

THE CASTLE OF LIGHT

"The interposition of the stern Corps presence, unflinching champion of underdogs, has more than once frustrated the colonial-imperialist urges of expansion-minded states.

At Yalc, Minister Barnshingle, braving every peril in single-handed confrontation with the forces of tyranny, gallantly reaffirmed the hallowed principle of fair play for all."

—Vol. II, reel 161, 481 AE (AD 2942)

Retief scaled his pale burgundy afternoon informal beret across the office, narrowly missing the clothes tree, and dumped the heavy carton he was carrying on his desk. A shapely brunette with a turned-up nose appeared at the connecting door to the next office.

"Miss Braswell," he said before she could speak. "I have here two handsome half-liter wine glasses which I'm about to field-test. Will you join me?"

She made a shushing motion, rolling her eyes toward the inner office. A narrow, agitated face appeared over her shoulder.

"Retief!" Consul-General Magnan burst out. "I've been at wit's end! How does it happen that every time catastrophe strikes you're out of the office?"

"It's merely a matter of timing," Retief said soothingly, stripping paper from the package. He pulled out a tulip-shaped goblet which seemed to be made of coils of jewel-colored glass welded together in an intricate pattern, held it up to the light.

"Pretty, eh? And barely cool from the glass-blower—"

"While you idled about the bazaar," Magnan snapped, his face an angry pink above a wide, stiff collar of yellow plastiweave, "I've been coping single-handedly with disaster! I suggest you put aside your baubles; I'm calling a formal Emergency Staff Meeting in two minutes!"

"That means you, me and Miss Braswell, I take it, since the rest of the staff is off crater-viewing—"

"Just you and I." Magnan mopped at his face with a vast floral-patterned tissue. "This is a highly classified emergency."

"Oh, goody, I'll take the rest of the afternoon off and watch the festivities." Miss Braswell winked at Retief, extended the tip of her tongue in salute to the Consul-General's back, and was gone.

Retief plucked a bottle from his desk drawer and followed Magnan into the inner office. The senior officer yanked at his stiff collar, now wilting with perspiration.

"Why this couldn't have waited until Minister Barnshingle's return, I don't know," he said. "He's already a day overdue. I've tried to contact him, to no avail; this primitive line-of-sight local telescreen system—" he broke off.

"Retief, kindly defer your tippling until after the crisis!"

"Oh, this isn't tippling, Mr. Magnan. I'm doing a commodity analysis for my next report. You fobbed the detail of Commercial Attaché on me, if you recall—"

"As Chargé d'affaires in the absence of the Minister, I forbid drinking on duty!" Magnan roared.

"Surely you jest, Mr. Magnan; it would mean the end of diplomacy as we know it—"

"Well, not until after lunch, at least. And I hereby authorize you to postpone market research until further notice; we're facing a possible holocaust in a matter of hours!"

"What's it all about?"

Magnan plucked a sheet of yellow paper from his desk and handed it across to Retief. "This came in over the auto-typer forty minutes ago."

* * * * *

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"Uhlans," Retief said. "Those are thousand-man transports. And oh-nine-hundred on the thirty-third is just about two hours from now."

"This could be an invasion, Retief! A major breach of the peace! Can you imagine how it would look in my record if the planet were invaded under my very nose!"

"Tough on the natives, too," Retief commented. "What action have you taken so far?"

"Action? Why, I've canceled this afternoon's social engagements, checked out-going passenger schedules, and sharpened a number of pencils."

"Have you tried contacting this Ensign Pomfroy for a little more detail?"

"There's no one on duty in the Message Center but a local Code Clerk; he's trying to raise him now." Magnan depressed a button on his desk.

"Oo-Gilitit, have you met with any success?"

"Pomfroy-Tic all same have organ cluster up ventral orifice—"

"Gilitit, I've warned you to watch your language!" Magnan roared. "It's no habit for a communications man to get into!" He clicked off. "Confounded locals! It's hopeless, of course; our equipment was never designed for pin-pointing moving patrol boats at four A-U's."

"How do the Yalcans feel about the situation?"

Magnan blinked. "Why, as to that, I, ah . . . was just going to call Oo-Rilikuk." Magnan punched keys, tuned in a bland yellow and blue face

with eyes like gold pinheads and vertically-hinged jaws busy with an oily drumstick.

"Ah, there, Magnan," a voice like an unoiled wheel said. "Just finishing up my lunch. Roast haunch of giant locust. Delicious." A tongue like a length of green silken rope flicked a tidbit from a corner of the lipless mouth.

"Oo-Rilikuk, do you know anything of a large convoy due here today?"

Rilikuk dabbed at his chin with a gossamer napkin. "I seem to recall issuing a number of visas to Groaci nationals in recent weeks."

"Groaci? Fifty shiploads of them?"

"Something like that," the Yalcan said carelessly. "By the way, if you haven't already made arrangements, perhaps you'd care to join my Bachelor's Group for the upcoming festivities—"

"You're not concerned? Perhaps you're not aware of the insidious reputation the Groaci enjoy—"

"I don't mind saying I've exercised a trifle of influence to procure a choice mud pocket; the rich, oleaginous kind, you know. And there'll be no shortage of nubile females along—though you're not organized to appreciate the latter, it's true—"

"May I ask the state of the planetary defenses, Rilikuk? I'm warning you, these Groaci are not to be trusted—"

"Planetary defenses?" Rilikuk issued a chirp of amusement. "As confirmed pacifists, we've never felt the need for such an extravagance. Now, I'll be leaving the office in a few minutes; suppose I drop by for you—we'll go on to my place for dinner, then off to the bog—"

"You're leaving the Foreign Office at a moment like this?" Magnan yelped. "They'll be landing in a matter of minutes!"

"I fear I'll have no time to devote to tourism this week, Magnan," Rilikuk said. "They'll just have to manage alone. After all, Voom Festival time comes but once in ninety-four standard years—"

Magnan rang off with a snort. "We'll receive scant help from that quarter." He swiveled to gaze out the unglazed window across the gay tiles of the plaza, lined with squat, one-story shops of embossed and colored ceramic brick to the glittering minarets of the mile-distant temple complex.

"If these idlers invested less energy in shard-sorting and more in foreign affairs, I wouldn't be faced with this contretemps," he grumbled.

"If the CDT would talk Groac into selling them a few thousand tons of sand, they wouldn't have to sort shards."

"There are better uses for CDT bottoms than hauling sand, Retief, though I notice the local scrap pile is about depleted. Possibly now they'll turn to more profitable pursuits than lavishing the artistry of generations on tenantless shrines." He indicated the cluster of glass towers sparkling in

the sun. "They might even consent to export a reasonable volume of glassware in place of the present token amounts."

"Rarity keeps the price up; and they say they can't afford to let much glass off-world. It all goes back in the scrap piles when it's broken, for reuse."

Magnan stared across the plain, where the white plumes of small geysers puffed into brief life, while the pale smoke rising from the fumaroles rose straight up in the still air. Far above, a point of blue light twinkled.

"Odd," Magnan said, frowning. "I've never seen one of the moons in broad daylight before . . ."

Retief came to the window.

"You still haven't. Apparently our Groaci friends are ahead of schedule. That's an ion drive, and it's not over twenty miles out."

Magnan bounded to his feet. "Get your hat, Retief! We'll confront these interlopers the moment they set foot on Yalcan soil! The Corps isn't letting this sort of thing pass without comment!"

"The Corps is always a fast group with a comment," Retief said. "I'll give it that."

Outside, the plaza was a-bustle with shopkeepers glittering in holiday glass jewelry, busily closing up their stalls, erecting intricate decorations like inverted chandeliers before their shuttered shops, and exchanging shouted greetings. A long-bodied pink-and-red-faced Yalcan in a white apron leaning in the open door of a shop waved a jointed forearm.

"Retief-Tic! Do me honor of to drop in for last Voom cup before I lock up. Your friend, too!"

"Sorry, Oo-Plif; duty calls."

"I see you've established your usual contacts among the undesirable element," Magnan muttered, signaling a boat-shaped taxi edging through the press on fat pneumatic wheels. "Look at these lackwits! Completely engrossed in their frivolity, while disaster descends scarcely a mile away."

Retief eyed the descending ship as it settled in beyond the glittering glass spires of the temple-city.

"I wonder why they're landing there instead of at the port."

"They've probably mistaken the shrine for the town," Magnan snapped. "One must admit that it makes a far more impressive display than this collection of mud huts!"

"Not the Groaci; they do their homework carefully before they start anything."

The cab pulled up and Magnan barked directions at the driver, who waved his forearms in the Yalcan equivalent of a shrug.

"Speak to this fellow, Retief!" Magnan snapped. "Obscure dialects are a hobby of yours, I believe."

Retief gave the driver instructions in the local patois and leaned back against the floppy cushions. Magnan perched on the edge of the seat and nipped at a hangnail. The car cleared the square, racketed down a side street streaming with locals headed for the bog, gunned out across the hard-baked mud-flat, swerving violently around the bubbling devil's cauldrons of hot mud that dotted the way. A small geyser erupted with a whoosh!, spattering the open vehicle with hot droplets. A whiff of rotten-egg smoke blew past. Off to the left, the sunlight glinted from the wide surface of the swamp, thickly scattered with exotic lily-like flowers. Here and there, tree-ferns grew in graceful clumps from the shallow water. Along the shore, bright-colored tents had been erected, and local celebrants clustered in groups among them, weaving to and fro and waving their multiple arms.

"It's disgraceful," Magnan sniffed. "They're already staggering and their infernal festival's hardly begun!"

"It's a native dance," Retief said. "Very cultural."

"What's the occasion for this idiotic celebration? It seems to have completely paralyzed whatever elementary sense of responsibility these flibbertigibbets possess."

"It's related in some way to the conjunction of the four moons," Retief said. "But there's more to it than that. It seems to have an important religious significance; the dances are symbolic of death and rebirth, or something of the sort."

"Hmmp! I see the dancers are now falling flat on their faces! Religious ecstasy, no doubt!"

As they swept past the reeling locals, the driver made cabalistic signs in the air, grabbed the steering bar just in time to swerve past a steam-jet that snorted from a cleft boulder. Ahead, a cloud of dust was rolling out from the landing spot where the Groaci ship had settled in, a scant hundred yards from an outlying shrine, a sparkling fifty-foot tower of red, yellow, and green glass.

"They're coming perilously close to violating the native holy place," Magnan observed as the taxi pulled up beside the ship. "There may be mob violence at any moment."

A pair of locals, emerging from one of the many fanciful glass arches adorning the entrances to the shrine complex, cast no more than a casual glance at the vessel as a port opened in its side and a spindle-legged Groaci in golfing knickers and loud socks appeared.

Magnan climbed hurriedly from the cab. "I want you to note my handling of this, Retief," he said behind his hand, "a firm word now may avert an incident."

"I'd better say a firm word to the driver, or we'll be walking back."

"Look, Mac-Tic, I got a reserved slot in a hot pocket of mud waiting for me," the driver called as he wheeled the car around. "Five minutes, OK?"

Retief handed the cabbie a ten credit token and followed Magnan across the scorched ground to the landing ladder. The Groaci descended, all five eye-stalks canted in different directions. One fixed on Magnan.

"Minister Barnshingle," he said in his faint Groaci voice before Magnan could speak. "I am Fiss, Tour Director for Groac Planetary Tours, Incorporated. I assume you've come to assist in clearing my little flock through the Customs and Immigration formalities. Now—"

"Tour Director, did you say, Mr. Fiss?" Magnan cut in. "Fifty shiploads of tourists?"

"Quite correct. I can assure you that passports and visas are all in order, and immunization records are up-to-date. Since we Groaci have no diplomatic mission to Yalc, it is most kind of the CDT to extend its good offices—"

"Just a minute, Mr. Fiss. How long are your tourists planning to stay on Yalc? Just during Voom Festival, I assume?"

"I believe our visas read . . . ah . . . indefinite, Mr. Minister . . ."

"I'm Magnan, Chargé in the absence of the Minister," Magnan said.

Fiss waved his eyes. "The Minister is not here?"

"No, he's off mountain climbing. Very keen on sports. Now, ah, may I ask where your other forty-nine vessels might be?"

"Just where is the Minister to be found?" Fiss inquired.

"I really can't say," Magnan sniffed. "We've had no word for two days. Now, about your other ships—"

"There are, I believe, forty-nine cities here on this charming little world," Fiss said smoothly. "One transport is calling at each."

"Curious way to conduct a tour—" Magnan broke off as a cargo port rumbled open and a heavy six-wheeled vehicle churned out. Rows of multi-eyed Groaci heads peered over open sides, on which the words GROAC PLANETARY TOURS, INC. had been hastily lettered. A second vehicle followed the first, and then a third and fourth. Magnan gaped as the emerging carriers took up positions in an orderly double file.

"Here, what's this, Fiss?" he blurted. "These are tourists?"

"Of course? What else? Please note the presence of the ladies and also a number of lovable Groaci grubs. Yes, innocent, fun-loving tourists all."

"Why are they in armored cars?" Magnan watched as the vehicles moved off in the direction of the towering glass temples. "Here, where are they going?"

"Since the entire local populace is fully occupied with Voom Festival activities," Fiss hissed blandly, "Groac Tours has thoughtfully arranged to occupy available unused housing . . ."

"Why, that's the local Holy of Holies," Magnan expostulated. "You can't go in there . . . !"

"The structures are not in use," Fiss whispered. "And I see no objection on the part of the aborigines." He indicated the cab driver who was watching indifferently as the first tractor moved under a graceful crystalline arch into the sparkling glass-bricked avenue.

"Hey, Mac-Tic," the driver called to Retief in Yalc. "Time's up. I wanna get there before the mud cools . . ."

"Are you out of your mind, Mr. Fiss?" Magnan demanded. "You're deliberately precipitating an incident! I'm warning you, I'll refer this to Sector HQ and call for a squadron of Peace Enforcers—"

"What need for Peace Enforcers, my dear fellow?" Fiss murmured. "Peace reigns! We are unarmed; no act of violence is contemplated."

"We'll see about this!" Magnan fumed. He turned and stamped toward the waiting taxi.

"So thoughtful of you to welcome us," Fiss's faint voice followed him. "I shall be calling at the Legation later to arrange a number of formalities—all quite legal, I assure you."

"It's worse than I thought," Magnan groaned to Retief as he climbed into the cab. "When a Groaci starts citing statutes, you can be sure there's mischief afoot."

* * *

"This is incredible!" Magnan barked at the screen where Oo-Rilikuk's multi-colored visage nodded blandly against a background of sinuously moving Yalcen dancing-wenches. "You calmly admit that these foreigners are occupying every pagoda on the planet, strewing dope-stick butts and algae-bar wrappers—"

"This is Voom season, Mr. Magnan," Rilikuk said reasonably. "What could be more fitting?"

"Your concept of propriety confounds me. There are fifty thousand of these fellows—and I have the distinct impression they're planning an extended stay!"

"Very likely," Rilikuk agreed, twitching in time to the music in the background. "And now, if you'll excuse me . . ." The screen blanked.

Magnan threw up his hands. "I don't like it, Retief; there's an aspect of this we're missing—"

A chime sounded; the door opened and the Groaci Fiss bustled in, breathing noisily under the weight of a heavy briefcase.

"Ah, Mr. Magnan! So good of you to await me. I have the papers here . . ."
He hoisted the case onto the desk and undid stout straps. "I'm sure you'll find all in order: Territorial claims, governmental charter, application for League membership—"

"What's this?" Magnan scanned the heavy documents. "What are you saying, sir? That Yalc—that the Groaci—that you—"

"Quite right," Fiss nodded. "This world is now Groaci property."

There was a loud crash from the direction of the now deserted street. Magnan swiveled, stared out at a band of business-like Groaci, hard at work on a shuttered shop with pry-bars.

"What are they doing?" he yelled. "Mr. Fiss, order those vandals away at once! The situation is getting out of hand!"

"Not at all; those chaps are merely following my instructions. And now if you have any belongings you wish to take along, please feel free—"

"Eh? Belongings? I'm not going anywhere!"

"Permit me to contradict you," Fiss hissed softly, prodding a paper with a damp-looking finger. "This is the eviction order. I find that this humble structure will adequately fulfill my requirement for a field-office here in the village."

"F-field office?"

"I expect we shall be busy here for a few days," Fiss said. "Transferring useful items to our quarters." He waved airily toward the sparkling towers beyond the swamp.

"You're violating the Legation?" Magnan's eyes bulged.

"There has been a change of status quo since my arrival," Fiss pointed out. "No formal relations exist between my government and the CDT; therefore, this is merely an office, and you are unregistered aliens—"

"This is an outrage!" Magnan sputtered. "I'm not leaving!"

"So?" Fiss murmured. He stepped to the door, opened it, waved in a quartet of bigger-than-average Groaci.

"To intimidate the soft ones," he hissed in Groaci. "To make threatening gestures."

Two of the newcomers stepped to Retief. He took them casually by their thin necks, escorted them to the window, and tumbled them out. The second pair jumped at him in time to meet a stiff-arm which slammed both of them onto their backs. Fiss emitted a weak but impassioned bleat.

"Unhand them, brute! These are lawfully appointed bailiffs—"

Retief tossed the stunned Groaci after their fellows and took a step toward Fiss. The Tour Director squeaked and darted through the door.

"Retief!" Magnan yelled. "Stop! After all, these papers—"

Retief gathered in the parchments, tossed them after the intruders. The outraged face of Tour Director Fiss appeared at the opening.

"Ruffians! Bandits! Our legal and just claim—"

"—isn't worth the plastic it's printed on," Retief stated. "And if any more tourists wander into the Legation I won't be so polite with them."

Fiss turned and made frantic gestures to the foraging crew. "To enter and evict the madmen!" he hissed. "To cast them forth bodily!"

The several dozen Groaci who had gathered moved in a body toward the Legation door.

"I'm disappointed in you, Fiss," Retief said, shaking his head sadly. "I thought you were going to pretend that this was all perfectly legal, and here you are about to violate a diplomatic mission in broad daylight."

Fiss hesitated, then hissed an order to his men. They halted.

"Very well, Soft One," he whispered. "What need of force? Unlike the higher races, you require water at frequent intervals, I believe. Since, alas, I cannot authorize further deliveries through the village mains, you will soon emerge to seek it. We will be waiting."

Magnan tottered to Retief's side. "Mr. Fiss," he croaked. "This is madness! You can't possibly hope to justify this outrageous seizure—"

"On the contrary, Mr. Magnan," Fiss waved a fistful of paper. "If you will re-read your Colonial Code, Title Three, Section XXI, paragraph 9b, you will find that, and I quote, `any planetary body lacking an indigenous culture may be considered as available for homesteading by any Power covenant to these articles—'"

"Surely, Fiss, you don't imply that Yalc is uninhabited! Great Heavens, the world is known throughout the Sector for the beauty of its glass and ceramics work—"

"I refer further to paragraph 12d, *ibidem*," Fiss bored on, "which provides the following criteria for determination of cultural level within the meaning of the Code: (a) an active, organized government competent to represent native interests; (b) a degree of social organization characterized by cities of at least one thousand inhabitants; and (c) individual or group IQ (as applicable), averaging .8 (standard) as evidenced by GST Test scores—"

"Have you lost your wits?" Magnan cut in. "You're standing in the midst of a Yalcan City! I deal daily with representatives of the Yalcan government! And as for intelligence—"

"Inhabited city, Mr. Magnan, permit me to remind you minimum population, one thousand individuals." Fiss waved a hand at the empty street. "I see no individuals here."

"But they're all away participating in a festival—"

"As for government," Fiss continued blandly, "I have been totally unsuccessful in discovering any active organization. I confess I have been unable to secure a specimen of the local fauna for IQ Testing, but I feel sure any such effort would be unrewarded."

"You deliberately timed this coup to take advantage of local customs!" Magnan said in shocked tone. "The Code will be amended, Fiss—!"

The Groaci vibrated his throat sac, a contemptuous gesture. "Ex post facto legal manipulations can hardly be expected to affect the present situation retroactively, my dear Magnan."

Magnan clutched the edge of the window. "Retief," he gasped weakly. "This is insane, but I have a sudden, awful conviction that he's legally on firm ground."

"Of course," Fiss went on, "article 68 of the Code expressly prohibits occupation by force of any world, cultured or otherwise. However, since our arrival was carried out in complete tranquility, this is hardly germane—"

"The festival will be over tomorrow," Magnan burst out. "What then?"

"Now that we have established legal possession of this planet," Fiss whispered, "it will, of course, be necessary to enforce the just laws which are even now being enacted. To this end, certain arms are of course necessary." He spat rapid Groacian at a trio of newcomers in black hip-cloaks, who silently produced heavy particle-guns from sequined holsters strapped to their thighs.

"You aren't planning—violence?" Magnan gasped. "Not against us!"

"As to that," Fiss whispered, "I was about to point out that naturally, a formal request for diplomatic status addressed to the present régime would, of course, receive consideration."

"Tour Director Fiss—" Magnan gulped.

"Planetary Coordinator Pro Tem Fiss, if you please," the Groaci hissed. "A pity the large Soft One acted in such haste, but I am prepared to overlook the incident."

"Why, ah, very good of you, I'm sure, Pla—"

"You're out of luck, Fiss," Retief cut in. "You'll have to conduct your piracy without CDT sanction."

Magnan tugged at Retief's sleeve. "Here, Retief, this is hardly a time for truculence—"

"It's as good a time as any, Mr. Magnan. And Minister Barnshingle might be irritated if he came back and discovered that these squatters had been recognized as a legal government."

Magnan groaned. "I . . . I suppose you're right."

"So? But, no matter, Soft One," Fiss whispered. "Why treat with underlings,

eh? My scouts report a party of Terrestrials in difficulty on an awkward slope some leagues from here. Doubtless the person Barnshingle of whom you speak will be grateful for relief. A timely rescue by selfless Groaci homesteaders will establish a correct mood for initiation of formal relations."

"The Minister's in trouble?" Magnan squeaked.

"He is at present dangling over a crevasse of awesome depth by a single strand of rope. Diplomat muscles appear unequal to the task of drawing him up—"

There was a rending crash from a shop across the plaza as a barred door collapsed under the impact of a power ram. Swarms of Groaci were systematically looting the stalls already opened, loading foodstuffs, glassware, and other merchandise into wheeled vehicles.

"This is wholesale hijackery!" Magnan yelled. "Open pillage! Highway robbery!" You can't do this without a license!"

"Curb your tongue, sir!" Fiss hissed. "I shall for a while indulge your arrogant preemption of Groaci property out of sentimental respect for the niceties of diplomatic usage, but I shall tolerate no insult!"

"Threats, Mr. Fiss?" Magnan choked.

"Call it what you will, Soft One," Fiss said. "When you are ready to indicate your acquiescence, send word to me. Meantime, leave this building at your peril!"

* * *

Dusk had fallen. The sounds of shattering locks and maneuvering vehicles continued in the streets outside. Beyond the window, booted Groaci Peace-keepers paced monotonously, heavy blast guns at the ready. Now and then, in a momentary lull, the sound of Yalcan voices raised in song could be heard emanating from the bog, where torches flared, reflecting from the mirror-dark waters. The two lesser moons were high in the sky in their slow orbits; the third had risen above the horizon and cast purple shadows across the floor of the silent Legation office.

"It's nearly dark," Magnan muttered. "Retief, perhaps I'd better accompany you. Fiss may change his mind and batter the door down—"

"He could come in through the window anytime he decided to," Retief said. "He's nicely bluffed for the present, Mr. Magnan, and someone has to stay here to maintain occupancy of the Legation—"

"On second thought, I'm changing my instructions," Magnan said decisively. "You'd better not go. After all, if Minister Barnshingle wishes to recognize the coup, I see no reason—"

"I don't think the Minister will be reasoning at his most lucid level while dangling over a precipice. And there's also Miss Braswell to consider. She's out there somewhere."

"Retief, you can't hope to find her without being apprehended! The city is swarming with armed Groaci!"

"I think I know the back streets better than they do; I'll stay out of sight. If I can reach Barnshingle before he signs anything, it may save a lot of embarrassment all around."

"Retief, as Chargé—"

"Don't give me any instructions I can't follow, Mr. Magnan," Retief took a hand-light from a desk drawer, clipped it to his belt. "Just lie low and ignore whatever Fiss says to you. I'll be back in a few hours."

Retief stepped from a doorless opening into the shadows of a narrow alley running behind the Legation. He waited until a knob-kneed Groaci in an elaborate helmet had strolled past the lighted intersection fifty feet distant, then jumped, pulled himself up onto the low, tiled roof of the adjacent building. In the light of the rising fourth moon, he moved quietly to the far side, lay flat looking down on a side street littered with items discarded by the looters. One or two windows showed lights. A single armed Groaci stood under a corner street-lamp. Silently Retief worked his way along the roofs, jumping gaps between buildings, until he reached a narrow space leading back into darkness a few yards from the corner. He groped, found a chip of broken tile, tossed it down into the alley. The Groaci cocked his eyes alertly, swung his gun around and came over to investigate. Retief tossed down another pebble; as the sentry entered the dark way, Retief dropped behind him, yanked him backward off his feet, and caught the falling gun. He put the muzzle against the Groaci's pulsating throat sac.

"Tell me where the Terry female is being held," he growled, "and maybe I won't tie knots in your eye-stalks."

"Iiiiikk!" the Groaci said. "To unhand me, demonic one!"

"Of course, you may not know," Retief said. "In that case I'd have to regretfully kill you and strike up a new acquaintance, which would be a nuisance for both of us."

"The impropriety of assaulting an innocent tourist! To lodge a complaint with the Travelers Aid Society!"

"No, that was this morning," Retief corrected his prisoner. "This afternoon you're a peaceful homesteader. You can think of me as an unpacified aborigine, if it will help any." He jabbed with the gun. "Make up your mind. I'm on a tight schedule."

"The ghastliness of your fate," the Groaci hissed.

"Well, I have to hurry along," Retief said. "Pardon my thumbs; shooting is such a messy business, and noisy, too."

"To restrain yourself, prowler in the night! To show you the way to the Soft She—and to savor the moment when you writhe on the hooks!"

"That's right," Retief said agreeably. "Think about something cheerful." He

prodded the captive guard to his feet. "In the meantime—" he switched to Groaci—"To play your cards right and maybe to live to see the dawn."

* * *

In a shadowy arcade running beside a rare two-story structure, Retief studied the dark windows in the wall opposite. Faint light gleamed behind two of the glassless openings.

"I'll have to leave you here, I'm afraid, Tish," Retief said softly. "I'll just pop you into one of these convenient garbage storage units; they have nicely-fitted air tight doors, but you'll be all right for an hour or so. If your information is accurate, with luck I'll be back in plenty of time to let you out before you suffocate. Of course, if anything happens to delay me—well, that's just the little risk we have to run, eh?"

"To . . . to try the rear window first," Tish whispered.

"Whatever you say," Retief opened the door to the refuse bin and urged the Groaci inside. The alien clinched his olfactory sphincters tight and perched disconsolately on a heap of fruit rinds, locust carapaces, and pottery shards, his head ducked under the low ceiling.

"To remember this trusting one," he said shakily. "To carefully avoid being killed before returning to release me."

"With a motivation like that, I'm sure to survive." Retief clamped the door shut, looked both ways, and darted across the street. The wall tiles were deeply incised with decorative floral motifs; he found finger and toeholds, climbed quickly to the level of the windows, eased through one into a dark room. He paused to listen; there were faint Groaci voices somewhere. In the dim-lit hall, they were more distinct. He moved silently along to the nearest room. The door opened at a touch.

Miss Braswell jumped up from a long, low Yalcan couch, her mouth open for a scream, cut off as she recognized Retief in the gloom.

"Why—Mr. Retief—"

"Shhh." He crossed to her. A length of rope was tied firmly to her ankle and looped around a massive clay sculpture. She was barefooted, and her brown hair was in a state of mild disarray; there was a streak of dirt along one cheek.

"What in the world is it all about?" she whispered. "I was just about to buy the darlinest hand-decorated chamber pot, when all of a sudden a whole bunch of these nasty little creatures popped out of nowhere waving their eyes at me—"

"How many are in the building now?" Retief attacked the heavy knots in the rope.

"Heavens, I have no idea. It's been pretty quiet for the last hour." She giggled. "That tickles. I tried to untie it, but I only broke a fingernail."

The knot yielded and Retief tossed the rope aside.

"Do you feel equal to a short climb?"

Miss Braswell came close to Retief. "Whatever you say, Mr. Retief," she murmured.

"Where are your shoes?"

"I kept kicking them when they were tying me up, so they took them. Ugh! Those creepy, damp hands!"

"If we should get separated, head for the Legation. Mr. Magnan is holding the fort."

"You mean—these awful little Groaci are there, too?"

"Haven't you heard? They're colonizing the place."

"Why, the nerve!"

There was a sudden hiss of nearby voices. Retief flattened himself against the wall just inside the door. Miss Braswell whirled and sat on the chaise lounge. There was the soft clap of Groaci feet. A small figure stepped into the room.

"Ah, young woman," a soft Groaci voice hissed. "Time to be going along."

"Where?" the girl demanded loudly.

"To more comfortable quarters in more attractive surroundings—"

"If it wasn't so ridiculous, I'd think you were on the make, you sticky little monster. Keep away from me!"

"You mammals are all alike," the Groaci whispered. "But it's pointless to flaunt those ugly udders at me, my girl . . ." Two more Groaci had followed the first, who signaled. "To make fast its arms," he snapped. "Mind its talons—"

Miss Braswell jumped up and swung an open-handed slap that sent the flimsy alien reeling back; Retief stepped quickly behind the other two, cracked their heads together sharply, thrust them aside and chopped a hand across the leader's neck.

"Time to go," he breathed. At the window, he glanced out, then swung a leg over the sill. "It's easy; just hang on with your toes."

Miss Braswell giggled again. "It's so sort of sexy, being barefooted, isn't it?"

"That depends on what's attached to the feet," Retief said. "Hurry up, now. We're in enemy territory."

"Mr. Retief," she said from above, "do you think I flaunt my ah . . ."

"Certainly not, Miss Braswell. They flaunt themselves."

There was a sudden drumming from the shadows of the arcade across the

way.

"It just occurred to my friend Tish to use a little initiative," Retief called softly. He dropped to the street a few feet below. "Jump—I'll catch you."

The thumping continued. Miss Braswell squealed and let go, slammed against Retief's chest. He set her on her feet. "The Groaci have good ears. Come on—" They dashed for the nearest dark alley as a squad of armed Groaci Peace-keepers rounded a corner. There was a weak shout, a clatter of accouterments as the four aliens broke into a run. Gripping Miss Braswell's hand, Retief dashed along the narrow way. Ahead, a wall loomed, blocking the passage. They skidded to a halt, turned to face the oncoming pursuers.

"Get to the roof," Retief snapped. "I'll slow them down—!"

Between Retief and the Groaci, a six-foot-long grating set in the pavement suddenly dropped open with a clank of metal. The leading Groaci, coming on at a smart clip, plunged over the edge, followed an instant later by the second. Retief brought his light up, shone it in the eyes of the other two as the third Groaci reached the pitfall, dropped from sight. As the last of the four faltered, sensing something amiss, the long, sinuous form of a Yalcan native glided from a door set in the wall, gave the Groaci a hearty push, dusted both sets of hands, and inclined its head in a gracious nod.

"Ah, Retief-Tic—and Braswell Ticcim! What jolly surprise! Please do honor to enter humble abode for refreshing snort before continuing!"

"Nice timing, Oo-Plif," Retief said. "I thought you'd be off to the festival by now."

The Yalcan reached inside the door, fumbled. The grating swung back in place. "I was busy with brisk trade when Five-eyes arrive," he explained. "Decide stick around keep eye on store. Plenty time make scene at bog yet."

Miss Braswell shuddered as she crossed the grate. "What's down there?"

"Only good honest sewage, nice change for Five-eyes. After brisk swim, fetch up in bog, join in merry-making."

"I thought you Yalcans were pacifists," Retief commented, stepping inside a roughly-finished passage running parallel with the outer wall of the building.

"All Yalcan love peace. More peaceful now noisy Five-eyes enjoying swim. Besides, only open drain cover; visitors dive in of own free will."

"I had the impression you helped that last fellow along."

"Always try to be helpful when possible. Now for snort."

They followed Oo-Plif along interior passages to emerge behind the bar of the darkened dram-shop, took seats at a low bench and accepted elaborate glasses of aromatic liquor.

"Oo-Plif, I'd appreciate it if you'd see Miss Braswell back to the Legation," Retief said. "I have to leave town on an urgent errand."

"Better stay close, Retief-Tic, come along to bog in time for high point of Voom Festival; only couple hours now."

"I have an errand to run first, Oo-Plif; I've been delegated to find Minister Barnshingle and notify him that the Legation's under siege and that he shouldn't sign anything without reading the fine print."

"Barnshingle Tic-Tic? Skinny Terran with receding lower mandible and abdomen like queen ripe with eggs?"

"Graphically put, Oo-Plif. He's supposed to be hanging around a mountain somewhere, if the Groaci haven't yet swooped down to the rescue."

Oo-Plif was wobbling his head, now enameled in orange and green holiday colors, in the Yalcan gesture of affirmation.

"Barnshingle Tic-Tic here in city at present moment; arrive half-hour ago amid heavy escort of Five-eyes."

"Hmmm. That simplifies matters, perhaps. I was expecting to have to steal a Groaci heli and hunt him down in the wilds. Did he seem to be a prisoner, Oo-Plif?"

"Hard to say, not get too good look. Busy helping Five-eyes find way to bog."

"Via the sewer, I take it?"

"Sure; plenty gratings round town. Must be fifty Five-eyes in swim now; plenty company."

"Are you sure they can swim?"

"Details, details," Oo-Plif said soothingly. "You want go now, pay visit to Barnshingle Tic-Tic?"

"As soon as Miss Braswell's taken care of."

"I'm going with you," the girl said quickly. "I wouldn't dream of missing the excitement."

"This system of hidden passages is certainly handy," Retief said. "How much farther?"

"Close now. Not really hidden passages; just space in double walls. Yalcan like build plenty strong."

They emerged into another of the innumerable alleys that characterized the town, crossed it, entered another door. Oo-Plif cautioned silence. "Place swarm with Five-eyes. We sneak up and get lie of land, find way of rescue Barnshingle Tic-Tic from rescuers."

Five minutes later, crowded into a narrow, dusty passage in the heart of the sprawling building, Retief heard the booming tones of Barnshingle's

voice nearby, and the breathy reply of a Groaci.

"Opening in back of closet just ahead," Oo-Plif whispered. "Get earful of proceedings there."

Retief edged forward. Through the half-open closet door he caught a glimpse of Minister Barnshingle seated awkwardly in a low Yalcan easy chair, dressed in dusty hiking clothes. Half a dozen Groaci in vari-colored mufti surrounded him.

"—an exceedingly hairy experience, to be sure," Barnshingle was saying. "Most gratifying to see your heli appear, Drone-master Fiss. But I don't quite grasp the import of the present situation. Not that I'm suggesting that I'm being held against my will, you understand, but I really must hurry back to my office—"

"No need for haste, Mr. Minister," Fiss reassured him. "Everything has been conducted with scrupulous regard for legality, I assure you."

"But there seemed to be hundreds of your . . . ah . . . esteemed compatriots about in the streets," Barnshingle pressed on. "And I had the distinct impression that there were a number of highly irregular activities in progress—"

"You refer perhaps to the efforts of some of our people to remove certain obstacles—"

"Breaking down doors, to be precise," Barnshingle said a trifle snappishly. "As well as hauling away wagon-loads of merchandise from shops, the owners of which appeared to be absent."

"Ah, yes, impulse buying; hardly consonant with domestic thrift. But enough of this delightful gossip, Mr. Minister. The matter I wished to discuss with you . . ." Fiss gave the Minister a glowing account of his peaceful take-over, citing chapter and verse each time the astounded diplomat attempted to rumble a protest.

"And, of course," he finished, "I wished to acquaint your Excellency with the facts before permitting you to be subjected to ill-advised counsel by hot-heads."

"B-but, Great heavens, Drone-master—"

"Planetary Coordinator Pro Tem," Fiss interjected smoothly. "Now, I shall, of course, be happy to inspect your credentials at once in order to regularize relations between the Corps and my government."

"My credentials? But I've presented my credentials to Mr. Rilikuk of the Foreign Office—"

"This is hardly the time to reminisce over vanished regimes, Mr. Minister. Now . . ." Fiss leaned forward confidentially. "You and I are, if I may employ the term, men of the world. Not for us the fruitless expense of emotional energy over the fait accompli, eh? As for myself, I am most eager to show you around my offices in the finest of the towers of my capitol—"

"Towers? Capitol?"

"The attractive edifices just beyond the swampy area where the local wild-life are now disporting themselves," Fiss explained. "I have assigned—"

"You've violated the native Sanctum Sanctorum?" Barnshingle gasped.

"An unfortunate choice of words," Fiss hissed. "Would you have me establish my ministries here in this warren of one-story clay huts?"

"The Yalcans—" Barnshingle said weakly.

"The name of the planet is now Grudlu," Fiss stated. "In honor of Grud, the patron Muse of practicality."

"Look here, Fiss! Are you asking me to turn my back on the Yalcans and recognize you as the de jure government here? Simply on the basis of this absurd legalistic rationalization of yours?"

"With the exception of a number of slanted adjectives, very succinctly put," Fiss whispered.

"Why in the world would I do a dastardly thing like that?" Barnshingle demanded.

"Why, good for him," Miss Braswell breathed behind Retief.

"Ah, yes, terms," Fiss said comfortably. "First, your Mission would, of course, be raised at once to Embassy level, at Grudlun insistence, with yourself requested by name as Ambassador, naturally. Secondly, I have in mind certain local commercial properties which might make a valuable addition to your portfolio; I can let you in at investor's prices—the entire transaction to be conducted with the utmost discretion, of course, so as not to arouse comment among the coarse-minded. Then, of course, you'll wish to select a handsome penthouse for yourself in one of my more exclusive towers . . ."

"Penthouse? Ambassador? Portfolio?" Barnshingle babbled.

"I marvel at the patience Your Excellency has displayed in tolerating the thinly-veiled insult implied in your assignment to grubby quarters in this kennel," Fiss commented. "Why, a person could disappear in this maze of old crockery and never be heard from again . . ."

"Disappear?" Barnshingle croaked. "And wha-what if I refuse . . . ?"

"Refuse? Please, Mr. Minister—or more properly, Mr. Ambassador—why release the fowl of fancy to flutter among such morbid trees of speculation?"

"What about my staff? Will they . . . ah . . . ?"

"Suitable bribes will be offered," Fiss whispered crisply. "Pray don't give it another thought. All surviving members of the Mission will present a united front—with the exception of the two criminals now skulking in the former

Legation, of course," he added.

"Magnan? Why, he's one of my most reliable men . . ."

"Perhaps something could be managed in the case of Mr. Magnan, since you express an interest. As for the other—he will return to Groac to stand trial for assorted crimes against the peace and dignity of the Groacian state."

"I really must protest . . ." Barnshingle said weakly.

"Your Excellency's loyalty is most touching. And now, if you'd just care to sign here . . ." An underling handed Fiss a document which he passed to Barnshingle.

"Why, the old phoney!" Miss Braswell gasped. "He's going to do it!"

"It's time to break this up," Retief whispered to Oo-Plif. "I'll take care of Fiss; you hit the others—"

"On contrary, Retief-Tic," the Yalcans replied. "Most improper to interfere with natural course of events."

"Maybe you don't understand; Barnshingle's about to sign away your rights to Yalc. By the time you drag it through the courts and recover, you may all be dead. The Groaci are zealous in the field of wildlife control—"

"No matter; we Yalcans pacifistic folk; not like butt in."

"In that case, I'll have to do it alone. You'll take care of Miss Braswell—"

"No, not even alone, dear Retief-Tic. Not in spirit of Yalcans Pacifism." Something hard prodded Retief's chest; he looked down at the power gun in Oo-Plif's lower right hand.

"Why, you old stinker," Miss Braswell said. "And I thought you were sweet!"

"Hope soon to recoup good opinion, Braswell Ticcim," Oo-Plif said. "Now silence, please."

In the room, Barnshingle and Fiss were making congratulatory noises at each other.

"Matter of fact," Barnshingle said, "I never felt these Yalcans were ready for self-government. I'm sure your wardship will be just what they need."

"Please—no meddling in internal affairs," Fiss said. "And, now, let us away to more appropriate surroundings. Just wait until you see the view from your new suite, Mr. Ambassador . . ." They departed, chattering.

"Well, you've had your way, Oo-Plif," Retief said. "Your pacifism has a curiously spotty quality. Just why do you object to preventing our unfortunate Minister from making an idiot of himself?"

"Forgive use of weapon, Retief-Tic. Foolishness of Barnshingle Tic-Tic-Tic not important—"

"He's a three-tic man now?"

"Promotion just received at hands of Five-eyes. Now away to bog, all buddies together, eh?"

"Where's the rest of Barnshingle's staff? They were together on the crater-viewing expedition."

"All tucked away in house few alleys from here. Better get wiggle on now; climax of festival arrive soon."

"Good night, does your silly old carnival mean more to you than your own planet?" Miss Braswell demanded.

"Voom Festival of great national importance," Oo-Plif stated, opening and closing his bony mandibles like the two halves of a clam—a mannerism indicating polite amusement.

Following the Yalcan's instructions, Retief squeezed through narrow passages, found his way out into the inevitable dark alley, Miss Braswell's hand holding tightly to his. The sounds of looters and their vehicles had diminished to near-silence now. A turbine growled along a nearby street, going away. They came out into a side street, surveyed the deserted pavement, the scattered discards of the Groaci homesteaders. Above the low roof-lines, the mile-distant towers of the shrine were a blaze of gorgeous light.

"It looks so pretty, all lit up," Miss Braswell said. "I'm just amazed that you'd let those nasty little Groaci walk in and take it all away from you."

Oo-Plif laughed, a sound like sand in a bearing. "Towers tributes to deities. Fate of towers in deities' hands now."

"Hmmmph. They could have used a little help from you," Miss Braswell sniffed.

"Looks like the new owners have cleared out for now," Retief said. "All over at the towers, throwing a party in honor of Independence Day."

"Time go to dandy hot bog," Oo-Plif said. "Big event soon now."

Moving briskly along the empty street under the light of the fourth moon, now high in the sky, they reached the corner. Down the wide cross-avenue, the flaring torches of the revelers at the bog sparkled cheerfully. The faint sound of Yalcan voices raised in song were audible now in the stillness.

"Just what is this big event we're hurrying to make?" Retief inquired.

Oo-Plif indicated the large satellite overhead. "When number four moon reach position ten degrees west of zenith—Voom!"

"Oh, astrological symbolism."

"Not know big word—but only one time every ninety-four years standard all four moon line up. When this happen—Voom time here!"

"Voom," Retief said. "Just what does the word signify?"

"Fine old Yalcan word," Oo-Plif said. "Terry equivalent . . . ummm . . ."

"Probably untranslatable."

Oo-Plif snapped the fingers of his upper left hand.

"I remember," he said. "Mean `earthquake'!"

Retief stopped dead.

"You did say—`earthquake'?"

"Correct Retief-Tic—"

Retief's left fist slammed out in a jack-hammer punch to the Yalcan's midriff plates. The tall creature oofed, coiled into a ball, all four legs scrabbling, the four arms groping wildly.

"Sorry, pal," Retief muttered, catching up the power gun. "No time to argue." He grabbed Miss Braswell's hand and started off at a dead run down the deserted avenue toward the towering castle of light.

They skidded to a halt at a gleam from an opening door ahead. A pipe-stem-legged Groaci hurried from a building, a bulging sack over one knobby shoulder. A second helmeted looter trotted behind, lugging a handsome ten gallon spittoon.

"They've got a heli," Retief said softly. "We need it. Wait here."

Miss Braswell clutched his hand even tighter. "I'm scared!"

The two scavengers were clambering into their dark machine now. Running lights sprang into diamond brilliance. The turbos whirred. Retief disengaged his hand, ran across the thirty feet of open pavement and jumped, just as the heli lifted. There were faint, confused cries from the startled Groaci; one fumbled out a power rifle in time for Retief to jerk it from his grasp, toss it over the side. The heli canted wildly, narrowly missing a decorated cornice. Retief got a grip on a bony neck, propelled the owner over the side, heard a faint yelp as he hit. An instant later, the second followed. Retief caught the controls, brought the heli around in a tight turn, dropped it in beside Miss Braswell.

"Oh! I was afraid it was you that fell overboard, Mr. Retief!" She scrambled up beside him, lent a hand to tumble the gaboon out to smash thunderously on the tiles. On a nearby roof, the two dispossessed Groaci keened softly, like lost kittens. The heli jumped off, lifted swiftly and headed for the glass towers.

* * *

The city of glass spread over forty acres, a crystalline fantasy of towers, minarets, fragile balconies suspended over space, diaphanous fretwork, airy walkways spun like spider-webs between slim spires ablaze with jewel-colored light. Retief brought the heli in high, settled in a stomach-lifting swoop toward the tallest of the towers.

"Miss Braswell, you can operate this thing, can't you?"

"Sure, I'm a good driver, but—"

Retief threw the drive into auto-hover three feet above a tiny terrace clinging to the spire. "Wait here; I'll be back as soon as I can. If anybody else shows up, get out of here fast and head for the bog!"

"The . . . the bog?"

"It'll be the safest place around when the quake hits . . . !" He was over the side, across the five-foot wide shelf of water-clear glass, and through an opening arched with intertwined glass vines hung with sparkling scarlet and purple berries. A narrow stair wound down, debouching into a round chamber walled with transparent murals depicting gardens in the sun. Through the glass, lighted windows in the next tower were visible, and beyond, the silhouettes of half a dozen Groaci and a tall, paunchy Terrestrial.

Retief found more stairs, leaped down them, whirled through an archway of trellised glass flowers. A narrow crystal ribbon arched across the void to the lighted entry opposite. He pulled off his shoes, crossed the bridge in five quick steps.

Voices were audible above, and dark shadows moved to the pebble-glass ceiling. Retief went up, caught a brief glimpse of five richly-draped Groaci under an ornate chandelier, fingering elaborate Yalcan wine glasses and clustering about the stooping, chinless figure of Minister Barnshingle.

"—pleasure to deal with realists like yourselves," the diplomat was saying. "Pity about the natives, of course, but as you pointed out, a little discipline—"

Retief knocked two Groaci spinning, caught Barnshingle by the arm, slopping his drink over the crimson cuff of his mess jacket.

"We've got to go—fast, Mr. Minister! Explanations later!"

Fiss hissed orders; two Groaci darted away and another rushed in to be stiff-armed. Barnshingle choked, spluttered, jerked free. His face had turned an unflattering shade of purple.

"What's the meaning of this outburst—"

"Sorry, Mr. Minister . . ." Retief slammed a clean right cross to the side of Barnshingle's jaw, caught the diplomat as he folded, stooped to hoist the weight to his shoulders, and ran for the door.

Suddenly, Groaci were everywhere. Two bounced aside from Retief's rush; another ducked, swung a power gun up, fired just as Fiss leaped in and knocked his hand aside.

"To endanger the bloated one," he hissed—and went over backward as Retief slammed him aside. A helmeted Groaci Peace-keeper tackled Retief from behind; he paused to kick him across the room, bowling over others. A blaster bolt bubbled glass above his head. The air hissed with weak Groaci

shouts as Retief plunged down stairs. Behind him, there was a terrific crash; over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of glass chips showering from the fallen chandelier. He was at the bridge now. Barnshingle groaned and flapped his arms feebly. Retief stepped onto the narrow span, felt it sway under his weight. He took two steps, put a foot over the edge, teetered—

There was a crystalline tinkle, and a ten-foot spear of canary-yellow glass fell past him. He caught his balance, took another step, wobbled as the bridge quivered, leaped clear as the glass shattered into ten thousand glittering shards that sparkled as they fell.

He went up stairs three at a time. A sudden lurch threw him against the wall, where mosaiced glass figures depicted glass blowers at work. A huge chunk of the scene fell backward, letting in a gust of cool night air. Retief scrambled for footing, went up, felt a glass slab drop from underfoot as he gained the terrace. Wind beat down from the heli, hovering a few yards distant. The sparkling tower that had loomed nearby was gone. A sustained crashing, as of nearby surf, drowned the whine of the heli's turbos as it darted in close.

Retief lowered Barnshingle, now pawing weakly and blinking vague eyes, half lifted, half shoved him into the rear seat.

"Hurry, Mr. Retief! It's going . . . !" The noise was deafening now. Retief grasped a strut to pull himself up, and suddenly he was hanging by one hand, his feet treading air. The heli surged, lifting. He looked down. The tower was dropping away below, a cloud of vari-colored glass splinters puffing out as the upper stories thundered down into the depths. A slender sapphire spire, thrusting up almost alone now, rippled like a dancer, then broke into three major fragments, dropped gracefully from view. Retief hauled himself up, got a foot inside the heli, pulled himself into the seat.

"Mr. Retief, you're bleeding!" He put a hand up, felt slickness across his cheek.

"A lot of splinters flying around. It was a little too close—"

"Mr. Retief . . . !" Miss Braswell worked frantically at the controls. "We're losing altitude!"

There was a harsh droning noise. Retief looked back. A heavy armored heli with Groaci markings was dropping toward them.

"Make for the bog!" Retief called over the racket.

There was a buzz, and garish light glared across the struts above Retief's head, bubbling paint.

"Hang on!" Miss Braswell shouted. "Evasive action!" The heli tilted. Barnshingle yelled. The heli whipped up in the opposite direction, spun, dropped like a stone, darted ahead. The futile buzzing of the Groaci's blaster rattled around the faltering vehicle.

"Can't do much more of that," Miss Braswell gasped. "Losing altitude too fast—"

A vast, dark shadow flitted overhead.

"We're sunk," Miss Braswell squeaked. "Another one—"

There was a flare of actinic blue from above and behind, followed by a muffled clatter. Retief caught a glimpse of the Groaci heli, its rotors vibrating wildly falling away behind them. Something huge and shadowy swept toward them from the rear in a rising whistle of air.

"Get set," Retief called. He brought up the blaster he had taken from Oo-Plif, steadied his hand against the heli—

The shadow dropped close; the running lights of the heli gleamed on thirty-foot canopies of translucent tracery spread wide above a seven-foot body. Oo-Plif's gaily painted face beamed down at them. He floated on spread wings, arms and legs folded close.

"Ah, Retief-Tic! Punch in thorax hasten metamorphosis. Got clear of chrysalis just in time!"

"Oo-Plif!" Retief yelled. "What are you doing here?"

"Follow to warn you, dear buddy! Not want you meet gods with crowd of Five-eyes! Now on to bog for festivities!"

Below, the torch-lit surface of the swamp rushed up. Miss Braswell braked, threw herself into Retief's arms as the battered heli struck with a massive splatter at the edge of the mud. Painted Yalcan faces bobbed all around.

"Welcome, strangers!" voices called. "Just in time for fun!"

* * * * *

Barnshingle was groaning, holding his head.

"What am I doing here, hip-deep in mud?" he demanded. "Where's Magnan? What happened to that fellow Fiss?"

"Mr. Magnan is coming now," Miss Braswell said. "You bumped your head."

"Bumped my head? I seem to recall . . ."

Someone floundered up, gasping and waving skinny, mud-caked arms.

"Mr. Minister! These primitives dragged me bodily from the street—"

"I thought you were going to stay inside the Legation," Retief said.

"I was merely conducting a negotiation," Magnan huffed. "What are you doing here, Retief—and Miss Braswell!"

"What were you negotiating for, a private apartment just below the Ambassadorial penthouse?" she snapped.

"Miss Braswell! Kindly bend your knees! You're exposing yourself!"

"I've got a quarter-inch layer of black mud on; that's more than I wear to

the office!"

"Here, what's this?" Barnshingle exclaimed. "What's happened to my clothes? I'm stark naked!"

"Why, it's a sort of symbolic shedding of the chrysalis, as I understand it, sir," Magnan babbled. "One must go along with native religious observances, of course—"

"Gee, Mr. Retief," Miss Braswell murmured. "It's sort of sexy at that, isn't it?"

"Wha-whatever's happened?" Barnshingle burst out. "Where's the city gone?" He stared across at the glowing heap that marked the site of the fallen towers.

"It seems to have—ah—been offered to the local deities," Magnan said. "It seems to be the custom."

"And all those nasty little bug-eyes with it," Miss Braswell put in.

"Really, Miss Braswell! I must ask you to avoid the use of racial epithets!"

"It's really too bad about the towers; they were awfully pretty."

Oo-Plif, perched like a vast moth on a nearby tree-fern, spoke up. "Is OK; re-use glass; make plenty bowl and pot from fragments."

"But, what about all those Groaci mixed in with the pieces?"

"Impurities make dandy colors," Oo-Plif assured her.

"My jaw," Barnshingle grated. "How did I fall and hit my jaw?"

"Retief-Tic arrive in nick of time to snatch you from sacrificial pile. Probably bump chin in process."

"What in the world were you doing there, Mr. Minister?" Magnan gasped. "You might have been killed."

"Why, ah, I was trepanned there by the Groaci—quite against my will, of course. They . . . ah . . . had some fantastic proposal to make. I was just on the point of daring them to do their worst, when you appeared, Retief. After that, my recollection grows a bit hazy."

"These head-blows often have retroactive effects," Retief said. "I'll wager you don't recall a thing that was said from the time they picked you off the mountain."

"It's even possible that Oo-Plif has forgotten some of the things he overheard—about penthouses and gilt edge stocks," Retief went on. "Maybe it was the excitement generated by your announcement that Yalc will be getting some large shipments of fine grey silica sand from Groac suitable for glass-making, courtesy of the CDT."

"Announcement?" Barnshingle gulped.

"The one you're going to make tomorrow," Retief suggested gently.

"Oh . . . that one," the Minister said weakly.

"Time to go along now to next phase of celebration," Oo-Plif called from his perch.

"How jolly," Magnan said. "Come along, Mr. Minister—"

"Not you, Magnan-Tic, and Barnshingle Tic-Tic," Oo-Plif said. "Mating rite no place for elderly drones. You scheduled for cozy roost in thorn-tree as ceremonial penitence for follies of youth."

"What about us?" Miss Braswell asked breathlessly.

"Oh, time for you to get in on youthful follies, so have something to repent later!"

"You said . . . mating rite. Does that mean . . . ?"

"Voom Festival merely provide time, place, and member of opposite gender," Oo-Plif said. "Rest up to you . . ."