

PROTEST NOTE

"For all its spirit of detachment from petty local issues, the Corps was never slow to interpose its majestic presence in the path of injustice. Under-Secretary Sternwheeler's classic approach to the problem of Aga Kagan aggression at Flamme testified to the efficacy of tried diplomatic procedures backed by the profound prestige of the Corps . . ."

—Vol. XV, Reel 3, 494 AE (AD 2955)

"I'm not at all sure," Under-Secretary Sternwheeler said, "that I fully understand the necessity of your absenting yourself from your post of duty at this time, 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 of making my point."

"I seem to recall seeing a dispatch or two on the subject," 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. 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're 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 40mm infinite repeaters—and 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 cooperation—"

"The Boyars needed some co-operation sixty years ago. They tried to get the Aga Kagans to join in, help them beat back some of the saurian wildlife that liked to graze on people. The Aga Kagans didn't want to play. The Corps didn't like the idea either; they wanted to see an undisputed anti-Concordiatist enclave. But now that the world is tamed, the squatters are 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 naïve; 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 out-moded 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, 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 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 dislike the idea of 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. 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, I hope you'll make it 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 veranda at Government House, Retief settled himself comfortably in a lounge chair, accepted a tall glass from a white-jacketed waiter, and regarded the flamboyant Flamme sunset, a gorgeous blaze of vermilion 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 couldn'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 up-wind 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're 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. 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 . . ."

* * *

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 scrub-land support a crop?" Retief said, eyeing the lichen-covered knolls.

"Sure. We start with legumes, 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 and the Chef dropped his cigar, 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 of a—!" 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 till I get my hands on the son of a—"

Retief pulled him back. "Sit tight and look pleased, Georges. Never give the opposition a hint of your true feelings. Pretend you're a goat lover—and hand me one of your cigars."

The three horsemen pulled up in a churn of chaff and a clatter of pebbles. Georges coughed, batting a hand at the settling dust. Retief peeled the cigar unhurriedly, sniffed at it, thumbed it alight. He drew at it, puffed out a cloud of smoke, and glanced casually at the trio of Aga Kagan cavaliers.

"Peace be with you," he intoned in accent-free Kagan. "May your shadows never grow less."

The leader of the three, a hawk-faced man with a heavy beard, unlimbered his rifle, fingered it, frowning ferociously.

"Have no fear," Retief said, smiling graciously. "He who comes as a guest enjoys perfect safety."

A smooth-faced member of the threesome barked an oath, leveled his rifle at Retief.

"Youth is the steed of folly," Retief said. "Take care that the beardless one does not disgrace his house."

The leader whirled on the youth, snarled an order; he lowered the rifle, muttering. Blackbeard turned back to Retief.

"Begone, interlopers," he said. "You disturb the goats."

"Provision is not taken to the house of the generous," Retief said. "May the creatures dine well ere they move on."

"Hah! The goats of the Aga Kaga graze on the lands of the Aga Kaga." The leader edged his horse close, eyed Retief fiercely. "We welcome no intruders on our lands."

"To praise a man for what he does not possess is to make him appear foolish," Retief said. "These are the lands of the Boyars. But enough of these pleasantries. We seek audience with your ruler."

"You may address me as `Exalted One,'" the leader said. "Now dismount from that steed of Shaitan—"

"It is written, `If you need anything from a dog, call him `sir,' " Retief said.

"I must decline to impute canine ancestry to a guest. Now you may conduct me to your headquarters."

"Enough of your insolence—!" The bearded man cocked his rifle. "I could blow your heads off—"

"The hen has feathers, but it does not fly," Retief said. "We have asked for escort. A slave must be beaten with a stick; for a free man, a hint is enough."

"You mock me, pale one. I warn you—"

"Only love makes me weep," Retief said. "I laugh at hatred."

"Get out of the car!"

Retief puffed at his cigar, eyed the Aga Kagan cheerfully. The youth in the rear moved forward, teeth bared.

"Never give in to the fool, lest he say, `He fears me,'" Retief said.

"I cannot restrain my men in the face of your insults," the bearded Aga Kagan roared. "These hens of mine have feathers—and talons as well!"

"When God would destroy an ant, he gives him wings," Retief said. "Distress in misfortune is another misfortune."

The bearded man's face grew purple.

Retief dribbled the ash from his cigar over the side of the car.

"Now, I think we'd better be getting on," he said briskly. "I've enjoyed our chat, but we do have business to attend to."

The bearded leader laughed shortly. "Does the condemned man beg for the axe?" he inquired rhetorically. "You shall be allowed audience with the Aga Kaga, then. Move on—and make no attempt to escape, else my gun will speak you a brief farewell."

The horsemen glowered, then at a word from the leader, took positions around the car. Georges started the vehicle forward, following the leading rider. Retief leaned back and let out a long sigh.

"That was close," he said. "I was about out of proverbs."

"You sound as though you'd brought off a coup," Georges said. "From the expression on the whiskery one's face, we're in for trouble. What was he saying?"

"Just a routine exchange of bluffs," Retief said. "Now when we get there, remember to make your flattery sound like insults and your insults sound like flattery, and you'll be all right."

"These birds are armed—and they don't like strangers," Georges said. "Maybe I should have boned up on their habits before I joined this expedition."

"Just stick to the plan. And remember: a handful of luck is better than a camel-load of learning."

* * *

The air car followed the escort down a long slope to a dry river bed, across it, through a barren stretch of shifting sand, to a green oasis, set with canopies.

The armed escort motioned the car to a halt before an immense tent of glistening black, before which armed men lounged under a pennant bearing a lion couchant in crimson on a field vert.

"Get out," Blackbeard ordered. The guards eyed the visitors, drawn sabers catching sunlight. Retief and Georges stepped from the car onto rich rugs spread on the grass, followed the ferocious gesture of the bearded man through the opening into a perfumed interior of luminous shadows. A heavy odor of incense hung in the air, and the strumming of stringed instruments laid a muted pattern of sound behind the decorations of gold and blue, silver and green. At the far end of the room, among a bevy of female slaves, a large and resplendently clad man with blue-black hair and a clean-shaven chin popped a grape into his mouth, wiped his fingers negligently on a wisp of silk offered by a hand-maiden, belched loudly, and looked the callers over.

Blackbeard cleared his throat. "Down on your faces in the presence of the Exalted One, the Aga Kaga, ruler of the East and West—"

"Sorry," Retief said firmly. "My hay-fever, you know."

The reclining giant waved a hand languidly.

"Never mind the formalities," he said. "Approach."

Retief and Georges crossed the thick rugs. A cold draft blew toward them. The reclining man sneezed violently, wiped his nose on another silken scarf, and held up a hand.

"Night and the horses and the desert know me," he said in resonant tones. "Also the sword and the guest and paper and pen—" He paused, wrinkled his nose, and sneezed again.

"Turn off that damned air-conditioner," he snapped. He settled himself, motioned the bearded man to him; the two exchanged muted remarks. Then the bearded man stepped back, ducked his head, and withdrew to the rear.

"Excellency," Retief said, "I have the honor to present M. Georges Duror, Chef d'Regime of the Planetary government—"

"Planetary government?" The Aga Kaga spat grape seeds on the rug. "My men have observed a few squatters along the shore. If they're in distress, I'll see about a distribution of goat-meat."

"It is the punishment of the envious to grieve at another's plenty," Retief said. "No goat-meat will be required."

"Ralph told me you talk like a page out of Mustapha ben Abdallah Katib Jelebi," the Aga Kaga said. "I know a few old sayings myself. For example, 'A Bedouin is only cheated once.'"

"We have no such intentions, Excellency," Retief said. "Is it not written, 'Have no faith in the Prince whose minister cheats you'?"

"I've had some unhappy experiences with strangers," the Aga Kaga said. "It is written in the sands, 'All strangers are kin.' Still, he who visits rarely is a welcome guest. Be seated."

Hand-maidens brought cushions, giggled, and fled. Retief and Georges settled themselves comfortably. The Aga Kaga eyed them in silence.

"We have come to bear tidings from Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne," Retief said solemnly. A perfumed slave girl offered grapes.

"Modest ignorance is better than boastful knowledge," the Aga Kaga said. "What brings the CDT into the picture?"

"The essay of the drunkard will be read in the tavern," Retief said. "Whereas the words of kings . . ."

"Very well, I concede the point." The Aga Kaga waved a hand at the serving maids. "Depart, my dears. Attend me later. You too, Ralph. These are mere diplomats: men of words, not deeds."

The bearded man glared and departed. The girls hurried after him.

"Now," the Aga Kaga said. "Let's drop the wisdom of the ages and get down to the issues. Not that I don't admire your repertoire of platitudes. How do you remember them all?"

"Diplomats and other liars require good memories," Retief said. "But, as you point out, small wisdom to small minds. I'm here to effect a settlement of certain differences between yourself and the planetary authorities. I have here a Note, which I'm conveying on behalf of the Sector Under-Secretary. With your permission, I'll read it."

"Go ahead." The Aga Kaga kicked a couple of cushions onto the floor, eased a bottle from under the couch, and reached for glasses.

"The Under-Secretary for Sector Affairs presents his compliments to his Excellency the Aga Kaga of the Aga Kaga, Primary Potentate, Hereditary Sheik, Emir of the—"

"Yes, yes; skip the titles."

Retief flipped over two pages.

". . . and with reference to the recent relocation of persons under the jurisdiction of his Excellency, has the honor to point out that the territories now under settlement comprise a portion of that area, designated as Sub-sector Alpha, which, under terms of the Agreement entered into by his Excellency's predecessor, and as referenced in Sector Ministry's Notes numbers G-175846573957-b and X-7584-736 c-1, with particular pertinence

to that body designated in the Revised Galactic Catalogue, tenth edition, as amended, Volume Nine, reel 43, as 54 Cygni Alpha, otherwise referred to hereinafter as Flamme—"

"Come to the point," the Aga Kaga cut in. "You're here to lodge a complaint that I'm invading territories to which someone else lays claim, is that it?" He smiled broadly, offered dope-sticks, and lit one. "Well, I've been expecting a call. After all, it's what you gentlemen are paid for. Cheers."

"Your Excellency has a lucid way of putting things," Retief said.

"Call me Stanley," the Aga Kaga said. "The other routine is just to please some of the old fools—I mean the more conservative members of my government. They're still gnawing their beards and kicking themselves because their ancestors dropped science in favor of alchemy and got themselves stranded in a cultural dead-end. This charade is supposed to prove they were right all along. However, I've no time to waste in neurotic compensations. I have places to go and deeds to accomplish."

"At first glance," Retief said, "it looks as though the places are already occupied and the deeds are illegal."

The Aga Kaga guffawed. "For a diplomat, you speak plainly, Retief. Have another drink." He poured, eyeing Georges. "What of M. Duror? How does he feel about it?"

Georges took a thoughtful swallow of whiskey. "Not bad," he said. "But not quite good enough to cover the odor of goats."

The Aga Kaga snorted. "I thought the goats were overdoing it a bit myself," he said. "Still, the greybeards insisted. And I need their support."

"Also," Georges said distinctly, "I think you're soft. You lie around letting women wait on you, while your betters are out doing an honest day's work."

The Aga Kaga looked startled. "Soft? I can tie a knot in an iron bar as thick as your thumb." He popped a grape into his mouth. "As for the rest, your pious views as to the virtues of hard labor are as childish as my advisors' faith in the advantages of primitive plumbing. As for myself, I am a realist. If two monkeys want the same banana, in the end one will have it, and the other will cry morality. The days of my years are numbered, praise be to God. While they last, I hope to eat well, hunt well, fight well, and take my share of pleasure. I leave to others the arid satisfactions of self-denial and other perversions."

"You admit you're here to grab our land then," Georges said. "That's the damndest piece of bare-faced aggression—"

"Ah, ah." The Aga Kaga held up a hand: "watch your vocabulary, my dear sir. I'm sure that `justifiable yearnings for territorial self-realization' would be more appropriate to the situation. Or possibly `legitimate aspirations for self-determination of formerly exploited peoples' might fit the case. Aggression is, by definition, an activity carried on only by those who have inherited the mantle of `Colonial Imperialism.'"

"Imperialism! Why, you Aga Kagans have been the most notorious planet-grabbers in Sector history, you—you—"

"Call me Stanley." The Aga Kaga munched a grape. "I merely face the realities of popular folk lore. Let's be pragmatic; it's a matter of historical association. Some people can grab land and pass it off lightly as a moral duty; others are dubbed imperialist merely for holding onto their own. Unfair, you say. But that's life, my friends. And I shall continue to take every advantage of it."

"We'll fight you!" Georges bellowed. He took another gulp of whiskey and slammed the glass down. "You won't take this world without a struggle—"

"Another?" the Aga Kaga said, offering the bottle. Georges glowered as his glass was filled. The Aga Kaga held the glass up to the light. "Excellent color, don't you agree?" He turned his eyes on Georges.

"It's pointless to resist," he said. "We have you outgunned and outmanned. Your small nation has no chance against us. But we're prepared to be generous. You may continue to occupy such areas as we do not immediately require until such time as you're able to make other arrangements."

"And by the time we've got a crop growing out of what was bare rock, you'll be ready to move in," the Boyar Chef d'Regime snapped. "But you'll find we aren't alone!"

"Quite alone," the Aga Kaga said. He nodded sagely. "Yes, one need but read the lesson of history. The Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne will make expostulatory noises, but it will accept the fait accompli. You, my dear sir, are but a very small nibble. We won't make the mistake of excessive greed; we shall inch our way to empire—and those who stand in our way shall be dubbed warmongers."

"I see you're quite a student of history, Stanley," Retief said. "I wonder if you recall the eventual fate of most of the world-be empire nibblers of the past?"

"Ah, but they grew incautious; they went too far, too fast."

"The confounded impudence," Georges rasped. "Tells us to our face what he has in mind . . ."

"An ancient and honorable custom, from the time of Mein Kampf and the Communist Manifesto through the Porcelain Wall of Leung. Such declarations have a legendary quality; it's traditional that they're never taken at face value."

"But always," Retief said, "there was a critical point at which the man on horseback could have been pulled from the saddle—"

"COULD have been," the Aga Kaga chuckled. He finished the grapes and began peeling an orange. "But they never were. Hitler could have been stopped by the Czech Air Force in 1938; Stalin was at the mercy of the primitive atomics of the West in 1946; Leung was grossly over-extended at

Rangoon. But the onus of that historic role could not be overcome. It has been the fate of your spiritual forebears to carve civilizations from the wilderness, and then, amid tearing of garments and the heaping of ashes of self-accusation on your own confused heads, to withdraw, leaving the spoils for local political opportunists and mob leaders, clothed in the mystical virtue of native birth. Have a banana."

"You're stretching the analogy a little too far," Retief said. "You're banking on the inaction of the Corps. You could be wrong."

"I shall know when to stop," the Aga Kaga said.

"Tell me, Stanley," Retief said, rising. "Are we quite private here?"

"Yes, perfectly so. None would dare to intrude in my council." He cocked an eyebrow at Retief. "You have a proposal to make in confidence? But what of our dear friend Georges? One would not like to see him disillusioned . . ."

"Don't worry about Georges. He's a realist, like you. He's prepared to deal in facts. Hard facts, in this case."

The Aga Kaga nodded thoughtfully. "What are you getting at?"

"You're basing your plan of action on the certainty that the Corps will sit by, wringing its hands, while you embark on a career of interplanetary piracy—"

"Isn't it the custom?" the Aga Kaga smiled complacently.

"I have news for you, Stanley. In this instance, neck-wringing seems more in order than hand-wringing . . ."

The Aga Kaga frowned. "Your manner—"

"Never mind our manners!" Georges blurted, standing. "We don't need any lessons from goat-herding land-thieves!"

The Aga Kaga's face darkened. "You dare to speak thus to me, pig of a muck-grubber—"

With a muffled curse Georges launched himself at the potentate. The giant rolled aside, grunted as the Boyar's fist thumped in his short ribs, then chopped down on Georges' neck. The Chef d'Regime slid off onto the floor as the Aga Kaga bounded to his feet, sending fruit and silken cushions flying.

"I see it now!" he hissed. "An assassination attempt!" He stretched his arms, thick as tree-roots—a grizzly in satin robes. "Your heads will ring together like gongs before I have done with you . . .!" He lunged for Retief. Retief came to his feet, feinted with his left, and planted a short right against the Aga Kaga's jaw with a solid smack. The potentate stumbled, grabbed; Retief slipped aside. The Aga Kaga whirled to face Retief.

"A slippery diplomat, by all the houris in Paradise!" he grated, breathing hard. "But a fool. True to your medieval code of chivalry, you attacked singly, a blunder I would never have made. And you shall die for your

idiocy!" He opened his mouth to bellow—

"You sure look foolish, with your fancy hair-do down in your eyes," Retief said. "The servants will get a big laugh out of that—"

With a choked yell, the Aga Kaga dived for Retief, missed as he leaped aside. The two went to the mat together, rolled, sending a stool skittering. Grunts and curses were heard as the two big men strained, muscles popping. Retief groped for a scissors hold; the Aga Kaga seized his foot, bit hard. Retief bent nearly double, braced himself, and slammed the potentate against the rug. Dust flew. Then the two were on their feet, circling.

"Many times have I longed to broil a diplomat over a slow fire," the Aga Kaga snarled. "Tonight will see it come to pass . . ."

"I've seen it done often at staff meetings," said Retief. "It seems to have no permanent effect—"

The Aga Kaga reached for Retief, who fainted left, hammered a right to the chin. The Aga Kaga tottered. Retief measured him, brought up a haymaker. The potentate slammed to the rug—out cold.

Georges rolled over, sat up. "Let me at the son of a—" he muttered.

"Take over, Georges," Retief said, panting. "Since he's in a mood to negotiate now, we may as well get something accomplished."

Georges eyed the fallen ruler, who stirred, groaned lugubriously. "I hope you know what you're doing. But I'm with you in any case." Georges straddled the prone body, plucked a curved knife from the low table, prodded the Aga Kaga's Adam's apple. He groaned again and opened his eyes.

"Make one little peep and your wind-bag will spring a leak," Georges said. "Very few historical figures have accomplished anything important after their throats were cut."

"Stanley won't yell," Retief said. "We're not the only ones who're guilty of cultural idiocy. He'd lose face something awful if he let his followers see him like this." Retief settled himself on a tufted ottoman. "Right, Stanley?"

The Aga Kaga snarled.

Retief selected a grape, ate it thoughtfully. "These aren't bad, Georges. You might consider taking on a few Aga Kagan vine-growers—purely on a yearly contract basis, of course."

The Aga Kaga groaned, rolling his eyes.

"Well, I believe we're ready to get down to diplomatic proceedings now," Retief said. "Nothing like dealing in an atmosphere of realistic good-fellowship. First, of course, there's the matter of the presence of aliens lacking visas." He opened his briefcase, withdrew a heavy sheet of parchment. "I have the document here, drawn up and ready for signature. It provides for the prompt deportation of such persons, by Corps Transport, all expenses to be borne by the Aga Kagan government. That's agreeable, I

think?" Retief looked expectantly at the purple face of the prone potentate. The Aga Kaga grunted a strangled grunt.

"Speak up, Stanley," Retief said. "Give him plenty of air, Georges."

"Shall I let some in through the side?"

"Not yet. I'm sure Stanley wants to be agreeable."

The Aga Kaga snarled.

"Maybe just a little then, Georges," Retief said judiciously. Georges jabbed the knife in far enough to draw a bead of blood. The Aga Kaga grunted.

"Agreed!" he snorted. "By the beard of the Prophet, when I get my hands on you . . ."

"Second item: certain fields, fishing grounds, et cetera, have suffered damage due to the presence of the aforementioned illegal immigrants. Full compensation will be made by the Aga Kagan government. Agreed?"

The Aga Kaga drew a breath, tensed himself; Georges jabbed with the knife point. His prisoner relaxed with a groan. "Agreed!" he grated. "A vile tactic! You enter my tent under the guise of guests, protected by diplomatic immunity—"

"I had the impression we were herded in here at sword point," said Retief. "Shall we go on? Now, there's the little matter of restitution for violation of sovereignty, reparations for mental anguish, payment for damaged fences, roads, drainage canals, communications, et cetera, et cetera. Shall I read them all?"

"Wait until the news of this outrage is spread abroad—"

"They'd never believe it. History would prove it impossible. And on mature consideration, I'm sure you won't want it noised about that you entertained visiting dignitaries flat on your back."

"What about the pollution of the atmosphere by goats?" Georges put in. "And don't overlook the muddying of streams, the destruction of valuable timber for camp fires, and—"

"I've covered all that sort of thing under a miscellaneous heading," Retief said. "We can fill it in at leisure when we get back."

"Bandits!" the Aga Kaga hissed. "Thieves! Dogs of unreliable imperialists!"

"It's disillusioning, I know," Retief said. "Still, of such little surprises is history made. Sign here." He held the parchment out and offered a pen. "A nice clear signature, please. We wouldn't want any quibbling about the legality of the treaty, after conducting the negotiation with such scrupulous regard for the niceties."

"Niceties! Never in history has such an abomination been perpetrated!"

"Oh, treaties are always worked out this way, when it comes right down to

it. We've just accelerated the process a little. Now, if you'll just sign like a good fellow, we'll be on our way. Georges will have his work cut out for him, planning how to use all this reparations money."

The Aga Kaga gnashed his teeth; Georges prodded. The Aga Kaga seized the pen and scrawled his name. Retief signed with a flourish. He tucked the treaty away in his briefcase, took out another paper.

"This is just a safe-conduct, to get us out of the door and into the car," he said. "Probably unnecessary, but it won't hurt to have it, in case you figure out some way to avoid your obligations as a host."

The Aga Kaga signed the document after another prod from Georges.

"One more paper, and I'll be into the jugular," he said.

"We're all through now," said Retief. "Stanley, we're going to have to run now. I'm going to strap up your hands and feet a trifle; it shouldn't take you more than ten minutes or so to get loose, stick a band-aid over that place on your neck, and get back in your grape-eating pose."

"My men will cut you down for the rascals you are!"

"—By that time, we'll be over the hill," Retief continued. "At full throttle, we'll be at Government House in an hour, and of course I won't waste any time transmitting the treaty to Sector HQ. And the same concern for face that keeps you from yelling for help will ensure that the details of the negotiation remain our secret."

"Treaty! That scrap of paper—"

"I confess the Corps is a little sluggish about taking action at times," Retief said, whipping a turn of silken cord around the Aga Kaga's ankles. "But once it's got signatures on a legal treaty, it's extremely stubborn about all parties' adhering to the letter. It can't afford to be otherwise, as I'm sure you'll understand." He cinched up the cord, went to work on the hands. The Aga Kaga glared at him balefully.

"To the Pit with the Corps! The ferocity of my revenge—"

"Don't talk nonsense, Stanley. There are several squadrons of Peace Enforcers cruising in the Sector just now. I'm sure you're not ready to make any historical errors by taking them on." Retief finished and stood up.

"Georges, just stuff a scarf in Stanley's mouth. I think he'd prefer to work quietly until he recovers his dignity." Retief buckled his briefcase, selected a large grape, and looked down at the Aga Kaga.

"Actually, you'll be glad you saw things our way, Stanley," he said. "You'll get all the credit for the generous settlement. Of course, it will be a striking precedent for any other negotiations that may become necessary if you get grabby on other worlds in this region. And if your advisors want to know why the sudden change of heart, just tell them you've decided to start from scratch on an unoccupied world. Mention the virtues of thrift and hard work. I'm confident you can find plenty of historical examples to support you."

"Thanks for the drink," said Georges. "Drop in on me at Government House some time and we'll crack another bottle."

"And don't feel bad about your project's going awry," said Retief. "In the words of the Prophet, 'Stolen goods are never sold at a loss.'"

* * *

"A remarkable about-face, Retief," Magnan said. "Let this be a lesson to you. A stern Note of Protest can work wonders."

"A lot depends on the method of delivery," Retief said.

"Nonsense. I knew all along the Aga Kagans were a reasonable, peace-loving people. One of the advantages of senior rank, of course, is the opportunity to see the big picture. Why, I was saying only this morning—"

The desk screen broke into life. The mottled jowls of Under-Secretary Sternwheeler appeared.

"Magnan! I've just learned of the Flamme affair. Who's responsible?"

"Why, ah . . . I suppose that I might be said—"

"This is your work, is it?"

"Well . . . Mr. Retief did play the role of messenger—"

"Don't pass the buck, Magnan!" the Under-Secretary barked. "What the devil went on out there?"

"Why, just a routine Protest Note. Everything is quite in order—"

"Bah! Your over-zealousness has cost me dear. I was feeding Flamme to the Aga Kaga to consolidate our position of moral superiority for use as a lever in a number of important negotiations. Now they've backed out. The Aga Kaga emerges from the affair wreathed in virtue. You've destroyed a very pretty finesse in power politics, Mr. Magnan! A year's work down the drain!"

"But I thought—"

"I doubt that, Mr. Magnan. I doubt that very much!" The Under-Secretary rang off.

"This is a fine turn of events," Magnan groaned. "Retief, you know very well Protest Notes are merely intended for the historical record; no one ever takes them seriously."

"You and the Aga Kaga ought to get together," said Retief. "He's a great one for citing historical parallels. He's not a bad fellow, as a matter of fact. I have an invitation from him to visit Kaga and go mud-pig hunting. He was so impressed by Corps methods that he wants to be sure we're on his side next time. Why don't you come along?"

"Mmmm. Perhaps I should cultivate him. A few high-level contacts never do any harm. On the other hand, I understand he lives in a very loose way,

feasting and merry-making. Frivolous in the extreme. No wife, I understand, but hordes of light-clad women about. And in that connection, the Aga Kagans have some very curious notions as to what constitutes proper hospitality to guests."

Retief rose, pulled on the powder blue cloak and black velvet gauntlets of a Career Minister.

"Don't let it worry you," he said. "You'll have a great time. And as the Aga Kaga would say, `Ugliness is the best safeguard of virginity.'"