baby fur. Ghastly blue fuzz a foot I long."

"You did say ... blue?"

"Blue."

Retief nodded thoughtfully. "You know, Qoj, I think we have the basis for a cooperative undertaking after I all. If you'll give me another five minutes of your time, I'll explain what I have in mind. ..."

10

Flanked by Qoj and another Zooner named Ornx the Eager Eater, Retief dropped down through the cloud layer, propelled by a softly hissing steering jet salvaged from his punctured lift harness.

"That's it, dead ahead," he pointed to the towering coral reef, pale rose-colored in the distance.

"Wheee!" Qoj squealed with delight as he pulled up abreast of Retief with a shrill whistling of his borrowed

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jet. "Capital idea, Retief, these little squirt-bottles! You know, I never dreamed flying could be such fun! Always lived in dread of getting out of reach of a branch and just drifting aimlessly until one of the boys or some other predator got me. With these, a whole new dimension opens up! I can already detect a lessening of sibling rivalry drives and inverted Oedipus syndromes!"

"Don't let your released tensions go to your head, Qoj," Retief cautioned. "The Groaci may still take a little managing. You hang back while I go in to check the lie of the land."

Minutes later, Retief swept in above the convoluted surface of the coral peak. No Groaci were to be seen, but half a dozen Terrans were wandering aimlessly about their lofty prison. They ran forward with glad cries as Retief landed.

"Good show, my boy!" Colonel Smartfinger pumped his hand. "I knew you wouldn't leave us stranded here! Those rascally Groaci commandeered our harnesses-"

"But-where are the reinforcements?" the Political Officer demanded, staring around. "Where's the light-er? Where's His Excellency? Who are these creatures?" He eyed the Zooners, circling for a landing. "Where have you been, Retief?" He broke off, staring. "And where's your harness?"

"I'll tell you later," Retief motioned the diplomats toward the deflated Groaci gasbag now draped limply across the rocks. "There's no time to dally, I'm afraid. All aboard."

"But-its punctured!" Smartfinger protested. "It won't fly, man!"

"It will when our new allies finish," Retief reassured the colonel.

The Zooners were already busy, bustling about the ersatz cloud, stuffing fistfuls of seed-pods inside. A corner of the big bag stirred lazily, lifted to flap gently in the breeze. One side curled upward, tugging gently.

"You know what to do," Retief called to Qoj. "Don't waste any time following me down." He jumped into the air, thumbed the jet control wide open, and headed for the next stop at flank speed.

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Two thirds of the way down the sheer wall of the coral reef, a small figure caught Retief's eye, perched disconsolately in a crevice in the rock. He swung closer, saw the spindly shanks and five-eyed visage of a Groaci, his once-splendid raiment in

"Well, Field Marshal Shish," he called. "What's the matter, conditions down below not to your liking?"

"Ambassador Shish, if you please," the castaway hissed in sorrowful Groaci. "To leave me in solitude, Soft One; to have suffered enough."

"Not nearly enough," Retief contradicted. "Howev-er, all is not yet lost. I take it your valiant troops have encountered some sort of difficulty below?"

"The spawn of the pits fell upon us while I was in my bath!" the Groaci whispered, speaking Terran now. "They snapped up a dozen of my chaps before I could spring from the tub of hot sand in which I had been luxuriating! I was fortunate to escape with my life! And then your shoddy Terran-made harness failed and dropped me here. Alack! Gone are the dreams of a procuratorship . . ."

"Maybe not." Retief maneuvered in close, held out a hand. "I'll give you a piggyback, and explain how matters stand. Maybe you can still salvage something from the wreckage."

Shish canted his eye-stalks. "Piggyback? Are you insane, Retief? Why, there's nothing holding you up! How can it hold two of us up?"

"Take it or leave it, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said. "I have a tight schedule."

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"I'll take it." Shish gingerly swung his scrawny frame out and scrambled to a perch on Retief's back, four of his eyes sphinctered tight shut. "But if I hadn't already been contemplating suicide, nothing would have co-axed me to it!"

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Five minutes later, Retief heard a hail; he dropped down, settled onto a narrow ledge beside the slight figure of Ambassador Oldtrick. The senior diplomat had lost his natty beret, and there was a scratch on his cheek. His flight harness, its gasbag flat, hung on a point of the rock behind him.

"What's this?" he blurted. "Who's captured whom? Retief, are you-did he . . ."

"Everything's fine, Your Excellency," Retief said soothingly. "I'll just leave

His Groacian Excellency here with you. I've had a little talk with him, and he has something he wants to tell you. The staff will be along in a moment."

"But-you can't-" Oldtrick broke off as a dark shadow flitted across the rock. "Duck! It's that con-founded cloud back again!"

"It's all right," Retief called as he launched himself into space. "It's on our side now."

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At the long table in the main dining room aboard the heavy Corps transport which had been called in to assist in the repatriation of the Groaci Youth Scouts marooned on Zoon after the local fauna had devoured their ship, encampment, equipment, and supplies, Magnan nudged Retief.

"Rather a surprising about-face on the part of Ambassador Shish," he muttered. "When that fake

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cloud dumped us off on the rock ledge with him, I feared the worst."

"I think he'd had a spiritual experience down below that made him see the light," Retief suggested.

"Quite an equitable division of spheres of influence the Ambassadors agreed on," Magnan went on. "The Groaci seem quite pleased with the idea of erecting blastproof barriers to restrain those ferocious little eaters to one half the planet, and acting as herdsman over them, in return for the privilege of collecting their hair after moulting season."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't sneak out a few pelts beforehand," Colonel Smartfinger leaned to contribute. "Still, the Zooners don't seem to mind, eh, Ornx?" He cocked an eye at his neighbor.

"No problem," the Zooner said airily. "We're glad to wink at a few little violations in return for free access to our own real estate." |

There was a sharp dinging as Ambassador Oldtrick tapped his glass with a fork and rose. |

"Gentlemen-gentlebeings, I should say-" he smirked at the Groaci and Zooners seated along the board. "It's my pleasure to announce the signing of the Terran-Zoon accord, under the terms of which we've been ceded all rights in the coral reef of our choice on which to place our chancery, well out of reach of those nasty little-that is, the untutored-I mean, er, playfully inclined . . ."he quailed under the combined glares of a dozen rows of pink eyes.

"If he brings those abominations into the conversation again, I'm walking

out," Qoj said loudly.

"So we're going to be relegated to the top of that dreadful skyscraper?" Magnan groaned. "I suppose we'll all be commuting by patent gasbag-

"Ah!" Oldtrick brightened, glad of a change of subject. "I couldn't help overhearing your remark, Magnan. And I'm pleased to announce that I have just this afternoon developed a startling new improvement to my flight harness. Observe!" All eyes were on the

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Ambassador as he rose gently into the air, hung, beaming down from a height of six feet.

"I should mention that I had some assistance from Mr. Retief in, ah, working out some of the technicali-5ties," he murmured as the Terrans crowded around, competing for the privilege of offering their congratula-tions.

"Heavens! And he's not even wearing a balloon!" Magnan gasped as he rose to join the press. "How do you suppose he does it?"

"Easy," Qoj grunted. "He's got a pocketful of prime-quality Zooner spore-pods."

Beside him, Ambassador Shish gave an annoyed hiss. "Somehow, I can't escape the conviction that we Groaci have been had again-." He rose and stalked from the room.

"Hmph," Magnan sniffed, "he got what he wanted, didn't he?"

"True," Retief said. "But it's some people's ill luck to always want the wrong thing."

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A large green-yolked egg splattered across the flexglas panel as it slammed behind Relief. Across the long, narrow lobby, under a glare-sign reading HOSTELRY RITZKRUDLU, the Gaspierre room clerk looked up, then came quickly around the counter. He was a long-bodied, short-legged creature, wearing an expression as of one detecting a bad odor on his flattened, leathery-looking face. He spread six of the eight arms attached to his narrow shoulders like a set of measuring spoons, twitching the other two in a cramped shrug.

"The hotel, he is fill!" he wheezed. "To some other house you convey your custom, yes?"

"Stand fast," Retief said to the four Terrans who had preceded him through the door. "Hello, Strupp," he nodded to the agitated clerk. "These are friends of mine. See if you can't find them a room."

"As I comment but now, the rooms, she is occupy!" Strupp pointed to the door. "Kindly facilities provide by management to place selves back outside use!"

A narrow panel behind the registration desk popped open; a second Gaspierre slid through, took in the situation, emitted a sharp hiss. Strupp whirled, his arms semaphoring an unreadable message.

"Never mind that, Strupp," the newcomer snapped in accentless Terran. He took out a strip of patterned cloth, mopped under the breathing orifices set in the sides of his neck, looked at the group of Terrans, then back at Retief. "Ah, something I can do for you, Mr. Retief?"

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"Evening, Hrooze," Retief said. "Permit me to introduce Mr. Julius Mulvihill, Miss Suzette la Flamme, Wee Willie, and Professor Fate, just in from out-system. There seems to be a room shortage in town. I thought perhaps you could accommodate them."

Hrooze eyed the door through which the Terrans had entered, twitched his nictating eyelids in a nervous gesture.

"You know the situation here, Retief!" he said. "I have nothing against Terries personally, of course, but if I rent to these people-

"I was thinking you might fix them up with free rooms, just as a sort of good-will gesture."

"If we these Terries to the Ritz-Krudlu admit, the repercussions political out of business us will put!" Strupp expostulated.

"The next ship out is two days from now," Retief said. "They need a place to stay until then."

Hrooze looked at Retief, mopped his neck again. "I owe you a favor, Retief," he said. "Two days, though, that's all!"

"But-" Strupp began.

"Silence!" Hrooze sneezed. "Put them in twelve-oh-three and -four!"

He drew Retief aside as a small bellhop in a brass-studded harness began loading baggage on his back.

"How does it look?" he inquired. "Any hope of getting that squadron of Peace Enforcers to stand by out-system?"

"I'm afraid not; Sector HQ seems to feel that might be interpreted by the Krultch as a warlike gesture."

"Certainly it would! That's exactly what the Krultch can understand-"

"Ambassador Sheepshorn has great faith in the power of words," Retief said soothingly. "He has a reputation as a great verbal karate expert; the Genghis Khan of the conference table."

"But what if you lose? The cabinet votes on the

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Krultch treaty tomorrow! If it's signed, Gaspierre will be nothing but a fueling station for the Krultch battle fleet! And you Terries will end up as mess-slaves!"

"A sad end for a great oral athlete," Relief said, "Let's hope he's in good form tomorrow."

In the shabby room on the twelfth level, Retief tossed a thick plastic coin to the baggage slave, who departed emitting the thin squeaking that substituted in his species for a jaunty whistle. Mulvihill, a huge man with a handlebar mustache, looked around, plumped his vast, bulging suitcase to the thin carpet, mopped at the purple-fruit stain across his red plastic jacket.

"I'd like to get my hands on the Gasper that threw that," he growled in a bullfrog voice.

"That's a mean crowd out there," said Miss La Flamme, a shapely redhead with a tattoo on her left biceps. "It was sure a break for us the Ambassador changed his mind about helping us out. From the look the old sourpuss gave me when I kind of bumped against him, I figured he had ground glass where his red corpuscles ought to be."

"I got a sneaking hunch Mr. Retief swung this deal on his own, Suzy," the big man said. "The Ambassador's got bigger things on his mind than out-of-work variety acts."

"This is the first time the Marvelous Merivales ever been flat out of luck on tour," commented a whiskery little man no more than three feet tall, dressed in an old-fashioned frock coat and a checkered vest. His voice was like the yap of a Pekinese. "How come we got to get mixed up in politics?"

"Shut up, Willie!" the big man said. "It's not Mr. Relief's fault we came here."

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"Yeah," the midget conceded. "I guess you fellows in the CDT got it kind of rough, too, trying to pry the Gaspers out of the Krultch's hip pocket. Boy, I wish I could see the show tomorrow when the Terry Ambassador and the Krultch brass slug it out to see whose side the Gaspers'll be neutral on."

"Neutral, ha!" the tall, cadaverous individual loom-ing behind Wee Willie snorted. "I caught a glimpse of that ferocious war vessel at the port, openly flying the Krultch battle flag! It's an open breach of interworld custom-"

"Hey, Professor, leave the speeches to the CDT," the girl said.

"Without free use of Gaspierre ports, the Krultch plans for expansion through the Gloob cluster would come to naught. A firm stand-"

"Might get 'em blasted right off the planet," the big man growled. "The Krultch play for keeps."

"And the Gaspers aim to be on the winning side," the midget piped. "And all the smart money is on the Krultch battlewagon to put up the best

argument."

"Terries are fair game around here, it looks like, Mr. Relief," Mulvihill said. "You better watch yourself going back."

Retief nodded. "Stay close to your rooms; if the vote goes against us tomorrow, we may all be looking for a quick way home."

Outside, on the narrow elevated walkway that linked the gray slablike structures of the city, thin-featured Gaspierre natives shot wary looks at Retief, some skirting him widely, others jostling him as they crowded past. It was a short walk to the building where the Terrestrial delegation occupied a suite. As Retief neared it, a pair of Krultch sailors emerged from

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a grogshop, turned in his direction. They were short-coupled centauroid quadrupeds, with deep, narrow chests, snouted faces with business-like jaws and fringe beards, dressed in the redstriped livery of the Krultch Navy, complete with sidearms and short swagger sticks. Retief altered course to the right to give them passing room; they saw him, nudged each other, spaced themselves to block the walk. Retief came on without slowing, started between them. The Krultch closed ranks. Retief stepped back, started around the sailor on the left. The creature sidled, still blocking his path.

"Oh-hoh, Terry loose in street," he said in a voice like sand in a gear box. "You lost, Terry?"

The other Krultch crowded Retief against the rail. "Where you from, Terry? What you do-?"

Without warning, Retief slammed a solid kick to the shin of the Krultch before him, simultaneously wrenched the stick from the alien's grip, cracked it down sharply across the wrist of the other sailor as he went for his gun. The weapon clattered, skidded off the walk and was gone. The one whom Retief had kicked was hopping on three legs, making muffled sounds of agony. Retief stepped quickly to him, jerked his gun from its holster, aimed it negligently at the other Krultch.

"Better get your buddy back to the ship and have that leg looked at," he said.

A ring of gaping Gaspierre had gathered, choking the walk. Retief thrust the pistol into his pocket, turned his back on the Krultch, pushed through the locals. A large coarse-hided Gaspierre policeman made as if to block his way; Retief rammed an elbow in his side and kept going. A mutter was rising from the crowd behind him. The Embassy was just ahead now. Retief turned off toward the entry; two yellow-uniformed Gaspierre moved into sight under the marquee, eyed him as he came up.

"Terran, have you not heard of the curfew?" one demanded in shrill but accurate Terran.

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"Can't say that I have," Retief replied. "There wasn't any, an hour ago."

"There is now!" the other snapped. "You Terries are not popular here. If you insist on inflaming the populace by walking abroad, we cannot be responsible for your safety-" he broke off as he saw the Krultch pistol protruding from Reliefs pocket.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded in Gaspier-ran, then switched to pidgin Terran: "Where you-fella catchum bang-bang?"

"A couple of lads were playing with it in the street," Retief said in the local dialect. "I took it away from them before someone got hurt." He started past them.

"Hold on there," the policeman snapped. "We're not finished with you, fellow. We'll tell you when you can go. Now ..." He folded his upper elbows. "You're to go to your quarters at once. In view of the tense interplanetary situation, all you Terries are to remain inside until further notice, I have my men posted on all approaches to, ah, provide protection-"

"You're putting a diplomatic mission under arrest?" Retief inquired mildly.

"I wouldn't call it that. Let's say that it wouldn't be safe for foreigners to venture abroad-"

"Threats too?"

"This measure is necessary in order to prevent unfortunate incidents-!"

"How about the Krultch? They're foreigners; are you locking them in their bedrooms?"

"The Krultch are old and valued friends of the Gaspierre," the police captain said stiffly. "We-"

"I see now; ever since they set up an armed patrol just outside Gaspieran atmosphere, you've developed a vast affection for them. Of course, their purchasing missions help too."

The captain smirked. "We Gaspierre are nothing if not practical." He held out his clawlike two-fingered hand. "You will now give me the weapon."

Retief handed it over silently.

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"Come, I will escort you to your room," the cop said.

Relief nodded complacently, followed the Gaspierre through the entry cubicle and into the lift.

"I'm glad you've decided to be reasonable," the cop said. "After all, if you Terries should convince the cabinet, it will be much nicer all around if there have been no incidents."

"How true," Relief murmured.

He left the car at the 20th floor.

"Don't forget, now," the cop said, watching Relief key his door. "Just stay inside and all will yet be well." He signaled to a policeman standing a few yards along the corridor.

"Keep an eye on the door, Klosta. ..."

Inside, Relief picked up the phone, dialed the Ambassador's room number. There was a dry buzz, no answer. He looked around the room. There was a tall, narrow window set in the wall opposite the door, with a hinged section that swung outward. Relief opened it, leaned out, looked down at the dizzying stretch of blank facade that dropped sheer to the upper walkway seventy yards below. Above, the wall extended up twenty feet to an overhanging cornice. He went to the closet, yanked a blanket from the shelf, ripped it into four wide strips, knotted them together, tied one end to a chair which he braced below the window.

Relief swung his legs outside the window, grasped the blanket-rope, and slid down.

The window at the next level was closed and curtained. Relief braced himself on the sill, delivered a sharp kick to the panel; it shattered with an explosive

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sound. He dropped lower, reached through, released the catch, pulled the window wide, knocked the curtain aside, scrambled through into a darkened room.

"Who's there?" a sharp voice barked. A tall, lean man in a ruffled shirt with an unknotted string tie hanging down the front gaped at Relief from the inner room.

"Relief! How did you get here? I understood that none of the staff were to be permitted—that is, I agreed that protective custody—er, it seems ..."

"The whole staff is bottled up here in the building, Mr. Ambassador. I'd guess they mean to keep us here until after the Cabinet meeting. It appears the Krultch have the fix in."

"Nonsense! I have a firm commitment from the Minister that no final commitment will be made until we've been heard—"

"Meanwhile, we're under house arrest—just to be sure we don't have an opportunity to bring any of the cabinet around to our side."

"Are you suggesting that I've permitted illegal measures to be taken without a protest?" Ambassador Sheepshorn fixed Relief with a piercing gaze which wilted, slid aside. "The place was alive with armed gendarmes," he sighed. "What could I do?"

"A few shrill cries of outrage might have helped," Relief pointed out. "It's still not too late. A fast visit to the Foreign Office—"

"Are you out of your mind? Have you observed the lempers of the populace? We'd be torn to shreds!"

Relief nodded. "Quite possibly; but what do you think our chances are tomorrow, after the Gaspierre conclude a treaty with the Krullch?"

Sheepshorn made two cries, then swallowed hard. "Surely, Relief, you don't!"

"I'm afraid I do," Relief said. "The Krullch need a vivid symbol of their importance-and they'd also like to involve the Gaspierre in their skulduggery, just to

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ensure their loyalty. Packing a clutch of Terran diplomats off to the ice-mines would do both jobs."

"A great pity," the Ambassador sighed. "And only nine months to go till my retirement."

"I'll have to be going now," Retief said. "There may be a posse of annoyed police along at any moment, and I'd hate to make it too easy for them."

"Police? You mean they're not even waiting until after the Cabinet's decision?"

"Oh, this is just a personal matter; I damaged some Krullch naval property and gave a Gaspierre cop a pain in the neck."

"I've warned you about your personality, Retief," Sheepshorn admonished. "I suggest you give yourself up, and ask for clemency; with luck, you'll get to go along to the mines with the rest of us. I'll personally put in a good word-•"

"That would interfere with my plans, I'm afraid," Retief said. He went to the door. "I'll try to be back before the Gaspierre do anything irrevocable. Mean-while, hold the fort here. If they come for you, quote regulations at them; I'm sure they'll find that discouraging."

"Plans? Retief, I positively forbid you to-"

Retief stepped through the door and closed it behind him, cutting off the flow of ambassadorial wisdom. A flat policeman posted a few feet along the corridor came to the alert, opened his mouth to speak-

"All right, you can go home now," Retief said in brisk Gaspierian. "The chief changed his mind; he decided violating a Terran Embassy's quarters was just asking for trouble. After all, the Krullch haven't won yet."

The cop stared at him, then nodded. "I wondered if this wasn't kind of getting the rickshaw before the coolie ..." he hesitated. "But what do you know about it?"

"I just had a nice chat with the captain, one floor up."

"Well, if he let you come down here, I guess it's all right."

"If you hurry, you can make it back to the barracks before the evening rush begins." Relief waved airily and strolled away along the corridor.

Back at ground level, Retief went along a narrow service passage leading to the rear of the building, stepped out into a deserted-looking court-yard. There was another door across the way. He went to it, followed another hall to a street exit. There were no cops in sight. He took the sparsely peopled lower walkway, set off at a brisk walk.

Ten minutes later, Retief surveyed the approaches to the Hostelry Ritz-Krudlu from the shelter of an interlevel connecting stair. A surging crowd of Gaspierre blocked the walkway, with a scattering of yellow police uniforms patrolling the edge of the mob. Placards lettered TERRY GO HOME and KEEP GASPIERRE BROWN bobbed above the sea of flattened heads. Off to one side, a heavily braided Krultch officer stood with a pair of age-tarnished locals, looking on approvingly.

Retief retraced his steps to the debris-littered ground level twenty feet below the walkway, found an eighteen-inch-wide air space leading back between the buildings. He inched along it, came to a door, found it locked. Four doors later, a latch yielded to his touch. He stepped inside, made out the dim outlines of an empty storage room. The door across the room was locked. Retief stepped back, slammed a kick against it at latch level; it bounced wide.

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After a moment's wait for the sound of an alarm which failed to materialize, Relief moved off along the passage, found a rubbish-heaped stair. He clambered over the debris, started up.

At the twelfth level, he emerged into the corridor. There was no one in sight. He went quickly along to the door numbered 1203, tapped lightly. There was a faint sound from inside; then a bass voice rumbled, "Who's there?"

"Retief. Open up before the house dick spots me."

Bolts clattered and the door swung wide; Julius Mulvihill's mustached face appeared; he seized Reliefs hand and pumped it, grinning.

"Gripes, Mr. Retief, we were worried about you. Right after you left, old Hrooze called up here and said there was a riot starting up--"

"Nothing serious; just a few enthusiasts out front putting on a show for the Krultch."

"What's happened?" Wee Willie chirped, coming in from the next room with lather on his chin. "They throwing us out already?"

"No, you'll be safe enough right here. But I need your help."

The big man nodded, flexed his hands.

Suzette la Flamme thrust a drink into Reliefs hand. "Sit down and tell us about it."

"Glad you come to us, Retief," Wee Willie piped.

Retief took the offered chair, sampled the drink, then outlined the situation.

"What I have in mind could be dangerous," he finished.

"What ain't?" Willie demanded.

"It calls for a delicate touch and some fancy foot-work," Retief added.

The professor cleared his throat. "I am not without a certain dexterity-" he started.

"Let him finish," the redhead said.

"And I'm not even sure it's possible," Retief stated.

The big man looked at the others. "There's a lot of things that look impossible-but the Marvelous Meri-

vales do 'em anyway. That's what made our act a wow on a hundred and twelve planets."

The girl tossed her red hair. "The way it looks, Mr. Relief, if somebody doesn't do something, by this time tomorrow this is going to be mighty unhealthy territory for Terries."

"The ones the mob don't get will be chained to an oar in a Krultch battlewagon," Willie piped.

"With the Mission pinned down in their quarters, the initiative appears to rest with us," Professor Fate intoned. The others nodded.

"If you're all agreed then," Relief said, "here's what I have in mind . . ."

The corridor was empty when Relief emerged, followed by the four Terrans.

"How are we going to get out past that crowd out front?" Mulvihill inquired. "I've got a feeling they're ready for something stronger than slogans."

"We'll iry Ihe back way-"

There was a sudden hubbub from Ihe far end of the corridor; half a dozen Gaspierre burst into view, puffing hard from a fast climb. They hissed, pointed, slarled for Ihe Terrans at a short-legged trot. At the same moment, a door flew wide at the opposile end of Ihe hallway; more locals popped into view, closed in.

"Looks like a necktie party," Wee Willie barked. "Let's go get 'em Julie!" He

put his head down and charged. The oncoming natives slowed, skipped aside. One, a Irifle slow, bounced against the wall as the midget rammed him at knee level. The others whirled, grabbing at Wee Willie as he skidded to a halt. Mulvihill roared, took three giant steps, caught two Gaspierre by the backs of their leather necks, bounced them off the wall.

The second group of locals, emitting wheezes of

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excitement, dashed up, eager for the fray. Retief met one with a straight right, knocked two more aside with a sweep of his arm, sprinted for the door through which the second party of locals had appeared. He looked back to see Mulvihill toss another Gaspierre aside, pluck Wee Willie from the melee.

"Down here, Julie!"

The girl called, "Come on, Professor!"

The tall, lean Terran, backed against the wall by three hissing locals, stretched out a yard-long arm, flapped his hand. A large white pigeon appeared, fluttered, squawking, into the faces of the attackers; they fell back, slapping and snorting. Professor Fate plunged through them, grabbed the bird by the legs as he passed, dashed from the door where Retief and the girl waited.

There was a sound of pounding feet from the stairwell; a fresh contingent of locals came charging into view on stub legs. Retief took two steps, caught the leader full in the face with a spread hand, sent him reeling back down among his followers, as Mulvihill appeared, Wee Willie over his shoulder, yelling and kicking.

"There's more on the way," Retief called. "We'll have to go up."

The girl nodded, started up, three steps at a time. Mulvihill dropped the midget, who scampered after her. Professor Fate tucked his bird away, disappeared up the stairs in giant strides, Mulvihill and Retief behind him.

8

On the roof, Retief slammed the heavy door, shot the massive bolt. It was late evening now; cool blue air flowed across the unrailed deck; faint crowd sounds floated up from the street twenty stories below.

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"Willie, go secure that other door," Mulvihill commanded. He went to the edge of the roof, looked down, shook his head, started across toward another side. The redhead called to him.

"Over here, Julie ..."

Relief joined Mulvihill at her side. A dozen feet down and twenty feet distant across a narrow street was the slanted roof of an adjacent building. A long ladder was clamped to brackets near the ridge.

"Looks like that's it," Mulvihill nodded. Suzette unlimbered a coil of light line from a clip at her waist, gauged the distance to a projecting ventilator intake, swung the rope, and let it fly; the broad loop spread, slapped the opposite roof, encircling the target. With a tug, the girl tightened the noose, quickly whipped the end around a four-inch stack. She stooped, pulled off her shoes, tucked them in her belt, tried the taut rope, with one foot.

"Take it easy, baby," Mulvihill muttered. She nodded, stepped out on the taut, down-slanting cable, braced her feet, spread her arms, and in one smooth swoop, slid along the line and stepped off the far end, turned and executed a quick curtsy.

"This is no time to ham it up," Mulvihill boomed.

"Just habit," the girl said. She went up the roof, freed the ladder, released the catch that caused an extensible section to slide out, then came back to the roof's edge, deftly raised the ladder to a vertical position.

"Catch!" she let it lean toward Mulvihill and Relief; as it fell both men caught it, lowered it the last foot.

"Hey, you guys," Willie called. "I can't get this thing locked!"

"Never mind that now," Mulvihill rumbled. "Come on, Prof," he said to the lean prestidigitator. "You first."

The professor's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. He peered down at the street far below, then threw his shoulders back, clambered up onto the ladder, and started across on all fours.

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"Don't look down, Professor," Suzie called. "Look at me."

"Let's go, Willie!" Mulvihill called over his shoulder. He freed the rope, tossed it across, then stepped up on the ladder, started across, one small step at a time. "This isn't my strong suit," he muttered, teeth together. The professor had reached the far side. Mulvihill was half way. There was a sudden yelp from Willie. Relief turned. The midget was struggling against the door, which was being forced open from inside.

"Hey!" Mulvihill boomed. Suzie squealed. Relief sprinted for the embattled midget, caught him as he was hurled backward as the door flew open, disgorging three Gaspierre who staggered for balance, went down as Relief thrust out a foot. He thrust Wee Willie aside, picked up the nearest native, pitched him back inside, followed with the other two, then slammed the door, tried the bolt.

"It's sprung," he said. "Let's go, Willie!" He caught up the small man, ran for the ladder where Mulvihill still stood, halfway across.

"Come on, Julie!" the girl cried. "It won't hold both of you!"

There were renewed breathy yells from the site of the scuffle. The door had burst open again, and more Gaspierre were spilling from it. Mulvihill

snorted, finished the crossing and scrambled for footing on the slanting roof. Retief stepped out on the limber ladder, started across, Willie under his arm.

"Look out!" Suzette said sharply. The rungs jumped under Reliefs feet. He reached the roof in two jumps, dropped the midget, turned to see a huddle of Gasp-ierre tugging at the ladder. One, rendered reckless in his zeal, started across. Retief picked up the end of the ladder, shook it; the local squeaked, scrambled back. Retief hauled the ladder in.

"Up here," the girl called. Retief went up the slope, looked down at an open trap door in the opposite slope. He followed the others down through it into a

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musty loft, latched it behind him. The loft door opened into an empty hall. They followed it, found a lift, rode it down to ground level, Outside in a littered alley, the crowd noises were faint.

"We appear to have out-foxed the ruffians," Profes-sor Fate said, adjusting his cuffs.

"The Gaspers ain't far behind," Wee Willie shrilled. "Let's make tracks!"

"We'll find a spot and hide out until dark," Retief said. "Then we'll make our try."

9

A faint gleam from Gaspierre's three bright star-sized moons dimly illuminated the twisting alley along which Retief led the four Terrans.

"The port is half a mile from the city wall " he said softly to Mulvihill at his side. "We can climb it between watchtowers, and circle around and hit the ramp from the east."

"They got any guards posted out there?" the big man asked. , "I think the Krultch will have a few sentries out."

"Oh-oh, here's the wall . . ." The barrier loomed up, twelve feet high, Suzette came forward, looked it over.

"I'll check the top," she said. "Give me a boost, Julie." He lifted her, raised her to arm's length. She put a foot on the top of his head, stepped up. Mulvihill grunted. "Watch out some Gasper cop doesn't spot you!"

"Cpast is clear." She pulled herself up. "Come on, Willie, I'll give you a hand." Mulvihill lifted the midget, who caught the girl's hand, scrambled up. Mulvihill bent over, and Retief stepped in his cupped hands, then to the big man's shoulders, reached the top of the wall. The girl lowered her rope for Mulvihill. He

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clambered up, swearing softly, with Retiefs help hoisted his bulk to the top

of the wall. A moment later the group was moving off quietly across open ground toward the south edge of the port.

10

Lying flat at the edge of the ramp, Relief indicated a looming, light-encrusted silhouette.

"That's her," he said. "Half a million tons, crew of three hundred."

"Big enough, ain't she?" Wee Willie chirped.

"Hsst! There's a Krultch . . . !" Mulvihill pointed.

Relief got softly to his feet. "Wait until I get in position behind that fuel monitor . . ." he pointed to a dark shape crouching fifty feet distant. "Then make a few suspicious noises."

"I better go with you, Relief," Mulvihill started, but Relief was gone. He moved forward silently, reached the shelter of the heavy apparatus, watched the Krultch sentinel move closer, stepping daintily as a deer on its four sharp hooves. The alien had reached a point a hundred feet distant when there was a sharp ping! from behind Relief. The guard hailed; Relief heard the snick! of a power gun's action. The Krultch turned toward him. He could hear the cli-clack, cli-clack of the hooves now. At a distance of ten feet, the quadruped slowed, came to a halt. Relief could see the vicious snout of the gun aimed warily into the darkness. There was another sound from Mulvihill's position. The guard plucked something from the belt rigged across his chest, started toward the source of the sound. As he passed Relief, he shied suddenly, grabbed for his communicator. Relief leaped, landed a haymaker on the bony face, caught the microphone before it hit the pavement. The Krultch, staggering back from the

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blow, went to his haunches, struck out with knife-edged forefeet. Relief ducked aside, chopped hard at the collarbone. The Krultch collapsed with a choked cry. Mulvihill appeared at a run, seized the feebly moving guard, pulled off the creature's belt, trussed his four legs together, then used other straps to bind the hands and gag the powerful jaws as the others joined the group.

"Now what?" Wee Willie inquired. "You gonna cut his throat?"

"Shove him back of the monitor," Mulvihill said.

"Now let's see how close we can get to the ship without getting spotted," Relief said.

11

The mighty Krultch war vessel was a black column towering into the night, ablaze with varicolored running and navigation lights. Giant floods mounted far up on the ship's sleek sides cast puddles of blue-white radiance on the tarmac; from the main cabin amidships, softer light gleamed through wide view-windows.

"All lit up like a party," Mulvihill growled.

"A tough party to crash," Wee Willie said, looking up the long slant of the hull.

"I think I see a route, Mr. Retief," the girl said. "What's that little square opening up there, just past the gun emplacement?"

"It looks as though it might be a cargo hatch. It's not so little, Miss La Flamme; it's a long way up—"

"You reckon I could get through it?"

Retief nodded, looking up at the smooth surface above. "Can you make it up there?"

"They used to bill me as the human ladybug. Nothing to it."

"If you get in," Retief said, "try to find your way

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back down into the tube compartment. If you can open one of these access panels, we're in."

Suzette nodded, took out her rope, tossed a loop over a projection fifteen feet above, clambered quickly up the landing jack to its junction with the smooth metal of the hull. She put her hands flat against the curving, slightly inslanting wall before her, planted one crepe-soled shoe against a tiny weld seam and started up the sheer wall. -

Ten minutes passed. From the deep shadow at the ship's stern, Retief watched as the slim girl inched her way up, skirting a row of orange glare panels spelling out the name of the vessel in blocky Krultch ideo-graphs, taking advantage of a ventilator outlet for a minute's rest, then going on up, up, thirty yards now, forty, forty-five ...

She reached the open hatch, raised her head cautiously for a glance inside, then swiftly pulled up and disappeared through the opening.

Julius Mulvihill heaved a sigh of relief. "That was as tough a climb as Suzie ever made," he rumbled.

"Don't get happy yet," Wee Willie piped up. "Her troubles is just starting."

"I'm sure she'll encounter no difficulty," Professor Fate said anxiously. "Surely there'll be no one on duty aft, here in port. ..."

More minutes ticked past. Then there was a rasp of metal, a gentle clatter. A few feet above ground, a panel swung out; Suzie's face appeared, oil streaked.

"Boy, this place needs a good scrubbing," she breathed. "Come on; they're all having a shindig up above, sounds like."

Inside the echoing, gloomy vault of the tube com-partment, Retief studied the layout of equipment, the placement of giant cooling baffles, the contour

of the bulkheads.

"This is a Kfultch-built job," he said. "But it seems to be a pretty fair copy of an old Concordiat cruiser of the line. That means the controls are all the way forward."

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"Let's get started!" Wee Willie went to the wide-runged catwalk designed for goatlike Krultch feet, started up. The others followed. Relief glanced around, reached for the ladder. As he did, a harsh Krultch voice snapped, "Halt where you are, Terrans!"

12

Retief turned slowly. A dirt-smeared Krultch in baggy coveralls stepped from the conceal-ment of a massive ion-collector, a grim-looking power gun aimed. He waited as a second and third sailor followed him, all armed.

"A nice catch, Udas," one said admiringly in Krultch. "The captain said we'd have Terry labor to do the dirty work on the run back, but I didn't expect to see 'em volunteering."

"Get 'em down here together, Jesau," the first Krultch barked. His partner came forward, motioned with the gun.

"Retief, you savvy Fustian?" Mulvihill muttered.

"Uh-huh," Retief answered.

"You hit the one on the left; I'll take the bird on the right. Professor-"

"Not yet," Retief said.

"No talk!" the Krultch barked in Terran. "Come down, plenty quick-quick!"

The Terrans descended to the deck, stood in a loose group.

"Closer together!" the sailor said; he poked the girl with the gun to emphasize the command. She smiled at him sweetly. "You bat-eared son of a goat, just wait till I get a handful of your whiskers-"

"No talk!"

Professor Fate edged in front of the girl. He held out both hands toward the leading Krultch, flipped them over to show both sides, then twitched his wrists, fanned two sets of playing cards. He waved them under

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the astounded nose of the nearest gunman, and with a flick they disappeared.

The two rearmost sailors stepped closer, mouths open. The professor snapped his fingers; flame shot from the tip of each pointed forefinger. The Krultch jumped. The tall Terran waved his hands, whipped a gauzy blue handkerchief from nowhere, swirled it around; now it was red. He snapped

it sharply, and a shower of confetti scattered around the dumbfounded Krultch. He doubled his fists, popped them open; twin puffs of colored smoke whoofed into the aliens' face. A final wave, and a white bird was squawking in the air.

"Now!" Retief said, and took a step, uppercut the leading sailor; the slender legs buckled as the creature went down with a slam. Mulvihill was past him, catching Krultch number two with a roundhouse swipe. The third sailor made a sound like tearing sheet metal, brought his gun to bear on Retief as Wee Willie, hurtling forward, hit him at the knees. The shot melted a furrow in the wall as Mulvihill floored the hapless creature with a mighty blow.

"Neatly done," Professor Fate said, tucking things back into his cuffs. "Almost a pity to lose such an appreciative audience."

13

With the three Krultch securely strapped hand and foot in their own harnesses, Retief nudged one with his foot.

"We have important business to conduct in the control room," he said. "We don't want to disturb anyone, Jesau, so we'd prefer a nice quiet approach via the back stairs. What would you suggest?"

The Krultch made a suggestion. Retief tsked. "Professor perhaps you'd better give him a few more samples."

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"Very well," Professor Fate stepped forward, waved his hands; a slim-bladed knife appeared in one. He tested the edge with his thumb, which promptly dripped gore. He stroked the thumb with another finger; the blood disappeared. He nodded.

"Now, fellow," he said to the sailor. "I've heard you rascals place great store by your beards; what about a shave?" He reached-

The Krultch made a sound like glass shattering. "The port catwalk!" he squalled. "But you won't get away with this!"

"Oh, no?" The professor smiled gently, made a pass in the air, plucked a small cylinder from nowhere.

"I doubt if anyone will be along this way for many hours," he said. "If we fail to return safely in an hour, this little device will detonate with sufficient force to distribute your component atoms over approximately twelve square miles." He placed the object by the Krultch, who rolled horrified eyes at it.

"O-on second thought, try the service catwalk behind the main tube," he squeaked.

"Good enough," Retief said. "Let's go."

14

The sounds of Krultch revelry were loud in the cramped passage.

"Sounds like they're doing a little early celebrating for tomorrow's big diplomatic victory," Mulvihill said. "You suppose most of them are in there?"

"There'll be a few on duty," Retief said. "But that sounds like a couple of hundred out of circulation for the moment-until we trip something and give the alarm."

"The next stretch is all right," Professor Fate said, coming back dusting off his hands. "Then I'm afraid we shall have to emerge into the open."

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"We're not far from the command deck now," Relief said. "Another twenty feet, vertically, ought to do it."

The party clambered on up, negotiated a sharp turn, came to an exit panel. Professor Fate put his ear against it.

"All appears silent," he said. "Shall we sally forth?"

Relief came to the panel, eased it open, glanced out; then he stepped through, motioned the others to follow. It was quieter here; there was deep-pile carpeting underfoot, an odor of alien food and drug smoke in the air.

"Officers' country," Mulvihill muttered.

Retrief pointed toward a door marked with Krultch lettering. "Anybody read that?" he whispered.

There were shakes of the head and whispered negatives.

"We'll have to take a chance," Relief went to the door, gripped the latch, yanked it suddenly wide. An obese Krultch in uniform but without his lunic looked up from a brightly colored magazine on the pages of which Relief glimpsed glossy photos of slender-buill Krultch mares flirting saucy derriers at the camera. The alien sluffed the magazine in a desk slot, came to his feet, gaping, then whirled and dived for a control panel across the narrow passage in which he was posted. He reached a heavy lever, hauled it down just as Relief caught him with a flying tackle. Man and Krultch hit the deck together; Relief's hand chopped; the Krultch kicked twice and lay still.

"That lever-you suppose-" Wee Willie started,

"Probably an alarm," Relief said, coming to his feet. "Come on!" he ran along the corridor; it turned sharply to the right. A heavy door was sliding shut before him. He leaped to it, wedged himself in the narrowing opening, braced himself against the thrust of the steel panel. It slowed, with a groaning of machinery. Mulvihill charged up, grasped the edge of the door, heaved. Somewhere, metal creaked. Together, Relief and the strong man strained. There was a loud clunk! and a clatter of broken mechanism. The door slid freely back.

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"Close," Mulvihill grunted. "For a minute there-" he broke off at a sound from behind him. Ten feet back along the passage a second panel had slid noiselessly out, sealing off the corridor. Mulvihill jumped to it, heaved against it.

Ahead, Relief saw a third panel, this one standing wide open. He plunged through it; skidded to a halt. A braided Krultch officer was waiting, a foot-long purple cigar in his mouth, a power gun in each hand. He kicked a lever near his foot. The door whooshed shut behind Retief.

"Welcome aboard, Terran," the captain grated. "You can be the first of your kind to enjoy Krultch hospitality."

15

"I have been observing your progress on my inspection screen here," the captain nodded toward a small panel which showed a view of the four Terrans pushing fruitlessly against the doors that had closed to entrap them.

"Interesting," Retief commented.

"You are surprised at the sophistication of the equipment we Krultch can command?" the captain puffed out smoke, showed horny gums in a smilelike grimace.

"No, anybody who can steal the price can buy a Groaci spy-eye system," Retief said blandly. "But I find it interesting that you had to spend all that cash just to keep an eye on your crew. Not too trustworthy, eh?"

"What? Any of my crew would die at my command!"

"They'll probably get the chance, too," Retief nodded agreement. "How about putting one of the guns down-unless you're afraid of a misfire."

"Krultch guns never misfire." The captain tossed one pistol aside. "But I agree: I am overprotected against the paltry threat of a single Terran."

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"You're forgetting-I have friends."

The Krultch made a sound like fingernails on a blackboard. "They are effectively immobilized," he said. "Now, tell me: what did you hope to accomplish by intruding here?"

"I intend to place you under arrest," Relief said. "Mind if I sit down?"

The Krultch captain made laughing noises resembling a flawed drive bearing; he waved a two-fingered claw-hand.

"Make yourself comfortable-while you can," he said. "Now, tell me; how did you manage to get your equipment up to my ship without being seen? I shall impale the slackers responsible, of course."

"Oh, we have no equipment," Retief said breezily. He sniffed. "That's not a

Lovenbroy cigar, is it?"

"Never smoke anything else," the Krultch said. "Care for one?"

"Don't mind if I do," Retief admitted. He accepted an eighteen-inch stogie, lit up.

"Now, about the equipment," the captain persisted. "I assume you used fifty-foot scaling ladders, though I confess I don't see how you got them onto the port-"

"Ladders?" Retief smiled comfortably. "We Terrans don't need ladders; we just sprouted wings."

"Wings? You mean?"

"Oh, we're versatile, we Terries."

The captain was wearing an expression of black disapproval now. "If you had no ladders, I must conclude that you breached my hull at ground level," he snapped. "What did you use? It would require at least a fifty K-T/Second power input to penetrate two inches of flintsteel-"

Retief shook his head, puffing out scented smoke. "Nice," he said. "No, we just peeled back a panel barehanded. We Terrans-"

"Blast you Terrans! Nobody could ..." The captain clamped his jaws, puffed furiously. "Just outside, in the access-control chamber, you sabotaged the closure

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mechanism. Where is the hydraulic jack you used for this?"

"As I said, we Terrans-"

"You entered the secret access passage almost as soon as you boarded my vessel!" the captain screeched. "My men are inoculated against every talk-drug known! What did you use on the traitor who informed you-"

Relief held up a hand. "We Terrans can be very persuasive, Captain. At this very moment, you your-self, for example, are about to be persuaded of the futility of trying to outmaneuver us."

The Krultch commander's mouth "opened and closed. "Me!" he burst out. "You think that you can divert a Krultch officer from the performance of his duty?"

"Sure," a high voice piped from above and behind the captain. "Nothing to it."

The Krultch's hooves clattered as he whirled, froze at the sight of Wee Willie's small, round face smiling down at him from the ventilator register above the control panel. In a smooth motion, Relief cracked the alien across the wrist, twitched the gun from his nerveless hand.

"You see?" he said as the officer stared from him to the midget and back.

"Never underestimate us Ter-rans."

16

The captain dropped in his chair, mopping at his face with a polka-dotted hanky provided by Wee Willie.

"This interrogation is a gross illegality!" he groaned. "I was assured that all your kind did was talk--"

"We're a tricky lot," Relief conceded. "But surely a little innocent deception can be excused, once you understand our natures. We love strife, and this seemed to be the easiest way to stir up some action."

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"Stir up action?" the Krultch croaked.

"There's something about an apparently defenseless nincompoop that brings out the opportunist in people," Relief said. "It's a simple way for us to identify troublemakers, so they can be dealt with expeditiously. I think you Krultch'qualify handsomely. It's convenient timing, because we have a number of new planet-wrecking devices we've been wanting to field-test--"

"You're bluffing!" the Krultch bleated.

Retief nodded vigorously. "I have to warn you, but you don't have to believe me. So if you still want to try conclusions--"

There was a sharp buzz from the panel; a piercing yellow light blinked rapidly. The captain's hand twitched as he eyed the phone.

"Go ahead, answer it," Retief said. "But don't say anything that might annoy me. We Terrans have quick tempers."

The Krultch flipped a key.

"Exalted One," a rapid Krultch voice babbled from the panel. "We have been assassinated by captives! I mean, captivated by assassins! There were twelve of them-or perhaps twenty! Some were as high as a hundred-year Fufu tree, and others smaller than hoof-nits! One had eyes of live coals, and flames ten feet long shot from his hands, melting all they touched, and another--"

"Silence!" the captain roared. "Who are you? Where are you? What in the name of the Twelve Devils is going on here!" He whirled on Retief. "Where are the rest of your commandos? How did they evade my surveillance system? What--"

"Ah-ah," Retief clucked. "I'm asking the questions now. First, I'll have the names of all Gaspierre officials who accepted your bribes."

"You think I would betray my compatriots to death at your hands?"

"Nothing like that; I just need to know who the cooperative ones are so I can make them better offers."

A low brackk! sounded; this time a baleful blue light winked. The Krultch officer eyed it warily.

"That's my outside hot line to the local Foreign Office," he said. "When word reaches the Gaspierre government of the piratical behavior you allegedly peaceful Terries indulge in behind the fagade of diplo-macy-"

"Go ahead, tell them," Relief said. "It's time they discovered they aren't the only ones who understand the fine art of the triple-cross."

The Krultch lifted the phone. "Yes?" he snapped. His expression stiffened. He rolled an eye at Relief, then at Wee Willie.

"What's that?" he barked into the communicator. "Flew through the air? Climbed where? What do you mean, giant white birds!"

"Boy," Wee Willie exclaimed, "them Gaspers s,ure exaggerate!"

The captain eyed the tiny man in horror, com-paring his height with Retiefs six-three. He shud-dered.

"I know," he said into the phone. "They're already here . . ." He dropped the instrument back on its hook, glanced at his panel, idly reached-

"That reminds me," Relief said. He pointed the gun at the center of the captain's chest. "Order all hands to assemble amidships," he said.

"They-they're already there," the Krultch said unsteadily, his eyes fixed on the gun.

"Just make sure."

The captain depressed a key, cleared his throat.

"All hands to the central feeding area, on the double," he said.

There was a moment's pause. Then a Krultch voice came back: "All except the stand-by crews in power section and armaments, I guess you mean, Exalted One?"

"I said all hands, damn you!" the officer snarled. He flipped off the communicator. "I don't know what you think you'll accomplish with this," he barked. "I have

three hundred fearless warriors aboard this vessel; you'll never get off this ship alive!"

Two minutes passed. The communicator crackled. "All hands assembled sir."

"Willie, you see that big white lever?" Relief said mildly. "Just pull it down, and the next one to it."

The captain made as to move. The gun jumped at him. Willie went past the

Krultch, wrestled the controls down. Far away, machinery rumbled. A distinct shock ran through the massive hull, then a second.

"What was that?" the midget inquired.

"The disaster bulkheads, sliding shut," Relief said. "The three hundred fearless warriors are nicely locked in between them."

The captain slumped, looking stricken. "How do you know so much about the operation of my vessel?" he demanded. "It's classified. . . ."

"That's the result of stealing someone else's plans; the wrong people may have been studying them. Now, Willie, go let Julius and the rest of the group in; then I think we'll be ready to discuss surrender terms."

"This is a day that will live in the annals of treachery," the captain grated hollowly.

"Oh, I don't think it needs to get into the annals," Relief said. "Not if we can come to a private understanding, just between gentlemen. ..."

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It was an hour past sunrise when the emergency meeting of the Gaspierre Cabinet broke up. Ambassador Sheepshorn, emerging from the chamber deep in amiable conversation with an uncomfortable-looking Krultch officer in elaborate full dress uniform, hailed as he spied Relief.

"Ah, there, my boy! I was a trifle concerned when you failed to return last evening, but as I was just pointing out to the captain here, it was really all just a

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dreadful misunderstanding. Once the Krultch position was made clear—that they really preferred animal husbandry and folk dancing to any sort of warlike adventures, the Cabinet was able to come to a rapid and favorable decision on the Peace-and-Friendship Treaty."

"I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Ambassador," Relief said, nodding to the stony-faced Krultch commander. "I'm sure we'd all rather engage in friendly competition than have to demonstrate our negotiating ability any further."

There was a stir at the end of the corridor; a harried-looking Krultch officer with a grimy Krultch yeoman in tow appeared, came up to the captain, saluted.

"Exalted One, this fellow has just escaped from some sort of magical paralysis—"

"It was that one," the sailor indicated Relief. "Him and the others." He looked reproachfully at Relief. "That was a dirty trick, telling us that was a bomb you were planting; we spent a rough night waiting for it to go off before we found out it was just a dope stick."

"Sorry," Relief said.

"Look, Exalted One," the sailor went on in a stage whisper. "What I wanted to warn you about, that Terry--the long one, with the pointed tail and the fiery breath; he's a warlock; he waves his hands and giant white flying creatures appear--"

"Silence, idiot!" the captain bellowed. "Have you no powers of observation? They don't merely produce birds; any fool could do that! They transform them-selves! Now get out of my sight! I plan to enter a monastery as soon as we return home, and I want to get started on my meditating!" He nodded curtly and clattered away.

"Odd sort of chap," Sheepshorn commented. "I wonder what he was talking about?"

"Just some sort of in-group joke, I imagine," Retief said. "By the way, about that group of distressed Terrans I mentioned to you yesterday--"

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"Yes; I may have been a bit abrupt with them, Retief; but of course I was busy planning my strategy for today's meeting. Perhaps I was hasty. I hereby authorize you to put in a good word for them."

"I took the liberty of going a little further than that," Retief said. "Since the new treaty calls for Terran cultural missions, I signed a six-months contract with them to put on shows here on Gaspierre."

Sheepshorn frowned. "You went a bit beyond your authority, Retief," he snapped. "I'd thought we might bring in a nice group or two to read classic passages from the Congressional Record, or perform some of the new silent music, and I had halfway promised the Groaci Minister I'd have one of his nose-flute troupes--"

"I thought it might be a good idea to show Terran solidarity, just at this juncture," Retief pointed out. "Then, too, a demonstration of sword-swallowing, prestidigitation, fire-eating, juggling, tight-rope walk-ing, acrobatics, and thaumaturgics might be just the ticket for dramatizing Terran versatility."

Sheepshorn considered with pursed lips, then nod-ded. "You may have a valuable point there, my boy; we Terrans are a versatile breed. Speaking of which, I wish you'd been there to see my handling of the negotiation this morning! One moment I was all fire and trucu-lence; the next, as smooth as Yill silk."

A brilliant performance, I daresay, Mr. Ambassa-dor."

"Yes, indeed." Sheepshorn rubbed his hands togeth-er, chuckling. "In a sense, Retief, diplomacy itself might be thought of as a branch of show business, eh? Thus, these performers might be considered colleagues of a sort."

"True; but I wouldn't mention it when they're within earshot."

"Yes; it might go to their heads. Well, I'm off, Retief. My report on this morning's work will become a classic study of diplomatic subtlety."

He hurried away. A Gaspierre with heavy bifocal lenses edged up to Retief. "I'm with the Gaspierre Morning Exhalation," he wheezed. "Is it true, sir, that you Terries can turn into fire-breathing dragons at will, . . . ?"

A second reporter closed in. "I heard you read minds," he said. "And about this ability to walk through walls-"

"Just a minute, boys," Retief held up a hand. "I wouldn't want to be quoted on this of course, but just between you and me, here's what actually happened, as soon as the Ambassador had looked into his crystal ball ..."