

NATIVE INTELLIGENCE

"For all their professional detachment from emotional involvement in petty local issues, tough-minded CDT envoys have ever opened their hearts to long-suffering peoples striving to cast off the yoke of economic oppression. At Glave, Ambassador Sternwheeler's dedicated group selflessly offered their services, assisting the newly unshackled populace in savoring the first fruits of freedom . . ."

—Vol. IV, Reel 71, 492 AE (AD 2953)

Retief turned back the gold-encrusted scarlet cuff of the mess jacket of a First Secretary and Consul, gathered in the three eight-sided black dice, shook them by his right ear, and sent them rattling across the floor to rebound from the bulkhead.

"Thirteen's the point," the Power Section Chief called. "Ten he makes it!"

"Oh . . . Mr. Retief." A tall thin youth in the black-trimmed grey of a Third Secretary flapped a sheet of paper from the edge of the circle surrounding the game. "The Ambassador's compliments, sir, and will you join him and the staff in the conference room at once . . ."

Retief rose and dusted his knees. "That's all for now, boys," he said. "I'll take the rest of your money later." He followed the junior diplomat from the ward room, along the bare corridors of the crew level, past the glare panel reading NOTICE—FIRST CLASS ONLY BEYOND THIS POINT, through the chandeliered and draped ballroom and along a stretch of soundless carpet to a heavy door bearing a placard with the legend CONFERENCE IN SESSION.

"Ambassador Sternwheeler seemed quite upset, Mr. Retief," the messenger said.

"He usually is, Pete," Retief took a cigar from his breast pocket. "Got a light?"

The Third Secretary produced a permatch. "I don't know why you smoke those things instead of dope-sticks, Mr. Retief," he said. "The Ambassador hates the smell."

Retief nodded. "I only smoke this kind at conferences; it makes for shorter sessions." He stepped into the room. Ambassador Sternwheeler eyed him down the length of the conference table.

"Ah, Mr. Retief honors us with his presence. Do be seated, Retief." He fingered a yellow Departmental dispatch. Retief took a chair, puffed out a dense cloud of smoke.

"As I have been explaining to the remainder of my staff for the past quarter hour," Sternwheeler rumbled, "I've been the recipient of important intelligence." He blinked at Retief expectantly. Retief raised his eyebrows in polite inquiry.

"It seems," Sternwheeler went on, "that there has been a change in regime on Glave. A week ago, the government which invited the dispatch of this

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on Glave. A week ago, the government which invited the dispatch of this mission—and to which we're accredited—was overthrown. The former ruling class has fled into exile, and a popular workers' and peasants' junta has taken over."

"Mr. Ambassador," Counselor Magnan broke in, rising; "I'd like to be the first—" he glanced around the table—"or one of the first, anyway—to welcome the new government of Glave into the family of planetary ruling bodies —"

"Sit down, Magnan!" Sternwheeler snapped. "Of course the Corps always recognizes de facto sovereignty. The problem is merely one of acquainting

ourselves with the policies of this new group—a sort of blue-collar coalition, it seems. In what position that leaves this Embassy I don't yet know."

"I suppose this means we'll spend the next month in a parking orbit," Counselor Magnan sighed.

"Unfortunately," Sternwheeler went on, "the entire affair has apparently been carried off without recourse to violence, leaving the Corps no excuse to step in—that is, it appears our assistance in restoring order will not be required."

"Glave was one of the old Contract Worlds," Retief said. "What's become of the Planetary Manager General and the technical staff?—And how do the peasants and workers plan to operate the

atmospheric purification system, and weather control station, and the tide-regulation complexes?"

"I'm more concerned at present with the status of the Mission. Will we be welcomed by these peasants and workers, or peppered with buckshot?"

"You say that this is a popular junta, and that the former leaders have fled into exile," someone said. "May I ask the source of this information, Mr. Ambassador?"

"The dispatch cites a `reliable Glavian source.'"

"That's officialese for something cribbed from a broadcast news tape," Retief commented. "Presumably the Glavian news services are in the hands

of the revolution. In that case—"

"Yes, yes, there is the possibility that the issue is yet in doubt; of course, we'll have to exercise caution in making our approach; it wouldn't do to make overtures to the wrong side."

"Oh, I think we need have no fear on that score," the Chief of the Political Section spoke up. "I know these entrenched cliques; once challenged by an aroused populace, they scuttle for safety—with large balances safely tucked away in neutral banks."

"I'd like to go on record," Magnan piped, "as registering my deep gratification at this fulfillment of popular aspirations—"

"The most popular aspiration I know

of is to live high off someone else's effort," Retief said. "I don't know of anyone outside the Corps who's managed it."

"I'd like to propose that immediate arrangements be made for a technical mission," Magnan said. "It's my experience that one of the most pressing needs of newly established democracies is—"

"Is someone to tell them how to run what they've stolen after they've kicked out the legitimate owners," Retief suggested. The Political Officer blinked at Retief. "Are you implying approval of technocratic totalitarianism?"

"I won't know," Retief said, "until I look that up in a dictionary."

"Gentlemen!" Sternwheeler bellowed. "I'm awaiting your constructive suggestions—not an exchange of political views. We'll arrive off Glave in less than six hours. I should like before that time to have developed some notion regarding to whom I shall expect to offer my credentials!" There was a discreet tap at the door; it opened and the young Third Secretary poked his head in.

"Mr. Ambassador, I have a reply to your message—just received from Glave. It's signed by the Steward of the GFE, and I thought you'd want to see it at once . . ."

"Yes, of course; let me have it."

"What's the GFE?" someone asked.

"It's the revolutionary group," the messenger said, passing the message over.

"GFE? GFE? What do the letters signify?"

"Glorious Fun Eternally," Retief suggested. "Or possibly Goodies For Everybody."

"I believe that's 'Glavian Free Electorate'," the Third Secretary said. Sternwheeler stared at the paper, lips pursed. His face grew pink. He slammed the paper on the table.

"Well, gentlemen! It appears our worst fears have been realized! This is nothing less than a warning! A threat! We're advised to divert course and bypass Glave entirely. It seems the GFE

wants no interference from meddling foreign exploiters, as they put it!"

Magnan rose. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Ambassador, I want to get off a message to Sector HQ to hold my old job for me—"

"Sit down, you idiot!" Sternwheeler roared. "If you think I'm consenting to have my career blighted—my first Ambassadorial post whisked out from under me—the Corps made a fool of—"

"I'd like to take a look at that message," Retief said. It was passed along to him. He read it.

"I don't believe this applies to us, Mr. Ambassador."

"What are you talking about? It's addressed to me—by name!"

"It merely states that 'meddling foreign exploiters' are unwelcome. Meddling foreigners we are, but we don't qualify as exploiters unless we show a profit—and this appears to be shaping up as a particularly profitless venture."

"What are you proposing, Mr. Retief?"

"That we proceed to make planetfall as scheduled, greet our welcoming committee with wide diplomatic smiles, hint at largesse in the offing, and settle down to observe the lie of the land."

"Just what I was about to suggest," Magnan said.

"That might be dangerous," Sternwheeler said.

"That's why I didn't suggest it," Magnan said.

"Still it's essential that we learn more of the situation than can be gleaned from official broadcasts," Sternwheeler mused. "Now, while I can't justify risking the entire Mission, it might be advisable to dispatch a delegation to sound out the new regime—"

"I'd like to volunteer," Magnan said, rising.

"Of course, the delegates may be murdered—"

"—but unfortunately, I'm under treatment at the moment." Magnan sat down.

"—which will place us in an excellent position, propaganda-wise."

"What a pity I can't go," the Military Attaché said. "But my place is with my troops."

"The only troops you've got are the Assistant Attaché and your secretary," Magnan pointed out.

"Say, I'd like to be down there in the thick of things," the Political Officer said. He assumed a grave expression. "But, of course, I'll be needed here, to interpret results."

"I appreciate your attitude, gentlemen," Sternwheeler said, studying the ceiling. "But I'm afraid I must limit the privilege of volunteering for this hazardous duty to those officers of more robust physique, under forty years of age —"

"Tsk. I'm forty-one," Magnan said.

"—and with a reputation for adaptability." His glance moved along the table.

"Do you mind if I run along now, Mr. Ambassador?" Retief said. "It's time for my insulin shot."

Sternwheeler's mouth dropped open.

"Just kidding," Retief said. "I'll go. But I have one request, Mr. Ambassador: no further communication with the ground until I give the all-clear."

* * *

Retief grounded the lighter in the center of Glave spaceport, cycled the lock, and stepped out. The hot yellow Glavian sun beat down on a broad

expanse of concrete, an abandoned service cart, and a row of tall ships casting black shadows toward the silent control tower. A wisp of smoke curled up from the shed area at the rim of the field. There was no other sign of life.

Retief walked over to the cart, tossed his valise aboard, climbed into the driver's seat, and headed for the operations building. Beyond the port, hills rose, white buildings gleaming against the deep green slopes. Near the ridge, a vehicle moved ant-like along a winding road, a dust trail rising behind it. Faintly, the tiny rap! of a distant shot sounded. Papers littered the ground before the Operations Building. Retief pushed open the tall glass door, stood

listening. Slanting sunlight reflected from a wide, polished floor, at the far side of which illuminated lettering over empty counters read IMMIGRATION, HEALTH, and CUSTOMS. He crossed to the desk, put the valise down, then leaned across the counter. A worried face under an over-sized white cap looked up at him.

"You can come out now," Retief said. "They've gone." The man rose, dusting himself off. He looked over Retief's shoulder. "Who's gone?"

"Whoever it was that scared you."

"Whatta ya mean? I was looking for my pencil."

"Here it is." Retief plucked a worn stub from the pocket of the soiled shirt

sagging under the weight of braided shoulder-boards. "You can sign me in as a Diplomatic Representative; a break for you—no formalities necessary. Where can I catch a cab for the city?"

The man eyed Retief's bag. "What's in that?"

"Personal belongings under duty-free entry."

"Guns?"

"No, thanks, just a cab, if you don't mind."

"You got no gun?" the man raised his voice.

"That's right, fellows," Retief called out. "No gun; no knife, not even a small fission bomb; just a few pairs of socks and some reading matter." A brown-

uniformed man rose from behind the Customs counter, holding a long-barreled blast-rifle centered on the Corps insignia stitched to the pocket of Retief's powder-blue blazer.

"Don't try nothing," he said. "You're under arrest—"

"It can't be overtime parking; I've only been here five minutes."

"Hah!" the gun-handler moved out from the counter, came up to Retief.

"Empty out your pockets!" he barked. "Hands over head!"

"I'm just a diplomat, not a contortionist," Retief said, not moving. "Do you mind pointing that thing in some other direction?"

"Looky here, Mister, I'll give the

orders. We don't need anybody telling us how to run our business—"

"I'm telling you to shift that blaster before I take it away from you and wrap it around your neck," Retief said conversationally. The cop stepped back uncertainly, lowering the gun.

"Jake! Horny! Pud! Come on out!"

Three more brown uniforms emerged from concealment.

"Who are you fellows hiding from? The top sergeant?" Retief glanced over the ill-fitting uniforms, the unshaved faces, the scuffed boots. "Tell you what—when he shows up, I'll engage him in conversation, and you beat it back to the barracks and grab a quick bath—"

"That's enough smart talk." The

biggest of the three newcomers moved up to Retief. "You stuck your nose in at the wrong time. We just had a change of management around here."

"I heard about it," Retief said. "Who do I complain to?"

"Complain? What about?"

"The port's a mess," Retief barked. "Nobody on duty to receive official visitors! No passenger service facilities! Why, do you know I had to carry my own bag—"

"All right, all right, that's outside my department. You better see the boss."

"The boss? I thought you got rid of the bosses."

"We did, but now we got new ones."

"They any better than the old ones?"

"This guy asks too many questions," the man with the gun said. "Let's let Sozier answer 'em."

"Who's he?"

"He's the Military Governor of the City."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Retief said. "Lead the way, Jake—and don't forget my bag."

* * *

Sozier was a small man with thin hair oiled across a shiny scalp, prominent ears, and eyes like coal chips set in rolls of fat. He glowered at Retief from behind a polished desk occupying the center of a spacious office.

"I warned you off," he snapped. "You came anyway." He leaned forward and

slammed a fist down on the desk. "You're used to throwing your weight around, but you won't throw it around here! There'll be no spies pussy-footing around Glave!"

"Looking for what, Mr. Sozier?"

"Call me General!"

"Mind if I sit down?" Retief pulled out a chair, seated himself, and took out a cigar. "Curiously enough," he said, lighting up, "the Corps has no intention of making any embarrassing investigations. We deal with the existing government, no questions asked—" His eyes held the other's.

"Unless, of course, there are evidences of atrocities or other illegal measures."

The coal-chip eyes narrowed. "I don't have to make explanations to you or anybody else—"

"Except, presumably, the Glavian Free Electorate," Retief said blandly. "But tell me, General—who's actually running the show?" A speaker on the desk buzzed. "Hey, Corporal Sozier! Wes's got them two hellions cornered. They're holed up in the Birthday Cake —"

"General Sozier, damn you! And plaster your big mouth shut!" He gestured to one of the uniformed men standing by.

"You! Get Trundy and Little Moe up here—pronto!" He swiveled back to Retief. "You're in luck; I'm too busy right

now to bother with you. You get back over to the port and leave the same way you came—and tell your blood-sucking friends the easy pickings are over as far as Glave's concerned. You won't lounge around here living high and throwing big parties and cooking up deals to get fat on the expense of the working man."

Relief dribbled ash on Sozier's desk and glanced at the green uniform front bulging between silver buttons.

"Who paid for your pot-belly, Sozier?" he inquired carelessly. Sozier's eyes narrowed to slits. "I could have you shot—"

"Stop playing games with me, Sozier," Relief rapped. "There's a squadron of Peace Enforcers standing by just in case

any apprentice statesmen forget the niceties of diplomatic usage. I suggest you start showing a little intelligence about now, or even Horny and Pud are likely to notice." Sozier's fingers squeaked on the arms of his chair. He swallowed.

"You might start by assigning me an escort for a conducted tour of the capital," Retief went on. "I want to be in a position to confirm that order has been re-established, and that normal services have been restored—otherwise, it may be necessary to send in a Monitor Unit to straighten things out."

"You can't meddle with the internal affairs of a sovereign world—" Retief sighed. "The trouble with taking over

your boss's job is discovering its drawbacks. It's disillusioning, I know, Sozier—but—"

"All right! Take your tour! You'll find everything running as smooth as silk!

Utilities, police, transport, environmental control—"

"What about Space Control? Glave Tower seems to be off the air."

"I shut it down. We don't need anything from outside."

"Where's the new Premier keeping himself? Does he share your passion for privacy?"

The general got to his feet. "I'm letting you take your look, Mr. Big Nose. I'm giving you four hours. Then out! And the next meddling bureaucrat that tries to cut

atmosphere on Glave without a clearance gets burned!"

"I'll need a car."

"Jake! You stick to this bird. Take him to the main power plant, the water works, and the dispatch center, ride him around town and show him we're doing OK without a bunch of leeches bossing us; then dump him at the port—and see that he leaves."

"I'll plan my own itinerary, thanks. I can't promise I'll be finished in four hours—but I'll keep you advised."

"I warned you—"

"I heard you. Five times. And I only warned you once. You're getting ahead of me," Retief rose, motioned to the hulking guard. "Come on, Jake; we've

got a lot of ground to cover before dinner."

* * *

At the curb, Retief held out his hand. "Give me the power cylinder out of your rifle, Jake."

"Huh?"

"Come on, Jake. You've got a nervous habit of playing with the firing stud. We don't want any accidents."

"How do you get it out? They only give me this thing yesterday." Retief pocketed the cylinder. "You sit in back. I'll drive." He wheeled the car off along a broad avenue crowded with vehicles and lined with flowering palms behind which stately white buildings reared up into the pale sky.

"Nice looking city, Jake," Retief said conversationally. "What's the population?"

"I dunno. I only been here a year."

"What about Horny and Pud? Are they natives?"

"Whatta ya mean, natives? They're just as civilized as me."

"My boner, Jake. Known Sozier long?"

"Sure; he useta come around to the club."

"I take it he was in the army under the old regime?"

"Yeah—but he didn't like the way they run it. Nothing but band playing and fancy marching. There wasn't nobody to fight."

"Just between us, Jake—where did the former Planetary Manager General go?" Retief watched Jake's heavy face in the mirror. Jake jumped, clamped his mouth shut.

"I don't know nothing."

Half an hour later, after a tour of the commercial center, Retief headed toward the city's outskirts. The avenue curved, leading up along the flank of a low hill.

"I must admit I'm surprised, Jake," Retief said. "Everything seems orderly; no signs of riots or panic. Power, water, communications normal—just as the general said. Remarkable, isn't it, considering that the entire managerial class has packed up and left . . ."

"You wanta see the Power Plant?" Retief could see perspiration beaded on the man's forehead under the uniform cap.

"Sure. Which way?" With Jake directing, Retief ascended to the ridge top, cruised past the blank white façade of the station.

"Quiet, isn't it?" Retief pulled the car in to the curb. "Let's go inside."

"Huh? Corporal Sozier didn't say nothing—"

"You're right, Jake. That leaves it to our discretion."

"He won't like it."

"The corporal's a busy man, Jake. We won't worry him by telling him about it."

Jake followed Retief up the walk. The

broad double doors were locked.

"Let's try the back."

The narrow door set in the high blank wall opened as Retief approached. A gun barrel poked out, followed by a small man with bushy red hair. He looked Retief over.

"Who's this party, Jake?" he barked.

"Sozier said show him the plant," Jake said.

"What we need is more guys to pull duty, not tourists. Anyway, I'm Chief Engineer here. Nobody comes in here 'less I like their looks." Retief moved forward, stood looking down at the red-head. The little man hesitated, then waved him past. "Lucky for you, I like your looks." Inside, Retief surveyed the

long room, the giant converter units, the massive bussbars. Armed men—some in uniform, some in work clothes, others in loud sport shirts—stood here and there. Other men read meters, adjusted controls, or inspected dials.

"You've got more guards than workers," Retief said. "Expecting trouble?" The red-head bit the corner from a plug of spearmint. He glanced around the plant. "Things is quiet now; but you never know . . ."

"Rather old-fashioned equipment, isn't it? When was it installed?"

"Huh? I dunno. What's wrong with it?"

"What's your basic power source, a core sink? Lithospheric friction?"

Sub-crustal hydraulics?"

"Beats me, Mister. I'm the boss here, not a dern mechanic." A grey-haired man carrying a clip-board walked past, studied a panel, made notes, glanced up to catch Retief's eye, moved on.

"Everything seems to be running normally," Retief remarked.

"Sure; why not?"

"Records being kept up properly?"

"Sure; some of these guys, all they do is walk around looking at dials and writing stuff on paper. If it was me, I'd put 'em to work." Retief strolled over to the grey-haired man, now scribbling before a bank of meters. He glanced at the clip board.

Power off at sunset. Tell Corasol was scrawled in block letters across the

record sheet. Retief nodded, rejoined his guard.

"All right, Jake. Let's have a look at the communications center." Back in the car, headed west, Retief studied the blank windows of office buildings, the milling throngs in beer bars, shooting galleries, tattoo parlors, billiards halls, pin-ball arcades, bordellos, and half-credit casinos.

"Everybody seems to be having fun," he remarked. Jake stared out the window. "Yeah."

"Too bad you're on duty, Jake. You could be out there joining in."

"Soon as the corporal gets things organized, I'm opening me up a place to show dirty tri-di's. I'll get my share."

"Meanwhile, let the rest of 'em have their fun, eh, Jake?"

"Look, Mister, I been thinking: Maybe you better gimme back that kick-stick you taken outa my gun . . ."

"Sorry, Jake; no can do. Tell me, what was the real cause of the revolution?"

Not enough to eat? Too much regimentation?"

"Naw, we always got plenty to eat. There wasn't none of that regimentation—up till I joined up in the corporal's army."

"Rigid class structure, maybe? Educational discrimination?" Jake nodded. "Yeah, it was them schools done it. All the time trying to make a feller go to some kind of class. Big

shots. Know it all. Gonna make us sit around and view tapes. Figgered they are better than us."

"And Sozier's idea was you'd take over, and you wouldn't have to be bothered."

"Aw, it wasn't Sozier's idea. He ain't the big leader."

"Where does the big leader keep himself?"

"I dunno. I guess he's pretty busy right now." Jake snickered. "Some of them guys call themselves colonels turned out not to know nothing about how to shoot off the guns."

"Shooting, eh? I thought it was a sort of peaceful revolution; the managerial class were booted out, and that was

that."

"I don't know nothing," Jake snapped. "How come you keep trying to get me to say stuff I ain't supposed to talk about? You want to get me in trouble?"

"Oh, you're already in trouble, Jake. But if you stick with me, I'll try to get you out of it. Where exactly did the refugees head for? How did they leave?"

Must have been a lot of them; I'd say in a city of this size they'd run into the thousands."

"I don't know."

"Of course, it depends on your definition of a big shot. Who's included in that category, Jake?"

"You know, the slick-talking ones; the fancy dressers; the guys that walk around

and tell other guys what to do. We do all the work and they get all the big pay."

"I suppose that would cover scientists, professional men, executives, technicians of all sorts, engineers, teachers—all that crowd of no-goods."

"Yeah, them are the ones."

"And once you got them out of the way, the regular fellows would have a chance; chaps that don't spend all their time taking baths and reading books and using big words; good Joes that don't mind picking their noses in public."

"We got as much right as anybody—"

"Jake, who's Corasol?"

"He's—I don't know."

"I thought I overheard his name somewhere."

"Uh, here's the communication center," Jake cut in. Retief swung into a parking lot under a high blank façade. He set the brake and stepped out.

"Lead the way, Jake."

"Look, Mister, the corporal only wanted me to show you the outside—"

"Anything to hide, Jake?"

Jake shook his head angrily and stamped past Retief. "When I joined up with Sozier, I didn't figger I'd be getting in this kind of mess . . ."

"I know, Jake; it's tough. Sometimes it seems like a fellow works harder after he's thrown out the parasites than he did before." A cautious guard let Retief and Jake inside, followed them along bright lit aisles among consoles, cables,

batteries of instruments. Armed men in careless uniforms lounged, watching. Here and there a silent technician worked quietly.

Retief paused by one, an elderly man in a neat white coverall, with a purple spot under one eye.

"Quite a bruise you've got there," Retief commented heartily. "Power failure at sunset," he added softly. The technician hesitated, nodded, and moved on.

Back in the car, Retief gave Jake directions. At the end of three hours, he had seen twelve smooth-running, heavily guarded installations.

"So far, so good, Jake," he said. "Next stop, sub-station Number Nine." In the

mirror, Jake's face stiffened. "Hey, you can't go down there—"

"Something going on there, Jake?"

"That's where—I mean, no; I don't know."

"I don't want to miss anything, Jake. Which way?"

"I ain't going down there," Jake said sullenly. Retief braked. "In that case, I'm afraid our association is at an end, Jake."

"You mean . . . you're getting out here?"

"No, you are."

"Huh? Now wait a minute, Mister; the corporal said I was to stay with you." Retief accelerated. "That's settled, then. Which way?"

* * *

Retief pulled the car to a halt two hundred yards from the periphery of a loose crowd of brown-uniformed men who stood in groups scattered across a broad plaza, overflowing into a stretch of manicured lawn before the bare, functional facade of Sub-station Number Nine. In the midst of the besieging mob, Sozier's red face and bald head bobbed as he harangued a cluster of green-uniformed men from his place in the rear of a long open car.

"What's it all about, Jake?" Retief inquired. "Since the parasites have all left peacefully, I'm having a hard time figuring out who'd be holed up in the pumping station—and why. Maybe they

haven't gotten the word that it's all going to be fun and games from now on."

"If the corporal sees you over here—"

"Ah, the good corporal. Glad you mentioned him, Jake. He's the man to see." Retief stepped out of the car and started through the crowd. A heavy lorry loaded with an immense tank with the letter H blazoned on its side trundled into the square from a side street, moved up to a position before the building. A smaller car pulled alongside Sozier's limousine. The driver stepped down, handed something to Sozier. A moment later, Sozier's amplified voice boomed across the crowd.

"You in there, Corasol. This is General Sozier, and I'm warning you to

come out now or you and your smart friends are in for a big surprise. You think I won't blast you out because I don't want to wreck the plant. You see the tank aboard the lorry that just pulled up? It's full of gas—and I got plenty of hoses out here to pump it inside with. I'll put men on the roof and squirt it in the ventilators . . ."

Sozier's voice echoed and died. The militiamen eyed the station. Nothing happened.

"I know you can hear me, damn you!" Sozier squalled. "You'd better get the doors open and get out here fast—"

Retief stepped to Sozier's side. "Say, Corporal, I didn't know you went in for practical jokes—"

Sozier jerked around to gape at Retief.

"What are you doing here!" he burst out. "I told Jake—where is that—"

"Jake didn't like the questions I was asking," Retief said, "so he marched me up here to report to you."

"Jake, you damn fool!" Sozier roared. "I gotta good mind—"

"I disagree, Sozier," Retief cut in. "I think you're a complete imbecile. Sitting out here in the open yelling at the top of your lungs. For example: Corasol and his party might get annoyed and spray that fancy car you've swiped with something a lot more painful than words."

"Eh?" Sozier's head whipped around

to stare at the building.

"Isn't that a gun I see sticking out?"

Sozier dropped. "Where?"

"My mistake; just a foreign particle on my contact lenses." Retief leaned on the car. "On the other hand, Sozier, most murderers are sneaky about it; I think making a public announcement is a nice gesture on your part. The Monitors won't have any trouble deciding who to hang when they come in to straighten out this mess."

Sozier scrambled back onto his seat. "Monitors?" he snarled. "I don't think so. I don't think you'll be around to do any blabbering to anybody." He raised his voice. "Jake! March this spy over to the sidelines. If he tries anything, shoot

him!" He gave Retief a baleful grin. "I'll lay the body out nice and ship it back to your cronies. Accidents will happen, you know. It'll be a week or two before they get around to following up—and by then I'll have this little problem under control."

Jake looked at Retief uncertainly, fingering his empty rifle. Retief put his hands up. "I guess you got me, Jake," he said. "Careful of that gun, now."

Jake glanced at Sozier, gulped, aimed the rifle at Retief, and nodded toward the car. As Retief moved off, a murmur swept across the crowd. Retief glanced back; a turret on the station roof was rotating slowly. A shout rose; men surged away from the building, scuffling

for way; Sozier yelled. His car started up, moved forward, horns blaring. As Retief watched, a white stream arced up from the turret, catching the sun as it spanned the lawn, down to strike the massed men in a splatter of spray. It searched across the mob, came to rest on Sozier's car. Uniformed men scrambled for safety as the terrified driver gunned the heavy vehicle. The hose followed the car, dropping a solid stream of water on Sozier, kicking and flailing in the back seat. As the car passed from view down a side street, water was overflowing the sides.

"The corporal will feel all the better for an invigorating swim in his mobile pool," Retief commented. "By the way,

Jake, I have to be going now. It wouldn't be fair to send you back to your boss without something to back up your story that you were outnumbered, so—"

Retief's left fist shot out to connect solidly with Jake's jaw. Jake dropped the gun and sat down hard. Retief turned and headed for the pumping station. The hose had shut down now. A few men were standing, eyeing the building anxiously. Others watched his progress across the square. As Retief passed, he caught scattered comments:

"—seen that bird before."

"—where he's headed."

"—feller Sozier was talkin to . . ."

"Hey, you!" Retief was on the grass now. Ahead, the blank wall loomed up.

He walked on, briskly.

"Stop that jasper!" a shout rang out. There was a sharp whine and a black spot appeared on the wall ahead. Near it, a small personnel door abruptly swung inward. Retief sprinted, plunged through the opening as a second shot seared the paint on the doorframe. The door clanged behind him. Retief glanced over the half-dozen men confronting him.

"I'm Retief, CDT, Acting Chargé," he said. "Which of you gentlemen is Manager-General Corasol?"

* * * * *

Corasol was a tall, wide-shouldered man of fifty, with shrewd eyes, a ready smile, capable-looking hands, and an urbane manner. He and Retief sat at a

table at one side of the large room, under a maze of piping, tanks and valves, Corasol poured amber fluid into square glass tumblers.

"We spotted you by the blazer," he said. "Baby blue and gold braid stand out in a crowd."

Retief nodded. "The uniform has its uses," he agreed. He tried the drink.

"Say, what is this? It's not bad."

"Sugar-weed rum; made from a marine plant. We have plenty of ocean here on Glave; there's only the one continent, you know, and it's useless for agriculture."

"Weather?"

"That's part of it; Glave is moving into what would be a major glaciation if it

weren't for a rather elaborate climatic control installation. Then there are the tides; half the continent would be inundated twice a year when our satellite is at aphelion; there's a system of baffles, locks and deep-water pumps that maintain the shore-line more or less constant; we still keep our cities well inland. Then there are the oxygen generators, the atmosphere filtration complex, vermin control, and so on. Glave in its natural state is a rather hostile world."

"I'm surprised that your mines can support it all."

"Oh, they don't." Corasol shook his head. "Two hundred years ago, when the company first opened up Glave, it was

economical enough. Quintite was a precious mineral in those days. Synthetics have long since taken over. Even fully automated, the mines barely support the public services and welfare system."

"I seem to recall a reference in the Post Report to the effect that a Company petition to vacate its charter had been denied . . ." Corasol nodded, smiling wryly. "The CDT seemed to feel that as long as any of the world's residents desired to remain, the Company was constrained to oblige them. The great majority departed long ago, of course—relocated to other operational areas. Only the untrainables, living off welfare funds—and a skeleton staff of single men

to operate the technical installations—have stayed on."

"What do you mean—untrainable?"

"There's always a certain percentage of any population with the conviction that society is a conspiracy to deny them their rights. The right to be totally ignorant of any useful knowledge seems to be the basic one. Most societies can carry the burden of these drones—along with the criminal and idiot classes—as mere minority problems. Here on Glave, they've constituted the population—with the planet operated to maintain them. Some of them have opened small businesses—of the kind that require only a native shrewdness and a stomach for the popular tastes. Of course, they still

regard any material advantages possessed by the productive as flagrant evidence of discrimination."

"That explains the mechanics of the recent uprising," Retief said. The bottle clinked against glasses for a second round. "What about the good corporal?" Retief asked. "Assuming he's a strong swimmer, you should be hearing from him soon."

Corasol glanced at his finger watch. "I imagine he'll be launching his gas attack any minute."

"The prospect doesn't seem to bother you."

"Sozier is a clever enough chap in his own way," Corasol said. "But he has a bad habit of leaping to conclusions. He's

gotten hold of a tank of what someone has told him is gas—as indeed it is. Hydrogen, for industrial use. It seems the poor fellow is under the impression that anything masquerading as gas will have a lethal effect."

"He may be right—if he pumps it in fast enough."

"Oh, he won't be pumping it—not after approximately five minutes from now."

"Hmmm. I think I'm beginning to see the light. `Power off at sunset . . . "' Corasol nodded. "I don't think he realizes somehow that all his vehicles are operating off broadcast power."

"Still, he has a good-sized crowd of hopefuls with him. How do you plan to

get through them?"

"We don't; we go under. There's an extensive system of service ways underlying the city; another detail which I believe has escaped the corporal's notice."

"You'll be heading for the port?"

"Yes—eventually. First, we have a few small chores to see to. Sozier has quite a number of our technical men working at gun point to keep various services going."

Retief nodded. "It won't be easy breaking them out; I made a fast tour of the city this afternoon; locked doors, armed guards—"

"Oh, the locks are power-operated, too. Our fellows will know what to do

when the power fails. I think the sudden darkness will eliminate any problem from the guards."

The lights flickered and died. The whine of the turbines was suddenly noticeable, descending. Faint cries sounded from outside. Corasol switched on a small portable lantern. "All ready, gentlemen?" he called, rising. "Let's move out. We want to complete this operation before dawn."

* * *

Four hours later, Retief stood with Corasol in a low-ceilinged tunnel, white-tiled, brilliantly lit by a central glare strip, watching as the last of the column of men released from forced labor in the city's utilities installations

filed past. A solidly-built man with pale blond hair came up, breathing hard.

"How did it go, Taine?" Corasol asked.

"They're beginning to catch on, Mr. Corasol. We had a brisk time of it at Station Four. Everybody's clear now. No one killed, but we had a few injuries."

Corasol nodded. "The last few crews in have reported trouble. "Ah—what about—"

Taine shook his head. "Sorry, Sir. No trace. No one's seen them. But they're probably at the port ahead of us, hiding out. They'd know we'd arrive eventually."

"I suppose so. You sent word to them well in advance . . ."

"Suppose I stand by here with a few men; we'll patrol the tunnels in case they show up. We have several hours before daylight."

"Yes. I'll go along and see to the preparations at Exit Ten. We'll make our sortie at oh-five-hundred. If you haven't seen anything of them by then . . .

"

"I'm sure they're all right."

"They'd better be," Corasol said grimly. "Let's be off, Retief."

"If it's all the same to you, Mr. Manager-General, I'll stay here with Taine; I'll join you later."

"As you wish. I don't imagine there'll be any trouble—but if there is, having a CDT observer along will lend a certain

air to the operation." He smiled, shook Retief's hand and moved off along the tunnel. The echo of feet and voices grew faint, faded to silence. Taine turned to the three men detailed to him, conversed briefly, sent them off along branching corridors. He glanced at Retief.

"Mr. Retief, you're a diplomat. This errand is not a diplomatic one."

"I've been on a few like that, too, Mr. Taine." Taine studied Retief's face. "I can believe that," he said. "However, I think you'd better rejoin the main party."

"I might be of some use here, if your missing men arrive under fire."

"Missing men?" Taine's mouth twisted in a sour smile. "You fail to grasp the picture, Mr. Retief. There'll be no

missing men arriving."

"Oh? I understood you were waiting here to meet them."

"Not men, Mr. Retief. It happens that Corasol has twin daughters, aged nineteen. They haven't been seen since the trouble began."

* * *

Half an hour passed. Retief leaned against the tunnel wall, arms folded, smoking a cigar in silence. Taine paced, ten yards up the corridor, ten yards back

...

"You seem nervous, Mr. Taine," Retief said. Taine stopped pacing, eyed Retief coldly. "You'd better go along now," he said decisively. "Just follow the main tunnel; it's about a mile—"

"Plenty of time yet, Mr. Taine." Retief smiled and drew on his cigar. "Your three men are still out—"

"They won't be back here; we'll rendezvous at Exit Ten."

"Am I keeping you from something, Taine?"

"I can't be responsible for your safety if you stay here."

"Oh? You think I might fall victim to an accident?" Taine narrowed his eyes. "It could happen," he said harshly.

"Where were the girls last seen?" Retief asked suddenly.

"How would I know?"

"Weren't you the one who got word to them?"

"Maybe you'd better keep out of this."

"You sent your men off; now you're eager to see me retire to a safe position. Why the desire for solitude, Taine? You wouldn't by any chance have plans . . . ?"

"That's enough," Taine snapped. "On your way. That's an order!"

"There are some aspects of this situation that puzzle me, Mr. Taine. Mr. Corasol has explained to me how he and his Division Chiefs—including you—were surprised in the Executive Suite at Planetary Control, by a crowd of Sozier's bully-boys. They came in past the entire security system without an alarm. Corasol and the others put up a surprisingly good fight and made it to the service elevators—and from there to the

Sub-station. There was even time to order an emergency alert to the entire staff—but somehow, they were all caught at their stations and kept on the job at gun point. Now, I should think that you, as Chief of Security as well as Communications, should have some idea as to how all this came about."

"Are you implying—"

"Let me guess, Taine. You have a deal with Sozier. He takes over, ousts the legal owners, and set himself up to live off the fat of the land, with you as his technical chief. Then, I imagine, you'd find it easy enough to dispose of Sozier—and you'd be in charge."

Without warning, Taine put his head down and charged. Retief dropped his

cigar, side-stepped, and planted a solid right on Taine's jaw. He staggered, went to his hands and knees.

"I suppose you'd like to get word to Sozier that his work force is arriving at the port at oh-five-hundred," Retief said. "Of course, he'll want to have a good-sized reception committee on hand as they come out—" Taine plunged to his feet, threw a vicious left that went past Retief's ear, then abruptly dropped, clamped a lock on Retief's leg, twisted

The two men rolled, came to rest with Taine on top, Retief face-down, his arm bent back and doubled. Taine, red-faced and puffing, grunted as he applied pressure.

"You know a lot about me," he granted, "but you overlooked the fact that I've been Glavian Judo champion for the past nine years."

"You're a clever man, Taine," Retief said between clenched teeth. "Too clever to think it will work."

"It will work. Glave's never had a CDT mission here before; we're too small. Corasol invited your Embassy in because he had an idea there was something in the wind. That forced my hand. I've had to move hastily. But by the time I invite observers in to see for themselves, everything will be running smoothly. I can even afford to let Corasol and the others go—I'll have hostages for his good behavior."

"You've been wanting to boast about it to someone who could appreciate your cleverness, I see. Sozier must be an unappreciative audience."

"Sozier's a filthy pig—but he had his uses."

"What do you plan to do now?"

"I've been wondering that myself—but I think the best solution is simply break your arm for now. You should be easy to control then. It's quite simple; I merely apply pressure, thus . . ."

"Judo is a very useful technique," Retief said. "But in order to make it work, you have to be a pretty good man . . ." He moved suddenly, shifting his position. Taine grabbed, holding Retief's arm by the wrist and elbow, his own arm

levering Retief's back, back . . . Retief twisted onto his side, then his back. Taine grunted, following the movement, straining. Slowly, Retief sat up against Taine's weight. Then, with a surge, he straightened his arm. Taine's grip broke. Retief came to his feet. Taine scrambled up in time to meet a clean uppercut.

"Ah, there you are," Retief said as Taine's eyes fluttered and opened.

"You've had a nice nap—almost fifteen minutes. Feeling better?" Taine snarled, straining against the bonds on his wrists.

"Gold braid has its uses," Retief commented. "Now that you're back, perhaps you can answer a question for me. What's the Birthday Cake?" Taine

spat. Retief went to stand over him.

"Time is growing short, Mr. Taine. It will be dawn in another two hours. I can't afford the luxury of coaxing you. You'd better answer my question."

"You won't get away with this."

Retief looked at the glowing end of his cigar. "This won't be subtle, I agree—but it will work . . ."

"You're bluffing."

Retief leaned closer. "In my place—would you hesitate?" he asked softly. Taine cursed, struggled to break free, eyes on the cigar.

"What kind of diplomat are you?" he snarled.

"The modern variety; throat-cutting, thumb-screws, poison and stiletto work

were popular in Machiavelli's time; nowadays we go in more for the administrative approach—but the cigar-end still has its role."

"Look—we can come to an agreement —"

"What's the Birthday Cake?" Retief snapped.

"I'm in a position to do a lot for you —"

"Last chance—"

"It's the official Residence of the Manager-General!" Taine screeched, writhing away from the cigar.

"Where is it? Talk fast!"

"You'll never get close! There's a seven-foot wall and by this time the grounds are swarming with Sozier's men

—"

"Nevertheless, I want to know where it is—and the information had better be good. If I don't come back, you'll have a long wait." Taine groaned. "All right. Put that damned cigar away. I'll tell you what I can . . ."

* * *

Retief stood in the shadow of a vine-grown wall, watching the five-man guard detail at the main gate to the Residence grounds. The bluish light of the Glavian satellite reflected from the rain-pocked street, glinted from the leaves of a massive tree ten yards from the gate. The chill in the air cut through Retief's wet clothes; the men at the gate huddled, hands in pockets, coat collars

turned up, backs to the wind—and to Retief. He moved silently forward, caught a low branch of the tree, pulled himself up. The men at the gate exchanged muttered remarks. One lit a cigarette. Retief waited, then moved higher. The guards talked in low voices, edged closer to the shelter of the gatehouse. Retief lowered himself onto the wall, dropped down onto the sodden lawn, crouched, waiting. There was no alarm.

Through the trees the dark shape of the house loomed up, its top story defiantly ablaze with lights. Retief moved off silently, from the shadow of one tree to the next, swinging in an arc that would bring him to the rear of the great round

structure. He froze as the heavy footfalls of one of Sozier's pickets slogged past five yards from him, then moved on. The glow of a camp-fire flickered near the front of the house. Retief could make out the shapes of men around it—a dozen or two, at least. Probably as many more warmed themselves at each of the other fires visible on the grounds—and most of the rest had doubtless found dryer shelter in the lee of the house itself.

Retief reached the conservatory at the rear of the house, studied the dark path leading to the broad terrace, picked out the squat shape of the utilities manifold behind a screen of shrubbery. So far, Taine's information had been accurate. The next step was to—

There was a faint sound from high above, followed by a whoosh!— Then, with a sharp crack, a flare appeared overhead, rocking gracefully, floating down gently under a small parachute. Below it, inky shadows rocked in unison. In the raw white light, Retief counted eighteen men clinging to handholds on the side of the house, immobile in the pitiless glare. Above them, a face appeared, then a second, peering over the edge of the fourth-story gallery. Both figures rose, unlimbering four-foot bows, fitting arrows to strings —

Whok! Whok! Two men lost their holds and fell, yelling, to slam into the heavy shrubbery. A second flight of

arrows found marks. Retief watched from the shadows as man after man dropped to flounder in the wet foliage. Several jumped before the deadly bows were turned on them. As the flare faded, the last of the men plunged down to crash among their fellows. Retief stepped out, ran swiftly to the manifold, forcing his way among the close-growing screen, scrambled to its top. His hand fell on a spent arrow. He picked it up. It was a stout wooden shaft twenty inches long, terminating in a rubber suction cup. Retief snorted, dropped the arrow and started up.

* * *

Twenty feet above ground level, the wide windows of the third floor sun

terrace presented a precarious handhold as Retief swung back a foot, kicked in a panel. Inside, he dimly made out the shape of a broad carpeted room, curving out of sight in both directions. There were wide-leafed tropical plants in boxes, groups of padded chairs, low tables with bowls of fruit. Retief made his way past them, found an inner door, went into a dark hall. At the far end, voices exchanged shouted questions. Feet pounded. A flicker of light from a hand lantern splashed across the wall, disappeared. Retief found a stair, went up it noiselessly. According to Taine, the elevator to the top floor apartment should be to the left—

Retief flattened himself to the wall.

Footsteps sounded near at hand. He moved quickly to a doorway. There was a murmur of voices, the wavering light of lanterns. A party of uniformed men tiptoed past a cross corridor, struggling under the weight of a massive log, two feet in diameter and twelve feet long.

" . . . on signal, hit it all together. Then . . ." someone was saying. Retief waited, listening. There was the creak of a door, the fumbling of awkwardly-laden feet on a stair, hoarse breathing, a muffled curse.

" . . . got my fingers, ya slob . . ." a voice snarled.

"Shaddup!" another voice hissed.

There was a long moment of silence, then a muffled command—followed an

instant later by a thunderous crash, a shout—cut off abruptly by a ponderous blam! followed instantly by a roar like a burst dam, mingled with yells, thumps, crashes. A foamy wash of water surged along the cross corridor, followed a moment later by a man sliding on his back, then another, two more, the log, fragments of a door, more men. In the uproar, Retief moved along to the elevator, felt over the control panel, located a small knurled button. He turned it; the panel came away. He fumbled cautiously, found a toggle switch, flipped it. A light sprang up in the car; instantly, Retief flipped the light switch; the glow faded. He waited. No alarm. Men were picking themselves up,

shouting.

" . . . them broads dropped a hundred gallon bag of water . . ." someone complained.

" . . . up there fast, men. We got the door OK!" Feet thumped. Yells sounded.

"No good, Wes! They got a safe or something in the way!" Retief silently closed the lift door, pressed the button. With a sigh, the car slid upward, came to a gentle stop. He eased the door open, looked out into a dim-lit entrance hall. Footsteps sounded beyond a door. He waited, heard the clack of high heels crossing a floor. Retief stepped out of the car, went to the door, glanced into a spacious lounge with rich furniture, deep rugs, paintings, a sweep of glass, and in

an alcove at the far side, a bar. Retief crossed the room, poured a stiff drink into a paper-thin glass, and drained it.

The high-heeled steps were coming back now. A door opened. Two leggy young women in shorts, with red-gold hair bound back by ribbons—one green, one blue—stepped into the room. One held a coil of insulated wire; the other carried a heavy-looking grey-enameled box eight inches on a side.

"Now, see if you can tinker that thing to put out about a thousand amps at two volts, Lyn," the girl with the wire said. "I'll start stringing . . ." her voice died as she caught sight of Retief. He raised his glass. "My compliments, ladies. I see you're keeping yourselves amused."

"Who . . . who are you?" Lyn faltered.

"My name's Retief; your father sent me along to carry your bags. It's lucky I arrived when I did, before any of those defenseless chaps outside were seriously injured."

"You're not . . . one of them?"

"Of course he's not, Lyn," the second girl said. "He's much too good-looking."

"That's good," Lyn said crisply. "I didn't want to have to use this thing." She tossed a bright-plated 2mm needler onto a chair and sat down. "Dad's all right, isn't he?"

"He's fine, and we've got to be going. Tight schedule, you know. And you'd better get some clothes on. It's cold outside."

Lyn nodded. "Environmental Control went off the air six hours ago; you can already feel snow coming."

"Don't you suppose we have time to just rig up one little old circuit?" the other twin wheedled. "Nothing serious; just enough to tickle."

"We planned to wire all the window frames, the trunk we used to block the stair, the lift shaft—"

"And then we thought we'd try to drop a loop down and pick up the gallery guard rail, and maybe some of that wrought-iron work around the front of the house—"

"Sorry, girls; no time."

Five minutes later, the twins were ready, wrapped in fur robes. Retief had

exchanged his soaked blazer for a down-lined weatherproof.

"The lift will take us all the way down, won't it?" he asked. Lyn nodded. "We can go out through the wine cellar." Retief picked up the needler and handed it to Lyn. "Hang on to this," he said. "You may need it yet."

* * *

A cold wind whipped the ramp as dawn lightened the sky.

"It's hard to believe," Corasol said. "What made him do it?"

"He saw a chance to own it all."

"He can have it." Corasol's communicator beeped. He put it to his ear.

"Everything's ship-shape and ready to

lift," a tiny voice said. Corasol turned to Retief. "Let's go aboard—"

"Hold it," Retief said. "There's someone coming . . ." Corasol spoke into the communicator. "Keep him covered, but don't fire unless he does."

The man slogging across the concrete was short, wrapped in heavy garments. Over his head a white cloth fluttered from a stick.

"From the set of those bat-ears, I'd say it was the good corporal."

"I wonder what he wants."

Sozier stopped twenty feet from Retief and Corasol.

"I want to . . . ah . . . talk to you, Corasol," he said.

"Certainly, General. Go right ahead."

"Look here, Corasol. You can't do this. My men will freeze. We'll starve. I've been thinking it over, and I've decided we can reach an understanding." Corasol waited.

"I mean, we can get together on this thing. Compromise. Maybe I acted a little hasty." Sozier looked from Corasol to Retief. "You're from the CDT. You tell him. I'll guarantee his people full rights . . ." Retief puffed at his cigar in silence; Sozier started again.

"Look, I'll give you a full voice in running things. A fifty-fifty split. Whatta you say?"

"I'm afraid the proposal doesn't interest me, General," Corasol said.

"Never mind the General stuff,"

Sozier said desperately. "Listen, you can run it. Just give me and my boys a little say-so."

"Sorry," Corasol shook his head. "Not interested, General."

"OK, OK! You win! Just come on back and get things straightened out! I got a belly fully of running things!"

"I'm afraid I have other plans, General. For some time I've wanted to transfer operations to a world called Las Palmas on which we hold a charter. It has a naturally delightful climate, and I'm told the fishing is good. I leave Glave to the Free Electorate with my blessing. Goodbye, General." He turned to the ship.

"You got to stay here!" Sozier

howled. "We'll complain to the CDT! And don't call me General. I'm a Corporal—"

"You're a General now—whether you like it or not," Corasol said bluntly. He shivered. There was a hint of ice in the air. "If you or any of your men ever decide to go to work, General, I daresay we can train you for employment on Las Palmas. In the meantime—Long Live the Revolution!"

"You can't do this! I'll sue!"

"Calm down, Sozier," Retief said. "Go back to town and see if you can get your radio working. Put in a call for Mr. Magnan aboard the CDT vessel. Tell him your troubles. It will make his day. And a word of advice: Mr. Magnan

hates a piker—so ask for plenty."

* * *

"My boy, I'm delighted," Ambassador Sternwheeler boomed. "A highly professional piece of work. A stirring testimonial to the value of the skilled negotiator! An inspiration to us all!"

"You're too kind, Mr. Ambassador," Retief said, glancing at his watch.

"And Magnan tells me that not only will the mission be welcomed, and my job secure for another year—that is, I shall have an opportunity to serve—but a technical mission has been requested as well. I shall look forward to meeting General Sozier. He sounds a most reasonable chap."

"Oh, you'll like him, Mr. Ambassador.

A true democrat, willing to share all you have."

Counselor of Embassy Magnan tapped and entered the office.

"Forgive the intrusion, Mr. Ambassador," he said breathlessly, "but —"

"Well, what is it man! The deal hasn't gone sour . . . ?"

"Oh, far from it! I've been exploring General Sozier's economic situation with him via scope—and it seems he'll require a loan . . ."

"Yes, yes? How much?"

Magnan inhaled proudly. "Twenty. Million. Credits."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Magnificent! Good lord, Magnan, you're a genius! This will mean promotions all around. Why, the administrative load alone—"

"I can't wait to make planetfall, Mr. Ambassador. I'm all abubble with plans. I hope they manage to get the docking facilities back in operation soon."

"Help is on the way, my dear Magnan. I'm assured the Environmental Control installations will be coming back in operation again within a month or two."

"My, didn't those ice-caps form quickly—and in the open sea."

"Mere scum-ice. As my Counselor for Technical Affairs, you'll be in charge of the ice-breaking operation once we're settled in. I imagine you'll want to spend

considerable time in the field. I'll be expecting a record of how every credit is spent."

"I'm more the executive type," Magnan said. "Possibly Retief—" A desk speaker hummed. "Mr. Corasol's lighter has arrived to ferry Mr. Retief across to the Company ship . . ."

"Sorry you won't be with us, Retief," Sternwheeler said heartily. He turned to Magnan. "Manager-General Corasol has extended Retief an exequatur as Consul General to Las Palmas."

Retief nodded. "Much as I'd like to be out in that open boat with you, breaking ice, I'm afraid duty calls elsewhere."

"Your own post? I'm not sure he's experienced enough, Mr. Ambassador.

Now, I—"

"He was requested by name, Magnan. It seems the Manager-General's children took a fancy to him."

"Eh? How curious. I never thought you were particularly interested in infant care, Retief."

"Perhaps I haven't been, Mr. Magnan." Retief draped his short blue cape over his left arm and turned to the door. "But remember the diplomat's motto: be adaptable . . ."