

CLASSICS TO GO

THE DESERT AND THE STARS

AND THREE MORE STORIES



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The Desert and the Stars

The Aga Kaga wanted peace—a piece of everything in sight!

"I'm not at all sure," Under-Secretary Sternwheeler said, "that I fully understand the necessity for your ... ah ... absenting yourself from your post of duty, Mr. Retief. Surely this matter could have been dealt with in the usual way—assuming any action is necessary."

"I had a sharp attack of writer's cramp, Mr. Secretary," Retief said. "So I thought I'd better come along in person—just to be sure I was positive of making my point."

"Eh?"

"Why, ah, there were a number of dispatches," Deputy Under-Secretary Magnan put in. "Unfortunately, this being end-of-the-fiscal-year time, we found ourselves quite inundated with reports. Reports, reports, reports—"

"Not criticizing the reporting system, are you, Mr. Magnan?" the Under-Secretary barked.

"Gracious, no," Magnan said. "I love reports."

"It seems nobody's told the Aga Kagans about fiscal years," Retief said. "They're going right ahead with their program of land-grabbing on Flamme. So far, I've persuaded the Boyars that this is a matter for the Corps, and not to take matters into their own hands."

The Under-Secretary nodded. "Quite right. Carry on along the same lines. Now, if there's nothing further—"

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary," Magnan said, rising. "We certainly appreciate your guidance."

"There is a little something further," said Retief, sitting solidly in his chair. "What's the Corps going to do about the Aga Kagans?"

The Under-Secretary turned a liverish eye on Retief. "As Minister to Flamme, you should know that the function of a diplomatic representative is merely to ... what shall I say...?"

"String them along?" Magnan suggested.

"An unfortunate choice of phrase," the Under-Secretary said. "However, it embodies certain realities of Galactic politics. The Corps must concern itself with matters of broad policy."

"Sixty years ago the Corps was encouraging the Boyars to settle Flamme," Retief said. "They were assured of Corps support."

"I don't believe you'll find that in writing," said the Under-Secretary blandly. "In any event, that was sixty years ago. At that time a foothold against Neo-Concordiatist elements was deemed desirable. Now the situation has changed."

"The Boyars have spent sixty years terraforming Flamme," Retief said. "They've cleared jungle, descummed the seas, irrigated deserts, set out forests. They've just about reached the point where they can begin to enjoy it. The Aga Kagans have picked this as a good time to move in. They've landed thirty detachments of 'fishermen'—complete with armored trawlers mounting 40 mm infinite repeaters—and another two dozen parties of 'homesteaders'—all male and toting rocket launchers."

"Surely there's land enough on the world to afford space to both groups," the Under-Secretary said. "A spirit of co-operation—"

"The Boyars needed some co-operation sixty years ago," Retief said. "They tried to get the Aga Kagans to join in and help them beat back some of the saurian wild life that liked to graze on people. The Corps didn't like the idea. They wanted to see an undisputed anti-Concordiatist enclave. The Aga Kagans didn't want to play, either. But now that the world is tamed, they're moving in."

"The exigencies of diplomacy require a flexible policy—"

"I want a firm assurance of Corps support to take back to Flamme," Retief said. "The Boyars are a little naive. They don't understand diplomatic triple-speak. They just want to hold onto the homes they've made out of a wasteland."

"I'm warning you, Retief!" the Under-Secretary snapped, leaning forward, wattles quivering. "Corps policy with regard to Flamme includes no inflammatory actions based on outmoded concepts. The Boyars will have to accommodate themselves to the situation!"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Retief said. "They're not going to sit still and watch it happen. If I don't take back concrete evidence of Corps backing, we're going to have a nice hot little shooting war on our hands."

The Under-Secretary pushed out his lips and drummed his fingers on the desk.

"Confounded hot-heads," he muttered. "Very well, Retief. I'll go along to the extent of a Note; but positively no further."

"A Note? I was thinking of something more like a squadron of Corps Peace Enforcers running through a few routine maneuvers off Flamme."

"Out of the question. A stiffly worded Protest Note is the best I can do. That's final."

Back in the corridor, Magnan turned to Retief. "When will you learn not to argue with Under-Secretaries? One would

think you actively disliked the idea of ever receiving a promotion. I was astonished at the Under-Secretary's restraint. Frankly, I was stunned when he actually agreed to a Note. I, of course, will have to draft it." Magnan pulled at his lower lip thoughtfully. "Now, I wonder, should I view with deep concern an act of open aggression, or merely point out an apparent violation of technicalities...."

"Don't bother," Retief said. "I have a draft all ready to go."

"But how—?"

"I had a feeling I'd get paper instead of action," Retief said. "I thought I'd save a little time all around."

"At times, your cynicism borders on impudence."

"At other times, it borders on disgust. Now, if you'll run the Note through for signature, I'll try to catch the six o'clock shuttle."

"Leaving so soon? There's an important reception tonight. Some of our biggest names will be there. An excellent opportunity for you to join in the diplomatic give-and-take."

"No, thanks. I want to get back to Flamme and join in something mild, like a dinosaur hunt."

"When you get there," said Magnan, "I hope you'll make it quite clear that this matter is to be settled without violence."

"Don't worry. I'll keep the peace, if I have to start a war to do it."

On the broad verandah at Government House, Retief settled himself comfortably in a lounge chair. He accepted a tall glass from a white-jacketed waiter and regarded the flamboyant Flamme sunset, a gorgeous blaze of vermillion and purple that reflected from a still lake, tinged the broad lawn with color, silhouetted tall poplars among flower beds.

"You've done great things here in sixty years, Georges," said Retief. "Not that natural geological processes wouldn't have produced the same results, given a couple of hundred million years."

"Don't belabor the point," the Boyar Chef d'Regime said. "Since we seem to be on the verge of losing it."

"You're forgetting the Note."

"A Note," Georges said, waving his cigar. "What the purple polluted hell is a Note supposed to do? I've got Aga Kagan claim-jumpers camped in the middle of what used to be a fine stand of barley, cooking sheep's brains over dung fires not ten miles from Government House—and upwind at that."

"Say, if that's the same barley you distill your whiskey from, I'd call that a first-class atrocity."

"Retief, on your say-so, I've kept my boys on a short leash. They've put up with plenty. Last week, while you were away, these barbarians sailed that flotilla of armor-plated junks right through the middle of one of our best oyster breeding beds. It was all I could do to keep a bunch of our men from going out in private helis and blasting 'em out of the water."

"That wouldn't have been good for the oysters, either."

"That's what I told 'em. I also said you'd be back here in a few days with something from Corps HQ. When I tell 'em all we've got is a piece of paper, that'll be the end. There's a strong vigilante organization here that's been outfitting for the last four weeks. If I hadn't held them back with assurances that the CDT would step in and take care of this invasion, they would have hit them before now."

"That would have been a mistake," said Retief. "The Aga Kagans are tough customers. They're active on half a dozen worlds at the moment. They've been building up for this push for the last five years. A show of resistance by you

Boyars without Corps backing would be an invitation to slaughter—with the excuse that you started it."

"So what are we going to do? Sit here and watch these goat-herders take over our farms and fisheries?"

"Those goat-herders aren't all they seem. They've got a first-class modern navy."

"I've seen 'em. They camp in goat-skin tents, gallop around on animal-back, wear dresses down to their ankles—"

"The 'goat-skin' tents are a high-polymer plastic, made in the same factory that turns out those long flowing bullet-proof robes you mention. The animals are just for show. Back home they use helis and ground cars of the most modern design."

The Chef d'Regime chewed his cigar.

"Why the masquerade?"

"Something to do with internal policies, I suppose."

"So we sit tight and watch 'em take our world away from us. That's what I get for playing along with you, Retief. We should have clobbered these monkeys as soon as they set foot on our world."

"Slow down, I haven't finished yet. There's still the Note."

"I've got plenty of paper already. Rolls and rolls of it."

"Give diplomatic processes a chance," said Retief. "The Note hasn't even been delivered yet. Who knows? We may get surprising results."

"If you expect me to supply a runner for the purpose, you're out of luck. From what I hear, he's likely to come back with his ears stuffed in his hip pocket."

"I'll deliver the Note personally," Retief said. "I could use a couple of escorts—preferably strong-arm lads."

The Chef d'Regime frowned, blew out a cloud of smoke. "I wasn't kidding about these Aga Kagans," he said. "I hear they have some nasty habits. I don't want to see you operated on with the same knives they use to skin out the goats."

"I'd be against that myself. Still, the mail must go through."

"Strong-arm lads, eh? What have you got in mind, Retief?"

"A little muscle in the background is an old diplomatic custom," Retief said.

The Chef d'Regime stubbed out his cigar thoughtfully. "I used to be a pretty fair elbow-wrestler myself," he said. "Suppose I go along...?"

"That," said Retief, "should lend just the right note of solidarity to our little delegation." He hitched his chair closer. "Now, depending on what we run into, here's how we'll play it...."

II

Eight miles into the rolling granite hills west of the capital, a black-painted official air-car flying the twin flags of Chief of State and Terrestrial Minister skimmed along a foot above a pot-holed road. Slumped in the padded seat, the Boyar Chef d'Regime waved his cigar glumly at the surrounding hills.

"Fifty years ago this was bare rock," he said. "We've bred special strains of bacteria here to break down the formations into soil, and we followed up with a program of broad-spectrum fertilization. We planned to put the whole area into crops by next year. Now it looks like the goats will get it."

"Will that scrubland support a crop?" Retief said, eyeing the lichen-covered knolls.

"Sure. We start with legumes and follow up with cereals. Wait until you see this next section. It's an old flood plain, came into production thirty years ago. One of our finest—"

The air-car topped a rise. The Chef dropped his cigar and half rose, with a hoarse yell. A herd of scraggly goats tossed their heads among a stand of ripe grain. The car pulled to a stop. Retief held the Boyar's arm.

"Keep calm, Georges," he said. "Remember, we're on a diplomatic mission. It wouldn't do to come to the conference table smelling of goats."

"Let me at 'em!" Georges roared. "I'll throttle 'em with my bare hands!"

A bearded goat eyed the Boyar Chef sardonically, jaw working. "Look at that long-nosed son!" The goat gave a derisive bleat and took another mouthful of ripe grain.

"Did you see that?" Georges yelled. "They've trained the son of a—"

"Chin up, Georges," Retief said. "We'll take up the goat problem along with the rest."

"I'll murder 'em!"

"Hold it, Georges. Look over there."

A hundred yards away, a trio of brown-cloaked horsemen topped a rise, paused dramatically against the cloudless pale sky, then galloped down the slope toward the car, rifles bobbing at their backs, cloaks billowing out behind. Side by side they rode, through the brown-golden grain, cutting three narrow swaths that ran in a straight sweep from the ridge to the air-car where Retief and the Chef d'Regime hovered, waiting.

Georges scrambled for the side of the car. "Just wait 'til I get my hands on him!"