

King of the Blue Planet

by Mike Resnick

Lizard O'Neal leaned back on his straw chair, folded his dirty hands across his grubby shirt, and surveyed his empire.

The empire, such as it was, extended for some 200 feet in all directions from him, as he sat at its very epicenter. To the right were six small huts, each and every one (or so he liked to tell his customers) serviced by a reborn virgin; no one had ever asked exactly what a reborn virgin was, so he hadn't quite gotten around to defining it yet. To the left was the bar, a huge tree trunk imported ("at considerable expense") from the forest some 60 yards away, framed by wanted posters of the most notorious outlaws of the Rim, each of them personally autographed. Behind him was his royal palace, all two rooms of it, kept together by spit and bailing wire and held in place by pile upon pile of unwashed laundry. In front of him was the Royal Spaceport, a burnt and blackened strip of ground barely large enough to hold six two-man ships at a time, and right next to it was the Imperial Fuel Station.

Beyond the perimeter of his empire there were forests and mountains, rivers and streams and ultimately the enormous ocean that made his world glow like a blue gemstone in the night sky. There were also placid furry aliens who might or might not be intelligent. Word had it that there was even a desert out there, waiting for someone even crazier than him to try crossing it.

O'Neal ran his fingers through his thick, uncombed shock of red hair, stretched, sighed, and finally turned to the carefully-groomed man who looked so out of place in these surroundings.

"You've got your answer," he said, flicking a blue-and-gold insect away from his neck. "What are you waiting for?"

"The answer is unacceptable," replied Reinhardt.

"So is your proposition."

"Mr. O'Neal, the Alliance absolutely must have -- "

"Look around you," interrupted O'Neal, "and tell me what you see."

"Absolutely nothing," said Reinhardt contemptuously.

"Right," agreed O'Neal. "No banks, no lawyers, no tax collectors, no police -- and no Alliance," he added pointedly.

"That's precisely why the Alliance needs this planet," insisted Reinhardt, wiping a little trickle of sweat from his left cheek.

"Well, this planet doesn't need the Alliance. We're 75,000 light years from Tau Ceti. We mind our own business, we enjoy ourselves, we get a lot of sun and sex and fresh air, and nobody is bothering us -- except for you, of course."

"The fact that you're in a totally unpopulated area of the galaxy is precisely why we must have the use of your world for a few weeks."

"No."

"I could order you to acquiesce to my demands."

O'Neal shrugged. "Whatever makes you happy."

"This planet is within the Alliance's sphere of influence," noted Reinhardt.

"This planet declared independence five years ago," replied O'Neal.

"There is no record of that."

"Maybe you don't have a record of it, but we do." He gestured to the huge cash box behind the bar. "It's in there somewhere with the receipts."

"Totally illegal."

"Fine. Take me to court."

"In point of fact, we can take you to court over a number of matters, if we so desire," said Reinhardt calmly. "Lizard O'Neal," he quoted, "wanted for gun-running, smuggling, pandering, swindling, consorting with known -- "

"A series of misunderstandings," replied O'Neal with yet another shrug.

"We can let a court of law decide that."

"As a matter of fact, you can't," replied O'Neal. "We don't have any extradition treaties with the Alliance."

"Then I will speak to the ruler of this world."

"You're looking at him," said O'Neal with a lazy smile. "King Lizard the First."

"You are an alien here. I am speaking about the lawful leader of the native population."

"That's me. We took a vote. I won."

"_Who_ took a vote?" demanded Reinhardt.

"The planetary population."

"How many ballots were cast?"

"Just one," answered O'Neal. "But it was an absolutely open election. You can hardly blame me for voter apathy."

"I can see that we'll have to add enslavement of a sentient race to your list of crimes."

"It'll take you 500 years to find out whether or not they're sentient," replied O'Neal. "I thought you needed the world next month."

"We do -- and we will have it, one way or another."

"What's so special about this world?" asked O'Neal curiously. "Uranium? Gold? Platinum?"

"This world is valuable to us precisely because it has no value," responded Reinhardt.

"What have you been drinking?"

"Whatever your barman served me," was the distasteful reply.

"Well, you can't be drunk; we water our liquor down too much." O'Neal paused and stared at Reinhardt from beneath half-lowered lids. "So why is a little dirtball out in the middle of nowhere so important that the Alliance is making threats to me, a peaceable businessman who never caused any harm to anyone?"

Reinhardt stared silently at him for a moment.

"Well?" persisted O'Neal.

"I was just trying to envision you as a peaceable businessman," he said. "And believe me, it isn't easy."

"Use your imagination," said O'Neal easily. "And I still want to know: why do you need my planet?"

"It should be obvious to you."

"I'm sure it is," replied O'Neal. "But suppose you tell me why it's obvious to you."

"Have you ever heard of Switzerland?" asked Reinhardt, leaning forward intently.

"Nope."

"It was a little country, back on Earth, that was never conquered."

"Tough sons of bitches, huh?" asked O'Neal without much show of interest.

"Not especially."

"Well, it's probably better to be lucky than tough."

"Switzerland was never conquered because it was far too valuable as a neutral country." Reinhardt paused. "Warring nations had to have a place where their diplomats could meet, where international banking could be done, where..."

"Spare me the details," said O'Neal. "What you're trying to say is that you want to set up a meet with the Khalia, and that you want to do it on my world."

"That is correct."

"Well, why didn't you just come out and say so in the first place, instead of making all those threats?"

"Then you'll agree to it?" asked Reinhardt, surprised.

"No -- but think of the time we could have saved."

"O'Neal, I have been assigned to procure the services of this world for a secret meeting with the Khalia. I really can't return with my mission unfulfilled."

"And I really can't agree with my pockets unfulfilled," replied O'Neal.

"So it comes down to money?"

"Doesn't it always?"

"Have you no concept of loyalty at all?" demanded Reinhardt. "You have an opportunity to be of inestimable service to your own race!"

"I belong to the race of capitalist beachcombers," said O'Neal, "to whom I am intensely loyal. As for you and the Khalia, you're just a bunch of guys with money for beer."

"All right," said Reinhardt. "What are your terms?"

O'Neal shrugged. "Make me an offer."

"The Alliance can spend up to 200,000 credits for the use of your planet."

"Come on," said O'Neal. "You'll spend more than that just getting here."

"250,000."

"Forget it."

"And a pardon for all previous crimes."

"I'm never going back. What do I need a pardon for?"

"What do you want?" demanded Reinhardt in exasperation.

"Got a pen?"

"I have my pocket computer."

"All right," said O'Neal. "First, I want one million credits."

"That's out of the question."

"Second, I want the pardon you offered me."

"I told you, the amount is -- "

"Let me finish," said O'Neal. "Then we can negotiate." He leaned back comfortably. "Third, I want it -- in writing -- that the Alliance can't erect any competitive bars while they're here. Any soldier who wants a drink has to come to the Devil's Asshole."

"The Devil's Asshole?"

"That's where we are."

"We simply can't have that name, O'Neal. You will have to change it."

"I like it."

"Nevertheless."

"Who's making the rules here, anyway?"

"This is to be the site of a diplomatic meeting. We can't have you calling it the Devil's Asshole!"

"I'll think about it," replied O'Neal. "Fourth, if any special buildings have to be erected for the Khalia, the Alliance has to pay for them."

"Is that all?" asked Reinhardt dryly.

"Nope. I can't seem to get vodka out here. I want 24 cases of top-quality vodka. And finally, I want

official recognition as King Lizard I."

"Surely you're jesting!"

"Not at all."

"Your conditions are totally unacceptable."

"Well, as I said, they're negotiable. I'll take 16 cases of vodka if I have to."

"You'll take 200,000 credits and nothing else, and be glad we don't blow your planet right out of orbit."

"You'll give me what I asked or I'll mine every inch of this place."

"You can't mine an entire planet," said Reinhardt confidently.

"Maybe not, but I can make the air and water awfully dirty."

"We'll go elsewhere," threatened Reinhardt.

"Fine. I wish you would."

"Damn it, O'Neal -- we've only got a month!"

"So you said." O'Neal grinned. "I've done a little math, and according to my figures, if you've only got a month the Khalia are already on their way."

"Only in this general direction."

"And your engineers must be within a day's flight of here if you want the Khalia sleeping anywhere besides grass huts." O'Neal took a long sip from his drink. "I'd say this is a seller's market."

"I'll have to contact my superiors and get back to you."

"I've got all the time in the world," said O'Neal pleasantly.

Reinhardt stalked off, hoping that O'Neal couldn't see the trace of a smile forming at the corners of his mouth.

The Alliance approved O'Neal's terms within three hours.

* * * *

"Oh dear, oh dear," said the little diplomat. "This won't do at all, Mr. O'Neal. Not at all."

"What won't?" asked O'Neal.

"We can't have our men sleeping in a ... a _whorehouse_. It would do terrible things for discipline and morale."

"As a matter of fact," contradicted O'Neal, "it would be the best thing in the world for morale. They'd wake up smiling every morning."

"No, it just won't do, Mr. O'Neal. I'm afraid your female employees will have to go."

"Go? Go where?"

The little man stared at him. "That's hardly _my_ problem."

"They stay right where they are."

"Then I shall advise the Alliance that you have broken the spirit if not the letter of your agreement, and that payment not be made."

"Fine," said O'Neal. "You do that. And while you're at it, get the hell off my planet."

"I have every right to be here, Mr. O'Neal."

"I'm the king, and I said Scram!"

"Allow me to refer to you Section 19, sub-section 3, paragraph 21 of your signed agreement with the Alliance..."

"Why don't you just tell me what you think it says?"

"It gives me permission to survey the construction sites and -- "

"Sites?" repeated O'Neal. "You mean there's more than one?"

"I hope you didn't think we would permit our troops to sleep in thatched huts, Mr. O'Neal!" said the little diplomat, quite shocked. "And of course, we shall have to erect a dwelling fully commensurate with the needs of the Khalia."

"What has that got to do with my girls?"

"Really, Mr. O'Neal, I've no time for levity. And of course the name of your establishment must be changed."

"It already has been."

The little diplomat looked severe. "Satan's Sphincter has to go. If you won't change it, one of our people will be happy to come up with a new name."

* * * *

"You've knocked down all my trees!" complained O'Neal.

"We can't have the Khalia thinking we have any men hidden out there," said the General, who was supervising the defoliation.

"There's nothing out there! I've been here for three years, and I've never seen anything but a few birds!"

"You know it and I know it, Mr. O'Neal," replied the General, "but the Khalia may not believe it, and I won't have the conference fall apart over a trivial matter of a few trees."

"Do you know how long those trees have been standing there?" demanded O'Neal.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Centuries!"

"Then they'll be glad to have a rest, won't they?"

"You're desecrating my planet!" complained O'Neal.

"It's our planet for the next few weeks," replied the General. "And by the way, you're going to have to come up with a new name for your establishment."

"I already did."

"I don't know who approved of Lucifer's Rectum, but I assure you it's totally unacceptable."

O'Neal glared at him and began wishing he had put an escape clause into the contract.

* * * *

"Reinhardt! Where the hell have you been?"

"Around," replied Reinhardt calmly. "I've had numerous details to look after."

"I want to talk to you!"

"Well, here I am. Start talking."

"This isn't working out," said O'Neal.

"Nonsense," said Reinhardt, staring at the cold gray steel structures. "Construction is actually two days ahead of schedule."

"That's not what I mean."

"Then please explain yourself."

"There are too damned many people here, and your buildings are eyesores."

"Most of the people will be gone before long, and you can decorate the buildings any way you like once we've finished here."

"I plan to tear them down."

Reinhardt uttered an amused laugh. "They're made of fortified titanium with a tight molecular bonding."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that they're virtually indestructible. After all, it wouldn't do to have a saboteur try to blow them up during the meeting, would it?"

"You mean they're going to be here forever?"

"You'll get used to them. And I'm sure your -- ah -- ladyfriends will appreciate them comes winter."

"We don't have any winters here!" yelled O'Neal.

"So you don't. My mistake."

"Then what am I going to do with them?"

Reinhardt grinned at him. "War is hell, O'Neal."

* * * *

"Ready for your physical?" asked the Major.

"What physical?" replied O'Neal suspiciously.

"The Khalia are due to land here in just six more days."

"What the hell does that have to do with my health?"

"It's not your health we're worried about," answered the Major. "But they're mammals, and very likely subject to many of the same diseases that afflict humans. What if you have a cold, or a minor viral infection? For all we know, it could kill the Khalia -- and we can't have them all dying on us, can we?"

"I thought that was the whole purpose of going to war with them," muttered O'Neal.

"What a refreshing sense of humor you have!" laughed the Major. "Now be a good fellow and report to Building #4 for your physical, won't you?"

"You go to hell."

"You can report voluntarily or I can call the guard, but you will report, Mr. O'Neal. Allow me to refer you to your written agreement with the Alliance, page 7, paragraph..."

* * * *

"Now breathe out."

O'Neal, his face a bright red, exhaled and began gasping for air.

"We're just a bit out of shape, aren't we?" asked the doctor with a smile.

"We didn't realize that holding our breath for ten minutes was a prerequisite for being king," replied O'Neal caustically.

"Come, now, Mr. O'Neal," chuckled the doctor. "You held it for barely 30 seconds."

"What does that have to do with carrying some disease that can wipe out the Khalia?" demanded O'Neal.

"Nothing," replied the doctor. "On the other hand, we don't want a reigning monarch to die during our occupation. It wouldn't look at all good back at headquarters."

"I have no intention of dying."

"Well, we seem to be in total agreement on that point."

"You bet your ass we are."

"Therefore, I'm certain you won't mind going on an immediate 800-calorie-per-day diet."

"What?"

"Just until you've lost 25 pounds or so," said the doctor. "And of course, the tobacco and liquor will have to go."

"They're not going anywhere!" snapped O'Neal.

"Really, Mr. O'Neal, a man with your blood pressure should try not to get so excited. I think a brisk three-mile walk every morning and evening is also called for."

"Then you take it."

"Please, Mr. O'Neal -- your health is my responsibility."

"Not unless the Khalia can get high blood pressure by visiting my planet, it isn't."

"This is most awkward," said the doctor. "You are calamitously out of condition, Mr. O'Neal. I really must insist that you follow my instructions."

"Not a chance."

"Then I shall have to use my authority, under Section 34 of -- "

"You have no authority! I'm the goddamned king!"

"Under Section 34 of the Occupying Army Specifications," continued the doctor doggedly. "If, in the opinion of the presiding medical officer," he quoted, "there is just and ample cause for..."

"Never mind," said O'Neal wearily.

"It's for your own good," said the doctor. "Some day you'll thank me."

"Don't hold your breath," muttered O'Neal.

"I won't," said the doctor agreeably. "But with luck, and a considerable amount of self-discipline, you may someday be able to hold yours."

* * * *

"What now?" demanded O'Neal as Reinhardt approached him.

"It's time for you to leave," replied Reinhardt. "The Khalia are expected within the next ten hours."

"So what? It's my planet. I'm curious to see what they look like."

"We can't have you representing the human race dressed like that! When was the last time you wore a pair of shoes?"

"What's that got to do with anything? For all you know, the Khalia don't even wear clothes."

"They may not, but humans do," answered Reinhardt severely. "You're simply not presentable."

"Then I'll get a pair of shoes."

"And a whole new outfit."

"Right," muttered O'Neal wearily.

"And a shave."

"What? No manicure?" said O'Neal sardonically.

"I was about to suggest that," agreed Reinhardt.

"Somehow I'm not surprised."

* * * *

The Khalia came and the Khalia went, accusations were hurled back and forth, and nothing very much was resolved, to nobody's great surprise.

"Thank God _that's_ over!" muttered O'Neal thankfully as the last of the Khalia ships departed.

"I should think that you, of all people, would be delighted," remarked Reinhardt. "After all, you made a million credits."

"I also lost 16 pounds, I haven't had a drink or a woman in three weeks, my feet are covered with blisters, my suit is too tight, and I don't recognize my home."

"Well, one can't have everything."

"I _had_ everything a month ago. Evidently one can't _keep_ everything as long as you military bastards continue to play your idiot games. Which reminds me," added O'Neal, "when are you clearing out?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," said Reinhardt.

"What's to understand?" snapped O'Neal. "When are you taking your men and going away?"

"I have absolutely no idea. It depends on headquarters."

"But the meeting's over, for all the good it did you."

"True," admitted Reinhardt. "But we do have an option to renew our lease."

"What the hell for?" demanded O'Neal. "You're never going to make peace with those bastards."

"Probably not," agreed Reinhardt. "Still, I don't see why it should bother you in the least. You'll get a renewal fee."

"I don't _want_ your money! I just want to be left alone!" He stood up. "Look at me. I'm in danger of turning into _you_!"

"Then you shouldn't have leased us the planet in the first place."

"_You_ came to _me_, damn it! I didn't come to you!"

"I can't see what difference that makes."

"Look," said O'Neal desperately, "why don't you just buy the damned world from me?"

"Oh, we couldn't do that," said Reinhardt. "Then it wouldn't be a neutral planet any longer." He paused. "No, we're quite pleased with our present arrangement."

* * * *

Reinhardt was sitting in the bar of the Angel's Anus, sharing a drink with the General, when the speaker on his wrist beeped twice.

"Yes?" said Reinhardt.

"He's gone, sir."

"He took all his possessions with him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you remember to put a tracer on his ship?"

"As you ordered."

"Good. Let me know where he winds up." Reinhardt deactivated the speaker and turned to the General. "A pity that we're going to have to freeze his account. One could almost feel sorry for him, if he hadn't tried to hold us up." He allowed himself the luxury of a smile. "I do love dealing with an amoral man!"

"Where do you suppose he'll come to rest?"

Reinhardt shrugged. "Who knows? Wherever it is, it'll be as far from us and the Khalia as possible." He grinned and leaned back comfortably on his chair. "The perfect place for another Switzerland, once this world has outlived its usefulness. I look forward to negotiating its use with him."

-- The End --