

COURIER

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—Vol. X, Reel 9, 493 AE (AD 2954)

"It is rather unusual, Retief," Deputy Assistant Under-Secretary Magnan said, "to assign an officer of your rank to courier duty; but this is an unusual mission."

Retief drew on his cigar and said nothing. Just before the silence grew awkward, Magnan went on.

"There are four planets in the group," he said. "Two double planets, all rather close to an unimportant star listed as DRI-G 814369. They're called Jorgensen's Worlds, and in themselves are of no importance whatever. However, they lie deep in the sector into which the Soetti have been penetrating.

"Now," Magnan leaned forward and lowered his voice, "we have learned that the Soetti plan a bold step forward. They've been quietly occupying non-settled worlds. Since they've met no opposition so far in their infiltration of Terrestrial space, they intend to seize Jorgensen's Worlds by force."

Magnan leaned back, waiting for Retief's reaction. Retief drew carefully on his cigar and looked at Magnan. Magnan frowned.

"This is open aggression, Retief, in case I haven't made myself clear. Aggression on Terrestrial-occupied territory by an alien species. Obviously, we can't allow it." He drew a large folder from his desk.

"A show of resistance at this point is necessary. Unfortunately, Jorgensen's Worlds are backward, technologically undeveloped areas. They're farmers, traders; their industry is limited to a minor role in their economy—enough to support the merchant fleet, no more. The war potential, by conventional standards, is nil."

Magnan tapped the folder before him.

"I have here," he said solemnly, "information which will change that picture completely." He leaned back, blinked at Retief.

"All right, Mr. Secretary," Retief said. "I'll play along; what's in the folder?"

Magnan spread his fingers, folded one digit down.

"First," he said, "the Soetti War Plan—in detail. We were fortunate enough to make contact with a defector from a party of renegade Terrestrials who've been advising the Soetti." He folded another finger. "Next, a battle

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another finger. "Next, a battle plan for the Jorgensen's people, worked out by the Theory Group." He wrestled a third finger down. "Lastly, an Utter Top Secret schematic for conversion of a standard anti-acceleration field into a potent weapon—a development our Systems people have been holding in reserve for just such a situation."

"Is that all? You've still got two fingers sticking up." Magnan looked at the fingers and put them away. "This is no occasion for flippancy, Retief. In the wrong hands, this information could be catastrophic. You'll memorize it before you leave this building—"

"I'll carry it, sealed," Retief said. "That way nobody can sweat it out of

me."

"As you wish. Now, let me caution you against personal emotional involvement here. Overall policy calls for a defense of these backwater worlds; otherwise, the Corps would prefer simply to allow History to follow its natural course, as always."

"When does this attack happen?"

"In less than four weeks."

"That doesn't leave me much time."

"I have your itinerary here. Your accommodations are clear as far as Aldo Cerise. You'll have to rely on your ingenuity to get you the rest of the way."

"And what do I rely on to get me back?"

Magnan looked casually at his

fingernails. "Of course you could refuse the assignment . . ."

Retief smiled, directed a smoke ring past Magnan's ear.

"This antiac conversion; how long does it take?"

"A skilled electronics crew can do the job in a matter of minutes. The Jorgensens can handle it very nicely; every second man is a mechanic of some sort."

Retief opened the envelope Magnan handed him and looked at the tickets inside.

"Less than four hours to departure time," he said. "I'd better not start any long books."

"You'd better waste no time getting

over to Indoctrination," Magnan said. Retief stood up. "If I hurry, maybe I can catch the cartoon."

"The allusion escapes me," Magnan said coldly. "And one last word: the Soetti are patrolling the trade lanes into Jorgensen's Worlds. Don't get yourself interned."

"I'll tell you what," Retief said soberly; "in a pinch, I'll mention your name."

"You'll be traveling with Class X credentials," Magnan snapped. "There must be nothing to connect you with the Corps."

"I'll pose as a gentleman. They'll never guess."

"You'd better be getting started."

Magnan shuffled papers.

"You're right. If I work at it, I might manage a snootful by take-off." He went to the door, looked back.

"No objection to my checking out a needler, is there?" Magnan looked up. "I suppose not. What do you want with it?"

"Just a feeling I've got."

"Please yourself."

"Some day," Retief said, "I may take you up on that."

* * *

Retief put down the heavy, travel-battered suitcase and leaned on the counter, studying the schedules chalked on the board under the legend

"ALDO CERISE
INTERPLANETARY." A thin clerk in a

faded sequined blouse and a plastic snakeskin cummerbund groomed his fingernails and watched Retief from the corner of his eye; he nipped off a ragged corner with rabbit-like front teeth, spat it on the floor. "Was there something?" he said.

"Two-twenty-eight, due out today for the Jorgensen group. Is it on schedule?"

The clerk nibbled the inside of his right cheek, eyed Retief.

"Filled up. Try again in a couple of weeks."

"What time does it leave?"

The clerk smiled pityingly. "It's my lunch hour. I'll be open in an hour." He held up a thumb nail, frowned at it.

"If I have to come around this

counter," Retief said, "I'll feed that thumb to you the hard way."

The clerk looked up, opened his mouth, caught Retief's eye. He closed his mouth and swallowed.

"Just as it says there," he said, jerking the thumb at the board. "Lifts in an hour. But you won't be on it," he added.

Retief looked at him.

"Some . . . ah . . . VIPs required accommodation," the clerk said. He hooked a finger inside the sequined collar. "All tourist reservations were canceled," he went on. "You'll have to try to get space on the Four-Planet Line ship next—"

"Which gate?" Retief said.

"For . . . ah . . . ?"

"Two-twenty-eight for Jorgensen's Worlds."

"Well," said the clerk. "Gate 19," he added quickly. "But—" Retief picked up his suitcase and walked away toward the glare sign reading "To gates 16-30."

"Smart-alec," the clerk said behind him.

Retief followed the signs, threaded his way through crowds, found a covered ramp with the number 228 posted over it. A heavy-shouldered man with a scarred jawline and small eyes, wearing a rumpled grey uniform, put out a hand as Retief started past him.

"Lessee your boarding pass," he growled.

Retief pulled a paper from an inside

pocket, handed it over. The guard blinked at it. "Whassat?"

"A 'gram confirming my space. Your boy on the counter says he's out to lunch."

The guard crumbled the 'gram, dropped it on the floor, lounged back against the handrail.

"On your way, bum," he said.

Retief put his suitcase down carefully, took a step and drove a right into the guard's midriff, stepped aside as the man doubled and went to his knees.

"You were wide open, ugly. I couldn't resist." Retief picked up his bag. "Tell your boss I sneaked past while you were resting your eyes." He stepped over the man and went up the gangway into the

ship. A pimply youth in stained white came along the corridor.

"Which way to cabin fifty-seven?" Retief asked.

"Up there." The boy jerked his head, hurried on. Retief made his way along the narrow hall, found signs, followed them to cabin fifty-seven. The door was open. Inside, unfamiliar baggage was piled in the center of the floor. A tall florid man with an expensive coat belted over a massive paunch stood in the open door. He looked at Retief. Retief looked back. The florid man clamped his jaws together, turned to speak over his shoulder.

"Somebody in the cabin. Get 'em out." He rolled a cold eye at Retief, backed

out of the room. A short thick-necked man appeared.

"What are you doing in Mr. Tony's room?" he barked. "Never mind; clear out of here, fellow. You're keeping Mr. Tony waiting."

"Too bad," Retief said. "Finders keepers."

"You nuts or something?" The thick-necked man stared at Retief. "I said it's Mr. Tony's room."

"I don't know Mr. Tony. He'll have to bull his way into other quarters."

"We'll see about you, mister." The man turned and went out. Retief sat on the bunk and lit a cigar. There was a sound of voices in the corridor. Two burly baggage-smashers appeared,

straining at an oversized trunk. They maneuvered it through the door, lowered it with a crash, glanced at Retief, and went out. The thick-necked man appeared again.

"All right, you; out," he growled. "Or have I got to have you thrown out?" Retief rose, clamped the cigar between his teeth. He gripped a handle of the brass-bound trunk in each hand, bent his knees and heaved the trunk up to chest level, then raised it overhead. He turned to the door.

"Catch," he said between clenched teeth. The trunk slammed against the far wall of the corridor and burst. Retief turned to the baggage on the floor, tossed it into the hall. The face of the thick-

necked man appeared cautiously around the door jamb.

"Mister, you must be—"

"If you'll excuse me," Retief said. "It's time for my nap." He flipped the door shut, pulled off his shoes, and stretched out on the bed. Five minutes passed before the door rattled and burst open. Retief looked up. A gaunt leathery-skinned man wearing white ducks, a blue turtleneck sweater, and a peaked cap tilted raffishly over one eye stared at Retief.

"Is this the joker?" he grated.

The thick-necked man edged past him, looked at Retief, snorted. "That's him, sure."

"I'm captain of this vessel," the gaunt

man said. "You've got two minutes to haul your freight out of here. Get moving, Buster."

"When you can spare the time," Retief said, "take a look at Section Three, Paragraph One, of the Uniform Code. That spells out the law on confirmed space on vessels engaged in interplanetary commerce."

"A space lawyer." The captain turned. "Throw him out, boys," he called. Two big men edged into the cabin, stood looking at Retief. "Go on, pitch him out," the captain snapped.

Retief put his cigar in an ashtray, swung his feet off the bunk. One of the two wiped his nose on a sleeve, spat on his right palm, and stepped forward, then

hesitated.

"Hey," he said. "This the guy tossed the trunk off the wall?"

"That's him," the thick-necked man called. "Spilled Mr. Tony's possessions right on the deck."

"Deal me out," the bouncer said. "He can stay put as long as he wants to. I signed on to move cargo. Let's go, Moe."

"You'd better be getting back to the bridge, Captain," Retief said. "We're due to lift in twenty minutes."

The thick-necked man and the captain both shouted at once. The captain's voice prevailed. "—twenty minutes . . . Uniform Code . . . gonna do?"

"Close the door as you leave," Retief said.

The thick-necked man paused at the door. "We'll see you when you come out."

Four waiters passed Retief's table without stopping. A fifth leaned against the wall nearby, a menu under his arm. At a table across the room, the captain, now wearing a dress uniform and with his thin red hair neatly parted, sat with a table of male passengers. He talked loudly and laughed frequently, casting occasional glances Retief's way.

A panel opened in the wall behind Retief's chair. Bright blue eyes peered out from under a white chef's cap.

"Givin' you the cold shoulder, heh, mister?"

"Looks like it, old timer. Maybe I'd

better go join the skipper; his party seems to be having all the fun."

"Fella has to be mighty careless who he eats with to set over there."

"I see your point."

"You set right where you're at, mister. I'll rustle you up a plate." Five minutes later, Retief cut into a thirty-two-ounce Delmonico nicely garnished with mushrooms and garlic butter.

"I'm Chip," the chef said. "I don't like the cap'n. You can tell him I said so. Don't like his friends, either. Don't like them dern Sweaties; look at a man like he was a worm."

"You know how to fry a steak, Chip," Retief said. He poured red wine into a glass. "Here's to you."

"Dern right," Chip said. "Dunno who ever thought up broiling 'em. I got a Baked Alaska comin up in here for dessert. You like brandy in yer coffee?"

"Chip, you're a genius."

"Like to see a fella eat. I gotta go now; if you need anything, holler." Retief ate slowly. Time always dragged on shipboard. Four days to Jorgensen's Worlds. Then, if Magnan's information was correct, there would be four days to prepare for the Soetti attack. It was a temptation to scan the tapes built into the handle of his suitcase; it would be good to know what Jorgensen's Worlds would be up against.

Retief finished the steak, and the chef handed out the Baked Alaska and coffee.

Most of the other passengers had left the dining room. Mr. Tony and his retainers still sat at the captain's table.

As Retief watched, four men arose from the table, sauntered across the room. The first in line, a stony-faced thug with a broken ear, took a cigar from his mouth as he reached the table, dipped the lighted end in Retief's coffee, looked at it, dropped it on the tablecloth.

The others came up, Mr. Tony trailing.

"You must want to get to Jorgensen's pretty bad," the thug said in a grating voice. "What's your game, hick?"

Retief looked at the coffee up, picked it up.

"I don't think I want my coffee," he

said. He looked at the thug. "You drink it."

The thug squinted at Retief. "A wise hick," he began. With a flick of the wrist, Retief tossed the coffee into the thug's face, then stood and slammed a straight right to the chin. The thug went down. Retief looked at Mr. Tony, who stood open-mouthed.

"You can take your playmates away now, Tony," he said. "And don't bother to come around yourself. You're not funny enough." Mr. Tony found his voice. "Take him, Marbles," he growled. The thick-necked man slipped a hand inside his tunic, brought out a long-bladed knife. He licked his lips and moved in.

Retief heard the panel open beside him. "Here you go, mister," Chip said. Retief darted a glance; a well-honed French knife lay on the sill.

"Thanks, Chip. I won't need it for these punks." Thick-neck lunged and Retief hit him square in the face, knocking him under the table. The other man stepped back, fumbled a power pistol from his shoulder holster.

"Aim that at me, and I'll kill you," Retief said.

"Go on, burn him, Hoany!" Mr. Tony shouted. Behind him the captain appeared, white-faced.

"Put that away, you!" he yelled. "What kind of—"

"Shut up," Mr. Tony said. "Put it

away, Hoany. We'll fix this bum later."

"Not on this vessel, you won't," the captain said shakily. "I got my charter to —"

"Ram your charter," Hoany said harshly. "You won't be needing it long —"

"Button your floppy mouth, damn you," Mr. Tony snapped. He looked at the two men on the floor. "Get Marbles out of here. I ought to dump the slobs .

. ." He turned and walked away. The captain signaled and two waiters came up. Retief watched as they carted the casualties from the dining room. The panel opened. "I usta be about your size, when I was your age," Chip said. "You handled them pansies right. I wouldn't

give 'em the time o' day."

"How about a fresh cup of coffee, Chip?"

"Sure, mister. Anything else?"

"I'll think of something," Retief said. "This is shaping up into one of those long days."

* * *

"They don't like me bringing yer meals to you in yer cabin," Chip said. "But the cap'n knows I'm the best cook in the Merchant Service; they won't mess with me."

"What has Mr. Tony got on the captain, Chip?" Retief asked.

"They're in some kind o' crooked business together. You want some more of that smoked turkey?"

"Sure. What have they got against my going to Jorgensen's Worlds?"

"Dunno; hasn't been no tourists got in there fer six or eight months. I sure like a fella that can put it away. I was a big eater when I was yer age."

"I'll bet you can still handle it, old-timer. What are Jorgensen's Worlds like?"

"One of 'em's cold as hell and three of 'em's colder. Most o' the Jorgies live on Svea; that's the least froze up. Man don't enjoy eatin' his own cookin'

like he does somebody else's."

"That's where I'm lucky, Chip. What kind of cargo's the captain got aboard for Jorgensen's?"

"Derned if I know. In and out o' there

like a grasshopper, ever few weeks. Don't never pick up no cargo. No tourists any more, like I says. Don't know what we even run in there for."

"Where are the passengers we have aboard headed?"

"To Alabaster; that's nine days' run in-sector from Jorgensen's. You ain't got another of them cigars, have you?"

"Have one, Chip. I guess I was lucky to get space on this ship."

"Plenty of space, mister. We got a dozen empty cabins." Chip puffed the cigar alight, then cleared away the dishes, poured out coffee and brandy.

"Them Sweaties is what I don't like," he said. Retief looked at him questioningly.

"You never seen a Sweaty? Ugly-lookin' devils. Skinny legs, like a lobster; big chest, shaped like the top of a turnip; rubbery-lookin' head; you can see the pulse beatin' when they get riled."

"I've never had the pleasure."

"You'll prob'ly have it perty soon. Them devils board us nigh ever trip out; act like they was the Customs Patrol or somethin'." There was a distant clang, and a faint tremor ran through the floor.

"I ain't superstitious ner nothin'," said Chip, "but I'll be triple-danged if that ain't them boardin' us now."

Ten minutes passed before footsteps sounded outside the door, accompanied by a clicking patter. The doorknob

rattled, then a heavy knock sounded.

"They got to look you over," Chip whispered. "Nosey damn Sweaties."

"Unlock it, Chip." The chef threw the latch, opened the door.

"Come in, damn you," he said.

A tall and grotesque creature minced into the room, tiny hoof-like feet tapping on the floor. A metal helmet shaded the deep-set compound eyes, and a loose mantle flapped around the knobbed knees. Behind the alien, the captain hovered nervously.

"Yo' papiss," the alien rasped.

"Who's your friend, captain?" Retief said.

"Never mind; just do like he tells you."

"Yo' papiss," the alien said again.

"Okay," Retief said. "I've seen it. You can take it away now."

"Don't horse around," the captain said. "This fellow can get mean." The alien brought up two tiny arms from the concealment of the mantle, clicked toothed pincers under Retief's nose. "Quick, soft one."

"Captain, tell your friend to keep its distance. It looks brittle, and I'm tempted to test it."

"Don't start anything with Skaw; he can clip through steel with those snappers."

"Last chance," said Retief. Skaw stood poised, open pincers an inch from Retief's eyes.

"Show him your papers, you damned fool," the captain said hoarsely. "I got no control over Skaw."

The alien clicked both pincers with a sharp report, and in the same instant Retief half turned to the left, leaned away from the alien, and drove his right foot against the slender leg above the bulbous knee-joint. Skaw screeched, floundered, greenish fluid spattering from the burst joint.

"I told you he was brittle," Retief said. "Next time you invite pirates aboard, don't bother to call."

"Jesus, what did you do! They'll kill us!" the captain gasped, staring at the figure flopping on the floor.

"Cart poor old Skaw back to his

boat," Retief said. "Tell him to pass the word; no more illegal entry and search of Terrestrial vessels in Terrestrial space."

"Hey," Chip said. "He's quit kickin'." The captain bent over Skaw, gingerly rolled him over. He leaned close, sniffed.

"He's dead." The captain stared at Retief. "We're all dead men. These Soetti got no mercy."

"They won't need it. Tell 'em to sheer off; their fun is over."

"They got no more emotions than a blue crab—"

"You bluff easily, captain. Show a few guns as you hand the body back. We know their secret now."

"What secret? I—"

"Don't be dumber than you gotta, Cap'n," Chip said. "Sweaties dies easy; that's the secret."

"Maybe you got a point," the captain said, looking at Retief. "All they got's a three-man scout. It could work."

He went out, came back with two crewmen. They circled the dead alien, hauled him gingerly into the hall.

"Maybe I can run a bluff on the Soetti," the captain said, looking back from the door. "But I'll be back to see you later."

"You don't scare us, Cap'n," Chip called as the door closed. He grinned at Retief. "Him and Mr. Tony and all his goons. You hit 'em where they live, that

time. They're pals o' these Sweaties. Runnin' some kind o' crooked racket."

"You'd better take the captain's advice, Chip. There's no point in your getting involved in my problems."

"They'd of killed you before now, mister, if they had any guts. That's where we got it over these monkeys; they got no guts."

"They act scared, Chip. Scared men are killers."

"They don't scare me none." Chip picked up the tray. "I'll scout around a little and see what's goin' on. If the Sweaties figure to do anything about that Skaw fella they'll have to move fast; they won't try nothin' close to port."

"Don't worry, Chip. I have reason to

be pretty sure they won't do anything to attract a lot of attention in this sector just now." Chip looked at Retief. "You ain't no tourist, mister. I know that much. You didn't come out here for fun, did you?"

"That," said Retief, "would be a hard one to answer."

* * *

Retief awoke at a tap on his door.

"It's me, mister: Chip."

"Come on in."

The chef entered the room, locked the door. "You shoulda had that door locked." He stood by the door, listening, then turned to Retief.

"You want to get to Jorgensen's pretty bad, don't you, mister?"

"That's right, Chip."

"Mr. Tony give the captain a real hard time about old Skaw. The Sweaties didn't say nothin'; didn't even act surprised, just took the remains and pushed off. Mr. Tony and that other crook they call Marbles—they was fit to be tied. Took the cap'n in his cabin and talked loud at him fer half an hour. Then the cap'n come out and give some orders to the mate." Retief sat up and reached for a cigar.

"Mr. Tony and Skaw were pals, eh?"

"He hated Skaw's guts. But with him it was business. Mister, you got a gun?"

"A 2mm needler. Why?"

"The orders Cap'n give was to change course fer Alabaster; we're by-passin' Jorgensen's Worlds. We'll feel the

course change any minute." Retief lit the cigar, reached under the mattress and took out a short-barreled pistol. He dropped it in his pocket, looked at Chip.

"Maybe it was a good thought, at that. Which way to the captain's cabin?"

"This is it," Chip said softly. "You want me to keep a eye on who comes down the passage?"

Retief nodded, opened the door, and stepped into the cabin. The captain looked up from his desk, then jumped up. "What do you think you're doing, busting in here—"

"I hear you're planning a course change, Captain."

"You've got damn big ears."

"I think we'd better call in at

Jorgensen's."

"You do, huh?" The captain sat down. "I'm in command of this vessel. I'm changing course for Alabaster."

"I wouldn't find it convenient to go to Alabaster. So just hold your course for Jorgensen's."

"Not bloody likely." The captain reached for the mike on his desk, pressed the key. "Power Section, this is the captain," he said. Retief reached across the desk, gripped the captain's wrist.

"Tell the mate to hold his present course," he said softly.

"Let go my hand, Buster," the captain snarled. With his eyes on Retief's, he eased a drawer open with his left hand,

reached in. Retief kneed the drawer. The captain yelped, dropped the mike.

"You busted my wrist, you—"

"And one to go," Retief said. "Tell him."

"I'm an officer of the Merchant Service—"

"You're a cheapjack who's sold his bridge to a pack of back-alley hoods."

"You can't put it over, hick. The landing—"

"Tell him."

The captain groaned, keyed the mike.

"Captain to Power Section. Hold your present course until you hear from me." He dropped the mike, looked up at Retief. "It's eighteen hours yet before we pick up Jorgensen control; you going to

sit here and bend my arm the whole time?"

Retief released the captain's wrist, turned to Chip. "Chip, I'm locking the door. You circulate around, let me know what's going on. Bring me a pot of coffee every so often. I'm sitting up with a sick friend."

"Right, mister. Keep an eye on that jasper; he's slippery."

"What are you going to do?" the captain demanded. Retief settled himself in a chair.

"Instead of strangling you, as you deserve, I'm going to stay here and help you hold your course for Jorgensen's Worlds."

The captain looked at Retief. He

laughed, a short bark. "Then I'll stretch out and have a little nap, farmer. If you feel like dozing off some time during the next eighteen hours, don't mind me."

Retief took out the needler and put it on the desk before him.

"If anything happens that I don't like," he said, "I'll wake you up with this."

"Why don't you let me spell you, mister," Chip said. "Four hours to go yet; you're gonna hafta be on yer toes to handle the landing."

"I'll be all right, Chip. You get some sleep."

"Nope. Many's the time I stood four, five watches runnin', back when I was yer age. I'll make another round."

Retief stood up, stretched his legs,

paced the floor, stared at the repeater instruments on the wall. Things had gone quietly so far, but the landing would be another matter. The captain's absence from the bridge during the highly complex maneuvering would be difficult to explain . . . The desk speaker crackled.

"Captain, Officer of the Watch here. Ain't it about time you was getting up here with the orbit figures?"

Retief nudged the captain. He awoke with a start, sat up. "Whazzat?" He looked wild-eyed at Retief.

"Watch Officer wants orbit figures," Retief said, nodding toward the speaker.

The captain rubbed his eyes, shook his head, picked up the mike. Retief

released the safety on the needler with an audible click.

"Watch Officer, I'll . . . ah . . . get some figures for you right away. I'm . . . ah . . . busy right now."

"What the hell you talking about, busy?" the speaker blared. "You ain't got the figures ready, you'll have a hell of a hot time getting 'em up in the next three minutes. You fergot your approach pattern or something?"

"I guess I overlooked it," the captain said, looking sideways at Retief. He smiled crookedly. "I've been busy."

"One for your side," Retief said. He reached for the captain.

"I'll make a deal," the captain squalled. "Your life for—" Retief took

aim, slammed a hard right to the captain's jaw. He slumped to the floor.

Retief glanced around the room, yanked wires loose from a motile lamp, trussed the man's hands and feet, stuffed his mouth with paper and taped it.

Chip tapped at the door. Retief opened it and the chef stepped inside, looked at the man on the floor.

"The jasper tried somethin', huh? Figured he would. What we goin' to do now?"

"The captain forgot to set up an approach, Chip. He out-foxed me."

"If we overrun our approach patterns," Chip said, "we can't make orbit at Jorgensen's on automatic, and a manual approach—"

"That's out. But there's another possibility." Chip blinked. "Only one thing you could mean, mister. But cuttin' out in a lifeboat in deep space is no picnic."

"They're on the port side, aft, right?"

Chip nodded. "Hot damn!" he said. "Who's got the 'tater salad?"

"We'd better tuck the skipper away out of sight."

"In the locker."

The two men carried the limp body to a deep storage chest, dumped it in, closed the lid.

"He won't suffercate; lid's a lousy fit."

Retief opened the door, went into the corridor, Chip behind him.

"Shouldn't oughta be nobody around

now," the chef said. "Everybody's mannin' approach stations."

At the D deck companionway Retief stopped suddenly.

"Listen."

Chip cocked his head. "I don't hear nothin'," he whispered.

"Sounds like a sentry posted on the lifeboat deck," Retief said softly.

"Let's take him, mister."

"I'll go down. Stand by, Chip."

Retief started down the narrow steps, half stair, half ladder. Halfway, he paused to listen. There was a sound of slow footsteps, then silence. Retief palmed the needler, went down the last steps quickly, emerged in the dim light of a low-ceilinged room. The stern of a

five-man lifeboat bulked before him.

"Freeze, you!" a cold voice snapped.

Retief dropped, rolled behind the shelter of the lifeboat as the whine of a power pistol echoed off metal walls. A lunge, and he was under the boat, on his feet. He jumped, caught the quick-access handle, hauled it down. The lifeboat's outer port cycled open.

Feet scrambled at the bow of the boat, and Retief whirled, fired. The guard rounded into sight and fell headlong. Above, an alarm bell jangled. Retief stepped on a stanchion, hauled himself into the open port. A yell rang, then the clatter of feet on the stair.

"Don't shoot, mister!" Chip shouted.

"All clear, Chip," Retief called.

"Hang on; I'm comin' with ya!"

Retief reached down, lifted the chef bodily through the port, slammed the lever home. The outer door whooshed, clanged shut.

"Take number two, tie in! I'll blast her off," Chip said. "Been through a hundred 'bandon ship drills . . ."

Retief watched as the chef flipped levers, pressed a fat red button. The deck trembled under the lifeboat.

"Blew the bay doors," Chip said, smiling happily. "That'll cool them jaspers down." He punched a green button.

"Look out, Jorgensen's . . ." With an ear-splitting blast, the stern rockets fired, a sustained agony of pressure . . .

Abruptly, there was silence, weightlessness. Contracting metal pinged loudly. Chip's breathing rasped in the stillness.

"Pulled nine Gs there for ten seconds," he gasped. "I gave her full emergency kick-off."

"Any armament aboard our late host?"

"A pop-gun; time they get their wind, we'll be clear. Now all we got to do is set tight till we pick up a R and D from Svea Tower: maybe four, five hours."

"Chip, you're a wonder," Retief said. "This looks like a good time to catch that nap."

"Me too. Mighty peaceful here, ain't it?"

There was a moment's silence.

"Durn!" Chip said softly.

Retief opened one eye. "Sorry you came, Chip?"

"Left my best carvin' knife jammed up 'tween Marbles' ribs," the chef said.

"Comes o' doin' things in a hurry."

* * * * *

The blond girl brushed her hair from her eyes and smiled at Retief.

"I'm the only one on duty," she said. "I'm Freya Dahl."

"It's important that I talk to someone in your government, miss," Retief said.

The girl looked at Retief. "The men you want to see are Thor Stahl and Bo Bergman. They will be at the lodge by nightfall."

"Then it looks like we go to the

lodge," Retief said. "Lead on, ma'am."

"What about the boat?" Chip asked.

"I'll send someone to see to it tomorrow," the girl said.

"You're some gal," Chip said admiringly. "Dern near six feet, ain't you? And built too, what I mean."

They stepped out of the building into a whipping wind.

"Let's go across to the equipment shed, and get parkas for you," Freya said.

"It will be cold on the slopes."

"Yeah," Chip said, shivering. "I've heard you folks don't believe in ridin' ever time you want to go a few miles uphill in a blizzard."

"It will make us hungry," Freya said.

Across the wind-scoured ramp abrupt peaks rose, snow-blanketed. A faint trail led across white slopes, disappeared into low clouds.

"The lodge is above the cloud layer," Freya said. "Up there the sky is always clear."

It was three hours later, and the sun was burning the peaks red, when Freya stopped, pulled off her woolen cap, and waved at the vista below.

"There you see it. Our valley."

"It's a mighty perty sight," Chip gasped. "Anything this tough to get a look at ought to be."

Freya pointed to where gaily painted houses nestled together, a puddle of color in the bowl of the valley. "There,"

she said. "The little red house by itself; do you see it? It is my father's home-acre."

"I'd appreciate it a dern sight better if my feet were up to that big fire you was talking about, Honey," Chip said.

The climbed on, crossed a shoulder, a slope of broken rock, reached the final slope. Above, the lodge sprawled, a long low structure of heavy logs, outlined against the deep-blue twilight sky. Smoke billowed from stone chimneys at either end, and yellow light gleamed from the narrow windows, reflected on the snow. Men and women stood in groups of three or four, skis over their shoulders. Their voices and laughter rang in the icy air. Freya

whistled shrilly. Someone waved.

"Come," she said. "Meet all my friends." A man separated himself from the group, walked down the slope to meet them. Freya introduced the guests.

"Welcome," the man said heartily. "Come inside and be warm." They crossed the trampled snow to the lodge, pushed through a heavy door into a vast low-beamed hall, crowded with people talking, singing, some sitting at long plank tables, others ringed around an eight-foot fireplace at the far side of the room. Freya led the way to a bench near the fire, made introductions, found a stool to prop Chip's feet on near the blaze. He looked around.

"I never seen so many perty gals

before," he said delightedly. A brunette with blue eyes raked a chestnut from the fire, cracked it, and offered it to Retief. A tall man with arms like oak roots passed heavy beer tankards to the two guests.

"Tell us about the places you've seen," someone called. Chip emerged from a long pull at the mug, heaved a sigh.

"Well," he said. "I tell you I been in some places . . ." Music started up, ringing above the clamor of talk. Freya rose. "Come," she said to Retief. "Dance with me."

* * *

When the music stopped, Retief rejoined Chip, who put down his mug

and sighed. "Derned if I ever felt right at home so quick before." He lowered his voice. "They's some kind o' trouble in the air, though. Some o' the remarks they passed sounds like they're lookin' to have some trouble with the Sweaties. Don't seem to worry 'em none, though."

"Chip," Retief said, "how much do these people know about the Soetti?"

"Dunno. We useta touch down here regler, but I always jist set in my galley and worked on ship models or somethin'. I hear the Sweaties been nosin' around here some, though."

Two girls came up to Chip. "I gotta go now, mister," he said. "These gals got a idea I oughta take a hand in the kitchen."

"Smart girls," Retief said. He turned

as Freya came up.

"Bo Bergman and Thor aren't back yet," she said. "They stayed to ski after moonrise."

"That moon is something. Almost like daylight."

"They will come soon, now. Shall we go to see the moonlight on the snow?" Outside, long black shadows fell like ink in silver. The top of the cloud layer below glared white under the immense moon.

"Our sister world, Göta," Freya said. "Nearly as big as Svea. I would like to visit it someday, although they say it's all stone and ice."

"Freya," Retief said, "how many people live on Jorgensen's Worlds?"

"About fifteen million, most of us here on Svea. There are mining camps and ice-fisheries on Göta. No one lives on Vasa or Skone, but there are always a few ice-wolf hunters there."

"Have you ever fought a war?"

Freya turned to look at Retief. "Don't be afraid for us, Retief. The Soetti will attack our worlds, and we will fight them. We have fought before. These planets were not friendly ones . . ."

"I thought the Soetti attack would be a surprise to you," Retief said. "Have you made any preparation for it?"

"We have ten thousand merchant ships. When the enemy comes, we will meet them."

Retief frowned. "Are there any guns

on this planet? Any missiles?" Freya shook her head. "We have a plan of deployment—"

"Deployment hell! Against a modern assault force you need modern armament."

"Look!" Freya touched Retief's arm. "They're coming now." Two tall grizzled men came up the slope, skis over their shoulders. Freya went forward to meet them, Retief at her side.

The two came up, embraced the girl, shook hands with Retief.

"He has come to help us," Freya said.

"Welcome to Svea," Thor said. "Let's find a warm corner where we can talk."

* * *

Retief shook his head, smiling as a

tall girl with coppery hair offered a vast slab of venison. "I've caught up," he said, "for every hungry day I ever lived."

Bo Bergman poured Retief's beer mug full. "Our captains are the best in space," he said. "Our population is concentrated in half a hundred small cities all across the planet. We know where the Soetti must strike us. We will ram their major vessels with unmanned ships; on the ground, we will hunt them down with small-arms."

"An assembly line turning out penetration missiles would have been more to the point."

"Yes," Bo Bergman said. "If we had known sooner."

"We've seen very few of the Soetti,"

Thor said. "Their ships have landed and taken on stores. They say little to us, but we've felt their contempt. They envy us our worlds. They come from a cold land."

"Freya says you have a plan of defense," Retief said. "A sort of suicide squadron idea, followed by guerilla warfare."

"It's the best we can devise, Retief. If there aren't too many of them, it might work."

Retief shook his head. "It might delay matters—but not much."

"Perhaps; but our remote control equipment is excellent; we have plenty of ships, albeit unarmed. And our people know how to live on the slopes—and

how to shoot."

"There are too many of them," Retief said. "They breed like flies and, according to some sources, they mature in a matter of months. They've been feeling their way into the sector for years now; set up outposts on a thousand or so minor planets—cold ones, the kind they like. They want your worlds because they need living space."

"Retief must not be trapped here," said Freya to her compatriots. "His small boat is useless now; he must have a ship."

"Of course," Thor said. "And—"

"Retief," a voice called. "A message for you; the operator has phoned it up. A 'gram . . ."

Retief took the slip of paper, unfolded it. It was short, in verbal code, and signed by Magnan.

"You are recalled herewith," he read. "Assignment canceled. Agreement concluded with Soetti relinquishing all claims so-called Jorgensen system. Utmost importance that under no repeat no circumstances classified intelligence regarding Soetti be divulged to locals. Advise you depart instanter; Soetti occupation imminent."

Retief looked thoughtfully at the scrap of paper, then crumpled it, dropped it on the floor.

"Any answer?" the messenger asked.

"No," Retief said. "As a matter of fact, I didn't even get the message." He

turned to Bo Bergman, took a tiny reel of tape from his pocket.

"This contains information," he said. "The Soetti attack plan, a defensive plan worked out at Corps HQ, and instructions for the conversion of a standard anti-acceleration unit into a potent weapon. If you have a screen handy, we'd better get started; we have about seventy-two hours."

* * *

In the Briefing Room at Svea Tower, Thor snapped off the projector.

"Our plan would have been worthless against that," he said. "We assumed they'd make their strike from a standard in-line formation. This scheme of hitting all our settlements simultaneously, in a

random order from all points—we'd have been helpless."

"It's perfect for this defensive plan," Bo Bergman said. "Assuming this antiac trick works."

"It works," said Retief. "I hope you've got plenty of heavy power cable available."

"We export copper," Thor said.

"We'll assign about two hundred vessels to each settlement. Linked up, they should throw up quite a field."

"It ought to be effective up to about fifteen miles, I'd estimate," Retief said.

A red light flashed on the communications panel. Thor went to it, flipped a key.

"Tower, Thor here," he said.

"I've got a ship on the scope, Thor," a voice said. "There's nothing scheduled; ACI 228 by-passed at 1600 . . ."

"Just one?"

"A lone ship; coming in on a bearing of 291/456/653; on manual, I'd say."

"How does this track key in with the idea of ACI 228 making a manual correction for a missed automatic approach?" Retief asked. Thor talked to the tower, got a reply.

"That's it," he said.

"How long before he touches down?"

Thor glanced at a lighted chart. "Perhaps eight minutes."

"Any guns here?"

Thor shook his head.

"If that's old 228, she ain't got but the

one 50mm rifle," Chip said. "She cain't figure on jumpin' the whole planet."

"Hard to say what she figures on," Retief said. "Mr. Tony will be in a mood for drastic measures."

"I wonder what kind o' deal the skunk's got with the Sweaties," Chip said.

"Prob'ly he gits to scavenge, after the Sweaties kill off the Jorgensens."

"He's upset about our leaving him without saying goodbye. And you left the door hanging open, too."

Chip cackled. "Old Mr. Tony don't look so good to the Sweaties now, hey, mister?"

Retief turned to Bo Bergman. "Chip's right. A Soetti died on the ship, and a

tourist got through the cordon. Tony's out to redeem himself."

"He's on final now," the tower operator said. "Still no contact."

"We'll know soon enough what he has in mind," Thor said.

"Let's take a look."

Outside, the four men watched the point of fire grow, evolve into a ship ponderously settling to rest. The drive faded and cut; silence fell. Inside the briefing room, the speaker called out. Bo Bergman went inside, talked to the tower, motioned the others in. "This is the tower talking to the ship," he said.

"—over to you," the speaker was saying. There was a crackling moment of silence; then another voice:

"—illegal entry. Send the two of them out, I'll see to it they're dealt with." Thor flipped a key. "Tower, switch me direct to the ship."

"Right."

"You on ACI 228," he said. "Who are you?"

"What's that to you?" the speaker crackled.

"You weren't cleared to berth here. Do you have an emergency aboard?"

"Never mind that, you," the speaker rumbled. "I tracked this bird in; I got the lifeboat on the screen now. They haven't gone far in six hours. Let's have 'em."

"You're wasting your time."

There was a momentary silence.

"You think so, hah?" the speaker

blared. "I'll put it to you straight: I see two guys on their way out in one minute, or I open up."

"He's bluffin'," Chip said. "The pop-gun won't bear on us."

"Take a look out the window," said Retief.

In the white glare of the moonlight a loading cover swung open at the stern of the ship, dropped down, formed a sloping ramp. A squat and massive shape appeared in the opening, trundled down onto the snow-swept tarmac.

Chip whistled. "I told you the captain was slippery," he muttered. "Where the devil'd he git that at?"

"What is it?" Thor asked.

"A tank," Retief said. "A museum

piece, by the look of it."

"I'll say," Chip said. "That's a Bolo Resartus, Model M. Built mebbe two hundred years ago in Concordiat times. Packs a wallop too, I'll tell ye." The tank wheeled, brought a gun muzzle to bear in the base of the tower.

"Send 'em out," the speaker growled. "Or I blast 'em out."

"One round in here, and I've had a wasted trip," Retief said. "I'd better go out."

"Wait a minute, mister. I got the glimmerins of a idear."

"I'll stall them," Thor said. He keyed the mike. "ACI 228, what's your authority for this demand?"

"I know that machine," Chip said. "My

hobby, old-time fightin' machines. Built a model of a Resartus once, inch to the foot; a beauty. Now lessee . .

"

* * *

The icy wind blew snow crystals stingingly against Retief's face. Chip carried a short length of iron bar thrust into his belt. He looked across at the tank. "Useta think that was a perty thing, that Resartus," he said.

"Looks mean, now."

"You're getting the target's eye view," Retief said. "Sorry you had to get mixed up in this, old-timer."

"Mixed myself in. Dern good thing too." Chip sighed. "I like these folks. Them boys didn't like lettin' us come out

here, but I'll give 'em credit; they seen it had to be this way, and they didn't set to moanin' about it."

"They're tough people, Chip."

"Funny how it sneaks up on you, ain't it, mister? Few minutes ago we was eatin' high on the hog; now we're right close to bein' dead men."

"They want us alive."

"It'll be a hairy deal. But t'hell with it. If it works, it works."

"That's the spirit."

"I hope I got them fields o' fire right —"

"Don't worry; I'll bet a barrel of beer we make it."

"We'll find out in about ten seconds," Chip said. "Here we go . . ." As they

reached the tank the two men broke stride and jumped. Retief leaped for the gun barrel, swung up astride it, ripped off the fur-lined leather cap he wore, and, leaning forward, jammed it into the bore of the cannon. The chef sprang for a perch above the fore scanner antenna. With an angry whuff! anti-personnel charges slammed from apertures low on the sides of the vehicle. Retief swung around, pulled himself up on the hull.

"Okay, mister," Chip called. "I'm goin' under." He slipped down the front of the tank, disappeared between the treads. Retief clambered up, took a position behind the turret, lay flat as it whirled angrily, sonar eyes searching for the tank's tormentors. The vehicle

shuddered, backed, stopped, moved forward, pivoted.

Chip reappeared at the front of the tank.

"It's stuck," he called. He stopped to breathe hard, clung as the machine lurched forward, spun to the right, stopped, rocking slightly.

"Take over here," Retief said. He crawled forward, watched as the chef pulled himself up, slipped down past him, feeling for the footholds between the treads. He reached the ground, dropped on his back, hitching himself under the dark belly of the tank. He groped, found the handholds, probed with a foot for the tread-jack lever.

The tank rumbled, backed quickly,

turned left and right in a sine curve. Retief clung grimly, inches from the clashing treads. He found the lever, braced his back, pushed. The lever seemed to give minutely. He set himself again, put both feet against the frozen bar, and heaved. With a dry rasp it slid back. Immediately, two rods extended themselves, slid down to grate against the pavement, drove on irresistibly. The left track raced as the weight went off it. Retief grabbed for a hold as the right tread clashed, heaving the fifty-ton machine forward, jacks screeching as they scored the tarmac. The tank pivoted, chips of pavement flying. The jacks lifted the clattering left track clear of the surface and the tank spun like a

hamstrung buffalo.

The tank stopped, sat silent, canted now on the extended jacks. Retief emerged from under the machine, jumped, pulled himself above the anti-personnel apertures as another charge rocked the tank. He clambered to the turret, crouched beside Chip. They waited, watching the entry hatch. Five minutes passed.

"I'll bet old Tony's givin' the chauffeur hell," Chip said. The hatch moved, cycled open. A head came cautiously into view in time to see the needler in Retief's hand.

"Come on out," Retief said.

The head dropped, and Chip snaked forward, rammed the iron rod under the

hatch near the hinge. The hatch began to cycle shut, groaned, stopped. There was a sound of metal failing, and the hatch, popped, stood open. Retief half rose, aimed the needler. The walls of the tank rang as the metal splinters ricocheted inside.

"That's one keg o' beer I owe you, mister," Chip said. "Now let's git outa here before the ship lifts and fries us."

* * *

"The biggest problem the Jorgensen's people will have is decontaminating the wreckage," Retief said.

Magnan leaned forward. "Amazing," he said. "They just kept coming, did they? Had they no inter-ship communication?"

"They had their orders. And their attack plan. They followed it."

"What a spectacle! Over a thousand ships, plunging out of control one by one as they entered the stress-field."

"Not much of a spectacle. You couldn't see them; too far away. They all crashed back in the mountains."

"Oh." Magnan's face fell. "But it's as well they did; the bacterial bombs—"

"Too cold for bacteria. They won't spread."

"Nor will the Soetti," Magnan said smugly, "thanks to the promptness with which I acted in dispatching you with the requisite data." He looked narrowly at Retief. "By the way, you're sure no . . . ah . . . message reached you after your

arrival?"

"I got something," Retief said, looking Magnan in the eye. "It must have been a garbled transmission. It didn't make sense." Magnan coughed, shuffled papers. "This information you've reported," he said hurriedly. "This rather fantastic story that the Soetti originated in the Cloud, that they're seeking a foothold in the main galaxy because they've literally eaten themselves out of subsistence; how did you get it? The one of two Soetti we attempted to question . . . ah," Magnan coughed again.

"There was an accident," he finished. "We got nothing from them."

"The Jorgensens took a Soetti from a wreck, still alive but unconscious. They

managed to get the story from him."

"It's immaterial, actually," Magnan said. "The Soetti violated their treaty with us the day after it was signed. Had no intention of fair play. Far from evacuating the agreed areas, they had actually occupied half a dozen additional minor bodies in the Whate system."

Retief clucked sympathetically. "You don't know who to trust, these days," he said. Magnan looked at him coldly.

"Spare me your sarcasm, Retief." He picked up a folder from his desk, opened it. "While you're out that way, I have another little task for you. We haven't had a comprehensive wildlife census report from Brimstone lately—"

"Sorry," Retief said. "I'll be tied up. I'm taking a month off. Maybe more."

"What's that?" Magnan's head came up. "You seem to forget—"

"I'm trying, Mr. Secretary. Goodbye now." Retief reached out and flipped the key. Magnan's face faded from the screen. Retief stood up.

"Chip, we'll crack that keg when I get back." He turned to Freya.

"Freya," he said, "do you think you could teach me to ski by moonlight?"