

ANDRE NORTON

(Writing as Andrew North)

DUEL OF THE COSMIC MAGICIANS

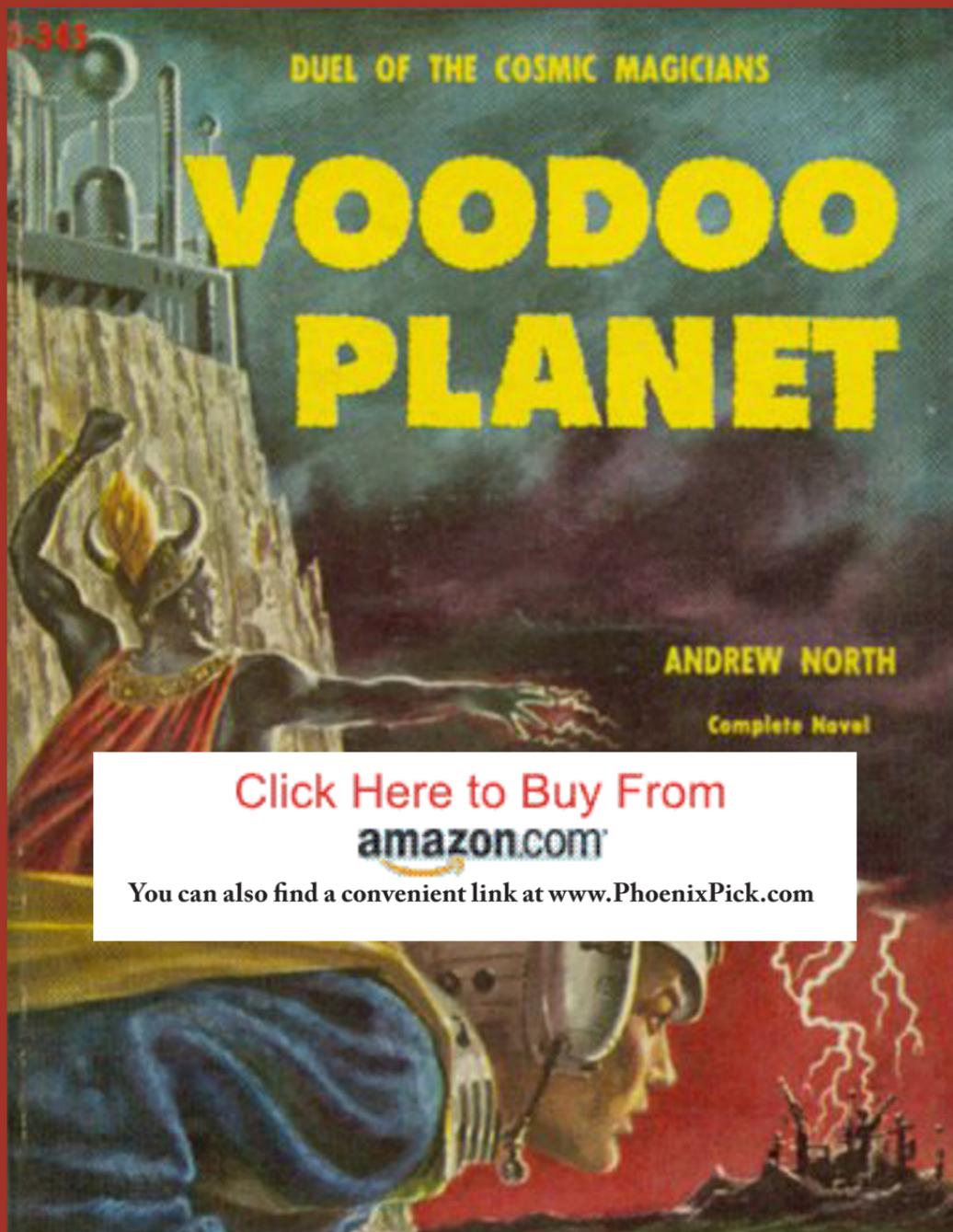
VOODOO PLANET

ANDREW NORTH

Complete Novel

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VOODOO
PLANET

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Dane Thorson: *He wanted to spend a short vacation on Khatka, not the rest of his life.*

Medic Tau: *Was he physician or magician—or a little bit of both?*

Chief Ranger Asaki: *Tracking the forests had taught him that mad animals—whether real or imaginary—were to be feared.*

Captain Jellico: *Would his knowledge of alien life-forms help him in his fight against alien ghosts?*

Nymani: *Not even this pilot's most scientific skill could overcome a voodoo charm's ground-drag.*

Lumbrilo: *On his own planet he was a witch doctor; on Earth he'd have been a master politician.*

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I

TALK OF HEAT—OR BETTER not—on Xecho. This waterlogged world combined all the most unattractive features of a steam bath and one could only dream of coolness, greenness—more land than a stingy string of islands.

The young man on the promontory above the crash of the waves wore the winged cap of a spaceman with the insignia of a cargo-master and not much else, save a pair of very short shorts. He wiped one hand absently across his bare chest and brought it away damp as he studied, through protective sun goggles, the treacherous promise of the bright sea. One *could* swim—if he wanted to lose most of his skin. There were minute organisms in that liquid that smacked their lips—if they had lips—every time they thought of a Terran.

Dane Thorson licked his own lips, tasting salt, and plodded back through the sand of the spaceport to the berth of the *Solar Queen*. This had been a long day, and one with more snarl-ups than he cared to count, keeping him on a constant, dogged trot between the ship and the fitting yard where riggers labored with the slowest motions possible to the human body—or so it seemed to the exasperated acting-Cargo-Master of the Free Trader. Captain Jellico had long ago taken refuge in his cabin to preserve the remnants of his temper. Dane had been allowed no such escape.

The *Queen* had a schedule for refitting to serve as a mail ship, and that time allowance did not allow for humidity playing the devil with the innards of robot fitters. She *had* to be ready to lift when the Combine ship now plying that run set down and formally signed off in her favor. Luckily, most of the work was done and Dane had given a last searching inspection before signing the rigger's book and reporting to his captain.

The air-conditioned interior of the *Queen* comforted him as he climbed to his quarters. Ship air was flat, chemically pure but unappetizing stuff. Today it was a relief to breathe. Dane went on to the bather. At least there was no lack of water—with the local skimmers filtered out. It was chill but relaxing on his gaunt young body.

He was sealing on his lightest tunic when the ramp buzzer sounded. A visitor—oh, not the supervisor-rigger again! Dane went to answer with dragging feet. For the crew of the *Queen* at the moment numbered exactly four, with himself for general errand boy. Captain Jellico was in his quarters two levels above, Medic Tau was presumably overhauling his supplies, and Sindbad, ship's cat, asleep in some empty cabin.

Dane jerked his tunic into place, very much on his guard as he came to the head of the ramp. But it was not the supervisor-rigger. Dane, thoroughly used to unusual-appearing strangers, both human and alien, was impressed by this visitor.

He was tall, this quiet man, his great height accented by a fit leanness, a narrowness of waist and hip, a length of leg and arm. His main article of clothing was the universal shorts of the Xecho settler. But, being fashioned of saffron yellow, they were the more brilliant because of his darkness of skin. For he was not the warm brown of the Terran Negroes Dane had served beside, though he shared their general features. His flesh was really black, black with an almost bluish sheen. Instead of shirt or tunic, his deep chest

was crossed by two wide straps, the big medallion marking their intersection giving forth flashes of gem fire when he breathed. He wore at his belt not the standard stun gun of a spaceman, but a weapon which resembled the more deadly Patrol blaster, as well as a long knife housed in a jeweled and fringed sheath. To the eye he was an example of barbaric force tamed and trimmed to civilized efficiency.

He saluted, palm out, and spoke Galactic Basic with only a suggestion of accent.

"I am Kort Asaki. I believe Captain Jellico expects me."

"Yes, sir!" Dane snapped to attention. So this was the Chief Ranger from fabulous Khatka, Xecho's sister planet.

The other ascended the cat ladder easily, missing no detail of the ship's interior as he passed. His expression was still one of polite interest as his guide rapped on the panel door of Jellico's cabin. And a horrible screech from Queex, the captain's pet hoobat, drowned out any immediate answer. Then followed that automatic thump on the floor of the blue-feathered, crab-parrot-toad's cage, announcing that its master was in residence.

Since the captain's cordial welcome extended only to his guest, Dane regretfully descended to the mess cabin to make unskilled preparations for supper—though there was not much you could do to foul up concentrates in an automatic cooker.

"Company?" Tau sat beyond the cooking unit nursing a mug of Terran coffee. "And do you *have* to serve music with the meals, especially that particular selection?"

Dane flushed, stopped whistling in mid-note. "Terra Bound" *was* old and pretty well worn out; he didn't know why he always unconsciously sounded off with that.

"A Chief Ranger from Khatka just came on board," he reported, carefully offhand, as he busied himself reading labels. He knew better than to serve fish or any of its derivatives in disguise again.

“Khatka!” Tau sat up straighter. “Now there’s a planet worth visiting.”

“Not on a Free Trader’s pay,” commented Dane.

“You can always hope to make a big strike, boy. But what I wouldn’t give to lift ship for there!”

“Why? You’re no hunter. How come you want to heat jets for that port?”

“Oh, I don’t care about the game preserves, though they’re worth seeing, too. It’s the people themselves—”

“But they’re Terran settlers, or at least from Terran stock, aren’t they?”

“Sure,” Tau sipped his coffee slowly. “But there are settlers and settlers, son. And a lot depends upon when they left Terra and why, and who they were—also what happened to them after they landed out here.”

“And Khatkans are really special?”

“Well, they have an amazing history. The colony was founded by escaped prisoners—and just one racial stock. They took off from Earth close to the end of the Second Atomic War. That was a race war, remember? Which made it doubly ugly.” Tau’s mouth twisted in disgust. “As if the color of a man’s skin makes any difference in what lies under it! One side in that line-up tried to take over Africa—herded most of the natives into a giant concentration camp and practiced genocide on a grand scale. Then they were cracked themselves, hard and heavy. During the confusion some survivors in the camp staged a revolt, helped by the enemy. They captured an experimental station hidden in the center of the camp and made a break into space in two ships which had been built there. That voyage must have been a nightmare, but they were desperate. Somehow they made it out here to the rim and set down on Khatka without power enough to take off again—and by then most of them were dead.

“But we humans, no matter what our race, are a tough breed. The refugees discovered that climatically their new

world was not too different from Africa, a lucky chance which might happen only once in a thousand times. So they thrived, the handful who survived. But the white technicians they had kidnaped to run the ships didn't. For they set up a color bar in reverse. The lighter your skin, the lower you were in the social scale. By that kind of selective breeding the present Khatkans are very dark indeed.

"They reverted to the primitive for survival. Then, about two hundred years ago, long before the first Survey Scout discovered them, something happened. Either the parent race mutated, or, as sometimes occurs, a line of people of superior gifts emerged—not in a few isolated births, but with surprising regularity in five family clans. There was a short period of power struggle until they realized the foolishness of civil war and formed an oligarchy, heading a loose tribal organization. With the Five Families to push and lead, a new civilization developed, and when Survey came to call they were no longer savages. Combine bought the trade rights about seventy-five years ago. Then the Company and the Five Families got together and marketed a luxury item to the galaxy. You know how every super-jet big shot on twenty-five planets wants to say he's hunted on Khatka. And if he can point out a graz head on his wall, or wear a tail bracelet, he's able to strut with the best. To holiday on Khatka is both fabulous and fashionable—and very, very profitable for the natives and for Combine who sells transportation to the travelers."

"I hear they have poachers, too," Dane remarked.

"Yes, that naturally follows. You know what a glam skin brings on the market. Wherever you have a rigidly controlled export you're going to have poachers and smugglers. But the Patrol doesn't go to Khatka. The natives handle their own criminals. Personally, I'd cheerfully take a ninety-nine-year sentence in the Lunar mines in place of what the Khatkans dish out to a poacher they net!"

"So that rumor has spread satisfactorily!"

Coffee slopped over the brim of Tau's mug and Dane dropped the packet of steak concentrate he was about to feed into the cooker. Chief Ranger Asaki loomed in the doorway of the mess as suddenly as if he had been teleported to that point.

The medic arose to his feet and smiled politely at the visitor.

"Do I detect in that observation, sir, the suggestion that the tales I have heard were deliberately set to blast where they would do the most good as deterrents?"

A fleeting grin broke the impassive somberness of the black face.

"I was informed you are a man skilled in 'magic,' Medic. You certainly display the traditional sorcerer's quickness of wit. But this rumor is also truth." The quirk of good humor had gone again, and there was an edge in the Chief Ranger's voice which cut. "Poachers on Khatka would welcome the Patrol in place of the attention they now receive."

He came into the mess cabin, Jellico behind him, and Dane pulled down two of the snap seats. He was holding a mug under the spout of the coffee dispenser as the captain made introductions.

"Thorson—our acting-cargo-master."

"Thorson," the Khatkan acknowledged with a grave nod of his head, and then glanced down to floor level with a look of surprise. Weaving a pattern about his legs, purring loudly, Sindbad was offering an unusually fervent welcome of his own. The Ranger went down on one knee, his hand out for Sindbad's inquiring sniff. Then the cat butted that dark palm, batted at it playfully with claw-sheathed paw.

"A Terran cat! It is of the lion family?"

"Far removed," Jellico supplied. "You'd have to add a lot of bulk to Sindbad to promote him to the lion class."

"We have only the old tales." Asaki sounded almost wistful as the cat jumped to his knee and clawed for a hold

on his chest belts. "But I do not believe that lions were ever so friendly toward my ancestors."

Dane would have removed the cat, but the Khatkan arose with Sindbad, still purring loudly, resting in the crook of his arm. The Ranger was smiling with a gentleness which changed the whole arrogant cast of his countenance.

"Do not bring this one to Khatka with you, Captain, or you will never take him away again. Those who dwell in the inner courts would not let him vanish from their sight. Ah, so this pleases you, small lion?" He rubbed Sindbad gently under the throat and the cat stretched his neck, his yellow eyes half closed in bliss.

"Thorson," the Captain turned to Dane, "that arrival report on my desk was the final one from Combine?"

"Yes, sir. There's no hope of the *Rover* setting down here before that date."

Asaki sat down, still holding the cat. "So you see, Captain, fortune has arranged it all. You have two tens of days. Four days to go in my cruiser, four days for your return here, and the rest to explore the preserve. We could not ask for better luck, for I do not know when our paths may cross again. In the normal course of events I will not have another mission to Xecho for a year, perhaps longer. Also—" He hesitated and then spoke to Tau. "Medic, Captain Jellico has informed me that you have made a study of magic on many worlds."

"That is so, sir."

"Do you then believe that it is real force, or that it is only a superstition for child-people who set up demons to howl petitions to when some darkness falls upon them?"

"Some of the magic I have seen is trickery, some of it founded upon an inner knowledge of men and their ways which a shrewd witch doctor can use to his advantage. There always remains"—Tau put down his mug, "—there always remains a small residue of happenings and results for which we have not yet found any logical explanations—"

"And I believe," Asaki interrupted, "it is also true that a race can be conditioned from birth to be sensitive to forms of magic so that men of that blood are particularly susceptible." That was more of a statement than a question, but Tau answered it.

"That is very true. A Lamorian, for example, can be 'sung' to death. I have witnessed such a case. But upon a Terran or another off-world man the same suggestion would have no effect."

"Those who settled Khatka brought such magic with them." The Chief Ranger's fingers still moved about Sindbad's jaw and throat soothingly, but his tone was chill, the coldest thing in the cramped space of the mess cabin.

"Yes, a highly developed form of it," Tau agreed.

"More highly developed perhaps than even you can believe, Medic!" That came in a hiss of cold rage. "I think that its present manifestation—death by a beast that is not a beast—could be worth your detailed study."

"Why?" Tau came bluntly to the point.

"Because it is a killing magic and it is being carefully used to rid my world of key men, men we need badly. If there is a weak point in this cloudy attack shaping against us, we must learn it, and soon!"

It was Jellico who added the rest. "We are invited to visit Khatka and survey a new hunting range as Chief Ranger Asaki's personal term guests."

Dane drew a deep breath of wonder. Guest rights on Khatka were jealously guarded—they were too valuable to their owners to waste. Whole families lived on the income from the yearly rental of even half a one. But the Rangers, by right of office, had several which they could grant to visiting scientists or men from other worlds holding positions similar to their own. To have such an opportunity offered to an ordinary Trader was almost incredible.

His wonder was matched by Tau's and must have been plain to read for the Chief Ranger smiled.

“For a long time Captain Jellico and I have exchanged biological data on alien life-forms—his skill in photographing such, his knowledge as an xenobiologist are widely recognized. And so I have permission for him to visit the new Zoboru preserve, not yet officially opened. And you, Medic Tau, your help, or at least your diagnosis, we need in another direction. So, one expert comes openly, another not so openly. Though, Medic, your task is approved by my superiors. And”—he glanced at Dane—“perhaps to muddle the trail for the suspicious, shall we not ask this young man also?”

Dane’s eyes went to the captain. Jellico was always fair and his crew would have snapped into action on his word alone—even if they were fronting a rain of Thorkian death darts and that order was to advance. But, on the other hand, Dane would never have asked a favor, and the best he hoped for was to be able to perform his duties without unfavorable comment upon their commission. He had no reason to believe Jellico was willing to agree to this.

“You have two weeks’ planet-side leave coming, Thorson. If you want to spend it on Khatka...” Jellico actually grinned then. “I take it that you do. When do we up-ship, sir?”

“You said that you must wait for the return of your other crew members—shall we say mid-afternoon tomorrow?” The Chief Ranger stood up and put Sindbad down though the cat protested with several sharp meows.

“Small lion,” the tall Khatkan spoke to the cat as to an equal, “this is your jungle, and mine lies elsewhere. But should you ever grow tired of traveling the stars, there is always a home for you in my courts.”

When the Chief Ranger went out the door, Sindbad did not try to follow, but he uttered one mournful little cry of protest and loss.

“So he wants a trouble shooter, does he?” Tau asked. “All right, I’ll try to hunt out his goblins for him; it’ll be worth that to visit Khatka!”

Dane, remembering the hot glare of the Xecho spaceport, the sea one could not swim in, contrasted that with the tri-dees he had seen of the green hunters' paradise on the next planet of the system. "Yes, sir!" he echoed and made a haphazard choice for the cooker.

"Don't be too lighthearted," Tau warned. "I'll say that any stew which was too hot for that Ranger to handle might give us burned fingers—and quick. When we land on Khatka, walk softly and look over your shoulder, and be prepared for the worst."

II

LIGHTNING PLAYED ALONG THE black ridges above them, and below was a sheer drop to a river which was only a silver thread. Under their boots, man-made and yet dominating the wildness of jungle and mountain, was a platform of rock slabs, fused to support a palace of towering yellow-white walls and curved cups of domes, a palace which was also half fortress, half frontier post.

Dane set his hands on the parapet of the river drop, blinked as a lightning bolt crackled in a sky-splitting glare of violet fire. This was about as far from the steaming islands of Xecho as a man could imagine.

"The demon graz prepare for battle." Asaki nodded toward the distant crackling.

Captain Jellico laughed. "Supposed to be whetting their tusks, eh? I wouldn't care to meet a graz that could produce such a display by mere tusk whetting."

"No? But think of the reward for the tracker who discovers where such go to die. To find the graveyard of the graz herds would make any man wealthy beyond dreams."

"How much truth is there in that legend?" Tau asked.

The Chief Ranger shrugged. "Who can say? This much *is* true: I have served my life in the forests since I could walk.

I have listened to the talk of Trackers, Hunters, Rangers in my father's courtyards and field camps since I could understand their words. Yet never has any man reported the finding of a body of a graz that died a natural death. The scavengers might well account for the bulk of flesh, but the tusks and the bones should be visible for years. And this, too, I have seen with my own eyes: a graz close to death, supported by two of its kind and being urged along to the big swamps. Perhaps it is only that the suffering animal longs for water at its end, or perhaps in the heart of that morass there does lie the graz graveyard. But no man has found a naturally dead graz, nor has any returned from exploring the big swamps..."

Lightning on peaks which were like polished jet—bare rock above, the lush overgrowth of jungle below. And between, this fortress held by men who dared both the heights and the depths. The wildly burgeoning life of Khatka had surrounded the off-worlders since they had come here. There was something untameable about Khatka; the lush planet lured and yet repelled at the same time.

"Zoboru far from here?"

The Chief Ranger pointed north in answer to the captain's question.

"About a hundred leagues. It is the first new preserve we have prepared in ten years. And it is our desire to make it the best for tri-dee hunters. That is why we are now operating taming teams—"

"Taming teams?" Dane had to ask.

The Chief Ranger was ready enough to discuss his project.

"Zoboru is a no-kill preserve. The animals, they come to learn that after a while. But we cannot wait several years until they do. So we make them gifts." He laughed, evidently recalling some incident. "Sometimes, perhaps, we are too eager. Most of our visitors who wish to make tri-dees want to picture big game—graz, amplet, rock apes, lions—"

“Lions?” echoed Dane.

“Not Terran lions, no. But my people, when they landed on Khatka, found a few animals that reminded them of those they had always known. So they gave those the same names. A Khatkan lion is furred, it is a hunter and a great fighter, but it is not the cat of Terra. However, it is in great demand as a tri-dee actor. So we summon it out of lurking by providing free meals. One shoots a poli, a water rat, or a landeer and drags the carcass behind a low-flying flitter. The lion springs upon the moving meat, which it can also scent, and the rope is cut, leaving a free dinner.

“The lions are not stupid. In a very short time they connect the sound of a flitter cutting the air with food. So they come to the banquet and those on the flitter can take their tri-dee shots at ease. Only there must also be care taken in such training. One forest guard on the Komog preserve became too enterprising. He dragged his kill at first. Then, to see if he could get the lions to forget man’s presence entirely, he hung the training carcasses on the flitter, encouraging them to jump for their food.

“For the guard that was safe enough, but it worked too well. A month or so later a Hunter was escorting a client through Komog and they swung low to get a good picture of a water rat emerging from the river. Suddenly there was a snarl behind them and they found themselves sharing the flitter with a lioness annoyed at finding no meat waiting on board.

“Luckily, they both wore stass belts; but they had to land the flitter and leave until the lioness wandered off, and she seriously damaged the machine in her irritation. So now our guards play no more fancy tricks while on taming runs. Tomorrow—no,” he corrected himself, “the day after tomorrow I will be able to show you how the process works.”

“And tomorrow?” inquired the captain.

“Tomorrow my men make hunting magic.” Asaki’s voice was expressionless.

“Your chief witch doctor being?” questioned Tau.

“Lumbrilo.” The Chief Ranger did not appear disposed to add to that but Tau pursued the subject.

“His office is hereditary?”

“Yes. Does that make any difference?” For the first time there was a current of repressed eagerness in the other’s tone.

“Perhaps a vast amount of difference,” Tau replied. “A hereditary office may carry with it two forms of conditioning, one to influence its holder, one to affect the public-at-large. Your Lumbrilo may have come to believe deeply in his own powers; he would be a very remarkable man if he did not. It is almost certain that your people unquestionably accept him as a worker of wonders?”

“They do so accept.” Once more Asaki’s voice was drained of life.

“And Lumbrilo does not accept something you believe necessary?”

“Again the truth, Medic. Lumbrilo does not accept his proper place in the scheme of things!”

“He is a member of one of your Five Families?”

“No, his clan is small, always set apart. From the beginning here, those who spoke for gods and demons did not also order men.”

“Separation of church and state,” commented Tau thoughtfully. “Yet in our Terran past there have been times when church and state were one. Does Lumbrilo desire that?”

Asaki raised his eyes to the mountain peaks, to the northward where lay his beloved work.

“I do not know what Lumbrilo wants, save that it makes mischief—or worse! This I tell you: hunting magic is part of our lives and it has at its core some of those unexplainable happenings which you have acknowledged do exist. I have used powers I can neither explain nor understand as part of my work. In the jungle and on the grasslands an off-worlder

must guard his life with a stass belt if he goes unarmed. But I—any of my men—can walk unharmed if we obey the rules of our magic. Only Lumbrilo does other things which his forefathers did not. And he boasts that he can do more. So he has a growing following of those who believe—and those who fear.”

“You want me to face him?”

The Chief Ranger’s big hands closed upon the rim of the parapet as if they could exert enough pressure to crumble the hard stone. “I want you to see whether there is trickery in this. Trickery I can fight, for that there are weapons. But if Lumbrilo truly controls forces for which there is no name, then perhaps we must patch up an uneasy peace—or go down in defeat. And, off-worlder, I come from a line of warriors—we do not drink defeat easily!”

“That I also believe,” Tau returned quietly. “Be sure, sir, if there is trickery in this man’s magic and I can detect it, the secret shall be yours.”

“Let us hope that so it shall be.”

Subconsciously, Dane had always associated the practice of magic with darkness and the night. But the next morning the sun was high and hot when he made one of the party coming down to a second and larger walled terrace where the Hunters, Trackers, Guards and other followers of the Chief Ranger were assembled in irregular rows.

There was a low sound which was more a throb in the clear air about them, getting into a man’s blood and pumping in rhythm there. Dane tracked the sound to its source: four large drums standing waist high before the men who tapped them delicately with the tips of all ten fingers.

The necklaces of claws and teeth about those dusky throats, the kilts of fringed hide, the crossed belts of brilliantly spotted or striped fur were in contrast to the very efficient and modern side arms each man wore, to the rest of the equipment sheathed and strapped at their belts.

There was a carved stool for the Chief Ranger, another for Captain Jellico. Dane and Tau settled themselves on the less comfortable seats of the terrace steps. Those tapping fingers increased their rate of beat, and the notes of the drums rose from the low murmur of hived bees to the mutter of mountain thunder still half a range away. A bird called from those inner courts of the palace from which the women never ventured.

Da—da—da—da... Voices took up the thud-thud of the drums, the heads of the squatting men moved in a slow swing from side to side. Tau's hand closed about Dane's wrist and the younger man looked around, startled, to see that the medic's eyes were alight, that he was watching the assembly with the alertness of Sindbad approaching prey.

"Calculate the stowage space in Number One hold!"

That amazing order, delivered in a whisper, shocked Dane into obeying it. Number One hold ... there were three divisions now and the stowage was—He became aware that for a small space of time he had escaped the net being woven by the beat of the drum, the drone of voices, the nodding of heads. He moistened his lips. So that was how it worked! He had heard Tau speak often enough about self-hypnotism under such conditions, but this was the first time the meaning of it had been clear.

Two men were shuffling out of nowhere, wearing nothing on their dark bodies but calf-length kilts of tails, black tails with fluffy white tips, which swayed uniformly in time to their pacing feet. Their heads and shoulders were masked by beautifully cured and semi-mounted animal heads displaying half-open jaws with double pairs of curved fangs. The black-and-white striped fur, the sharply pointed ears, were neither canine nor feline, but a weird combination of the two.

Dane gabbled two trading formulas under his breath and tried to think of the relation of Samantine rock coinage to galactic credits. Only this time his defenses did not work.

From between the two shuffling dancers padded something on four feet. The canine-feline creature was more than just a head; it was a loose-limbed, graceful body fully eight feet in length, and the red eyes in the prick-eared head were those of a confident killer. It walked without restraint, lazily, with arrogance, its white-tufted tail swinging. And when it reached the mid-point of the terrace, it flung up its head as if to challenge. But words issued from between those curved fangs, words which Dane might not understand but which undoubtedly held meaning for the men nodding in time to the hypnotic cadence of that da—da—da...

“Beautiful!” Tau spoke in honest admiration, his own eyes almost as feral as those of the talking beast as he leaned forward, his fists on his knees.

Now the animal was dancing also, its paws following the pace set by the masked attendants. It must be a man in an animal skin. But Dane could hardly believe that. The illusion was too perfect. His own hands went to the knife sheath at his belt. Out of deference to local custom they had left their stun rods in the palace, but a belt knife was an accepted article of apparel. Dane slid the blade out surreptitiously, setting its point against the palm of his hand and jabbing painfully. This was another of Tau’s answers for breaking a spell. But the white and black creature continued to dance; there was no blurring of its body lines into those of a human being.

It sang on in a high-pitched voice, and Dane noted that those of the audience nearest the stools where Asaki and the captain were seated now watched the Chief Ranger and the space officer. He felt Tau tense beside him.

“Trouble coming...” The warning from Tau was the merest thread of sound. Dane forced himself to look away from the swaying cat-dog, to watch instead the singers who were now furtively eying their lord and his guest. The Terran knew that there were feudal bonds between the Ranger and

his men. But suppose this was a showdown between Lumbrilo and Asaki—whose side would these men take?

He watched Captain Jellico's hand slide across his knee, his fingers drop in touching distance of knife hilt. And the hand of the Chief Ranger, hanging lax at his side, suddenly balled into a fist.

"So!" Tau expelled the word as a hiss. He moved with sure-footed speed. Now he passed between the stools to confront the dancing cat-dog. Yet he did not look at that weird creature and its attendants. Instead his arms were flung high as if to ward off—or perhaps welcome—something on the mountain side as he shouted:

"Hodi, eldama! Hodi!"

As one, those on the terrace turned, looked up toward the slope. Dane was on his feet, holding his knife as he might a sword. Though of what use its puny length would be against that huge bulk moving in slow majesty toward them, he did not try to think.

Gray-dark trunk curled upward between great ivory tusks, ears went wide as ponderous feet crunched volcanic soil. Tau moved forward, his hands still upraised, clearly in greeting. That trunk touched skyward as if in salute to the man who could be crushed under one foot.

"Hodi, eldama!" For the second time Tau hailed the monster elephant and the trunk raised in silent greeting from one lord of an earth to another he recognized as an equal. Perhaps it had been a thousand years since man and elephant had stood so, and then there had been only war and death between them. Now there was peace and a current of power flowing from one to the other. Dane sensed this, saw the men on the terrace likewise drawing back from the unseen tie between the medic and the bull he had so clearly summoned.

Then Tau's upheld hands came together in a sharp clap and men held their breath in wonder. Where the great bull had stood there was nothing—except rocks in the sun.

As Tau swung around to face the cat-dog, that creature had no substance either. For he fronted no animal but a man, a small, lean man whose lips wrinkled back from his teeth in a snarl. His attendant priests fell back, leaving the spaceman and the witch doctor alone.

“Lumbrilo’s magic is great,” Tau said evenly. “I hail Lumbrilo of Khatka.” His hand made the open-palmed salute of peace.

The snarl faded as the man brought his face under control. He stood naked, but he was clothed in inherent dignity. And there was power with that dignity, power and a pride before which even the more physically impressive Chief Ranger might have to give place.

“You have magic also, outlander,” he replied. “Where walks this long-toothed shadow of yours now?”

“Where once the men of Khatka walked, Lumbrilo. For it was men of your blood who long, long past hunted this shadow of mine and made its body their prey.”

“So that it now might have a blood debt to settle with us, outlander?”

“That you said, not I, man of power. You have shown us one beast, I have shown another. Who can say which of them is stronger when it issues forth from the shadows?”

Lumbrilo pattered forward, his bare feet making little sound on the stones of the terrace. Now he was only an arm’s-length away from the medic.

“You have challenged me, off-world man.” Was that a question or a statement? Dane wondered.

“Why should I challenge you, Lumbrilo? To each race its own magic. I come not to offer battle.” His eyes held steady with the Khatkan’s.

“You have challenged me.” Lumbrilo turned away and then looked back over his shoulder. “The strength you depend upon may become a broken staff, off-worlder. Remember my words in the time when shadows become substance, and substance the thinnest of shadows!”

III

"YOU ARE TRULY A man of power!"

Tau shook his head in answer to that outburst from Asaki.

"Not so, sir. Your Lumbrilo is a man of power. I drew upon his power and you saw the results."

"Deny it not! What we saw never walked this world."

Tau slung the strap of a trail bag over his shoulder. "Sir, once men of your blood, men who bred your race, hunted the elephant. They took his tusks for their treasure, feasted upon his flesh—yes, and died beneath the trampling of his feet when they were unlucky or unwary. So there is that within you which can even now be awakened to remember *eldama* in his might when he was king of the herd and need fear nothing save the spears and cunning of small, weak men. Lumbrilo had already awakened your minds to see what he willed you to see."

"How does he do this?" asked the other simply. "Is it magic that we see not Lumbrilo but a lion before us?"

"He weaves his spell with the drums, with the chant, by the suggestion his mind imposes upon yours. And, having woven his spell, he cannot limit it to just the picture he suggests if ancient racial memories raise another. I merely used the tools of Lumbrilo to show you yet another picture your people once knew well."

"And in so doing made an enemy." Asaki stood before a rack of very modern weapons. Now he made his selection, a silver tube with a stock curved to fit a man's shoulder. "Lumbrilo will not forget."

Tau laughed shortly. "No, but then I have merely done as you wished, have I not, sir? I have focused on myself the enmity of a dangerous man, and now you hope I shall be forced, in self-defense, to remove him from your path."

The Khatkan turned slowly, resting the weapon across his forearm. "I do not deny that, spaceman."

"Then matters here are indeed serious—"

"They are so serious," Asaki interrupted, speaking not only to Tau but to the other off-worlders as well, "that what happens now may mean the end of the Khatka that I know. Lumbrilo is the most dangerous game I have faced in a lifetime as a hunter. He goes, or we draw his fangs—or else all that I am, all I have labored here to build, will be swept away. To preserve this I will use any weapon."

"And I am now your weapon, which you hope will be as successful as that needler you are carrying." Tau laughed again, without much humor. "Let us hope I shall prove as effective."

Jellico moved out of the shadows. It was just after dawn, and the grayness of the vanishing night still held in the corners of the armory. Deliberately he took his own stand before the arms racks and chose a short-barreled blaster. Only when its butt was cupped in his hand did he glance at his host.

"We came guesting, Asaki. We have eaten salt and bread under this roof."

"On my body and my blood it is," returned the Khatkan grimly. "I shall go down to the blackness of Sabra before you do, if the flames of death are against us." From his belt he flipped loose his knife and offered the hilt to Jellico. "My body for a wall between you and the dark, Captain. But also understand this: to me, what I do now is greater than the life of any one man. Lumbrilo and the evil behind him must be rooted out. There was no trickery in my invitation!"

They stood eye to eye, equal in height, in authority of person, and that indefinable something which made them both masters in their own different worlds. Then Jellico's hand went out, his fingertip flicked the hilt of the bared blade.

"There was no trickery," he conceded. "I knew that your need was great when you came to the *Queen*."

Since both the captain and Tau appeared to accept the situation, Dane, not quite understanding it all, was prepared to follow their lead. And for the moment they had nothing more in plan than to visit the Zoboru preserve.

They went by flitter—Asaki, one of his Hunter pilots, and the three from the *Queen*—lifting over the rim of mountains behind the fortress-palace and speeding north with the rising sun a flaming ball to the east. Below, the country was stark—rocks and peaks, deep purple shadows marking the veins of crevices. But that was swiftly behind and they were over a sea of greens, many shades of green, with yellow, blue, even red cutting into the general verdant carpet of treetops. Another chain of heights and then open land, swales of tall grass already burnt yellow by the steady sun. There was a river here, a crazy, twisted stream coiling nearly back upon itself at times.

Once more broken land, land so ravished by prehistoric volcanic action that it was a grotesque nightmare of erosion-whittled outcrops and mesas. Asaki pointed to the east. There was a dark patch widening out into a vast wedge.

"The swamp of Mygra. It has not yet been explored."

"You could air map it," Tau began.

The Chief Ranger was frowning. "Four flitters have been lost trying that. Com reports fail when they cross that last mountain ridge eastward. There is some sort of interference which we do not yet understand. Mygra is a place of death; later we may be able to travel along its fringe and then you shall see. Now—" He spoke to the pilot in his own tongue and the flitter pointed up-nose at an angle as they climbed over the highest peak they had yet seen in this mountainous land, to reach at last a country of open grass dotted with small forest stands. Jellico nodded approvingly.

"Zoboru?"

"Zoboru," Asaki assented. "We shall go up to the northern end of the preserve. I wish to show you the roosts of the fastals. This is their nesting season and the sight is one you will long remember. But we shall take an eastern course; I have two Ranger stations to check on the way."

It was after they left the second station that the flitter swung farther out eastward, again climbing over the chain of heights to sight one of the newly discovered wonders the staff at the last station had reported—a crater lake.

And the flitter skimmed down across water which was a rich emerald in hue, filling the crater from one rock wall to the other with no beach at the foot of those precipitant cliffs. As the machine arose to clear the far wall, Dane tensed. One of his duties aboard the *Queen* was flitter pilot for planetwise trips. And ever since they had taken off that morning he had unconsciously flown with the Khatkan pilot, anticipating each change or adjustment of the controls. Now he felt that sluggish response to the other's lift signal, and instinctively his own hand went out to adjust a power feed lever.

They made the rise, were well above the danger of the cliff wall. But the machine was not responding properly. Dane did not need to watch the pilot's swiftly moving hands to guess that they were in trouble. And his slight concern deepened into something else as the flitter began to drop nose again. In front of him, Captain Jellico shifted uneasily, and Dane knew that he, too, was alerted.

Now the pilot had plunged the power adjuster to the head against the control board. But the nose of the flitter acted as if it were overweighted or magnetically attracted by the rocks below. The best efforts of the man flying it could not keep it level. They were being drawn earthward, and all the pilot could do only delayed the inevitable crack-up. The Khatkan was turning the machine north to avoid what lay below, for here a long arm of the Mygra swamp clasped about the foot of the mountain.

The Chief Ranger spoke into the mike of the com unit while the pilot continued to fight against the pull which was bringing them down. Now the small machine was below the level of the volcanic peak which cradled the lake, and the mountain lay between them and the preserve.

Asaki gave a muffled exclamation, slapped the com box, spoke more sharply into the mike. It was apparent he was not getting the results he wanted. Then with a quick glance about he snapped an order:

“Strap in!”

His Terran companions had already buckled the wide webbing belts intended to save them from crash shock. Dane saw the pilot push the button to release fend cushions. In spite of his pounding heart, a small fraction of his brain recognized the other's skill as the Khatkan took a course to bring them down on a relatively level patch of sand and gravel.

Dane raised his head from the shelter of his folded arms. The Chief Ranger was busy with the pilot, who lay limply against the controls. Captain Jellico and Tau were already pulling at the buckles of their protective crash belts. But one look at the front of the flitter told Dane that it would not take to the air again without extensive repairs. Its nose was bent up and back, obscuring the forward view completely. However, the pilot had made a miraculously safe landing considering the terrain.

Ten minutes later, the pilot restored to consciousness and the gash in his head bandaged, they held a council of war.

“The com was off, too. I did not have a chance to report before the crash,” Asaki put the situation straightly. “And our exploring parties have not yet mapped this side of the range; it has a bad reputation because of the swamp.”

Jellico measured the heights now to their west with resigned eyes. “Looks as if we climb.”

“Not here,” the Chief Ranger corrected him. “There is no passing through the crater lake region on foot. We must travel south along the edge of the mountain area until we do find a scalable way into the preserve region.”

“You seem very certain we are not going to be rescued if we stay right here,” Tau observed. “Why?”

“Because I’m inclined to believe that any flitter that tries to reach us may run into the same trouble. Also, they have no com fix on us. It will be at least a day or more before they will even begin to count us missing, and then they will have the whole northern portion of the preserve to comb; there are not enough men here—I can give you a multitude of reasons, Medic.”

“One of which might be sabotage?” demanded Jellico.

Asaki shrugged. “Perhaps. I am not loved in some quarters. But there may also be something fatal to flitters here as there is over Mygra. We thought the crater lake district safely beyond the swamp influence, but it may not be so.”

But you took the chance of traveling over it, Dane thought, though he did not comment aloud. Was this another of the Chief Ranger’s attempts to involve them in some private trouble of his own? Though to deliberately smash up a flitter and set them all afoot in this wilderness was a pretty drastic move.

Asaki had started to unload emergency supplies from the flitter. They each had a trail bag for a pack. But when the pilot staggered over to pull out a set of stass belts and Jellico began to uncoil them, the Chief Ranger shook his head.

“With the feeder beam shut off by the mountains, I fear those will no longer work.”

Jellico tossed one on the crumpled nose of the flitter and punched its button with the tip of the needler barrel. Then he threw a rock at the dangling belt. The stone landed, taking the wide protective band with it to the ground. That

force field which should have warded off the missile was not working.

“Oh, fine!” Tau opened his trail bag to pack concentrates. Then he smiled crookedly. “We aren’t signed in for killing licenses, sir. Do you pay our fines if we are forced to shoot a hole through something that disputes the right of way?”

To Dane’s surprise, the Chief Ranger laughed. “You are off preserve now, Medic Tau. The rules do not cover wild land. But I would suggest we now hunt a cave before nightfall.”

“Lions?” asked Jellico.

Dane, remembering the black and white beast Lumbrilo had presented, did not enjoy that thought. They had—his gaze went from man to man checking weapons—the needler Asaki carried, and another the pilot had slung by its carrying strap over his shoulder. Tau and the captain both were armed with blasters and he had a fire ray and a force blade, both considered small arms but deadly enough perhaps even to dampen a lion’s enthusiasm for the chase.

“Lions, graz, rock apes,” Asaki fastened the mouth of his trail bag. “All are hunters or killers. The graz send out scouts, and they are big and formidable enough to have no enemies. Lions hunt with intelligence and skill. Rock apes are dangerous, but luckily they cannot keep silent when they scent their prey and so give one warning.”

As they climbed up-slope from the flutter, Dane, looking back, saw that perhaps Asaki was right in his belief that they had better try to help themselves rather than wait for rescue. Putting aside the excuse of fearing another crack-up, the wrecked flutter made no outstanding mark on the ground. The higher they climbed, the less it could be distinguished from the tumble of rocks about it.

He had lagged a little behind and, when he hurried to catch up, found Jellico standing with his distance vision lenses to his eyes, directing them toward that shadow mark-

ing the swamp. As the younger spaceman reached him, the captain lowered the glasses and spoke:

"Take your knife, Thorson, and hold it close to that rock—over there." He pointed to a rounded black knob protruding from the soil a little off their path.

Dane obeyed, only to have the blade jerk in his hand. And when he loosened his hold in amazement, the steel slapped tight against the stone.

"Magnetic!"

"Yes. Which might explain our crash. Also this." Jellico held out a field compass to demonstrate that its needle had gone completely mad.

"We can use the mountain range itself for a guide," Dane said with more confidence than he felt.

"True enough. But we may have trouble when we head west again." Jellico let the lenses swing free on their cord about his neck. "If we were wrecked on purpose"—his mouth tightened and the old blaster burn on his cheek stretched as did his jaw set—"then someone is going to answer a lot of questions—and fast!"

"The Chief Ranger, sir?"

"I don't know. I just don't know!" The captain grunted as he adjusted his pack and started on.

If fortune had failed them earlier, she smiled on them now. Asaki discovered a cave before sundown, located not too far from a mountain stream. The Ranger sniffed the air before that dark opening as the Hunter pilot shed his equipment and crept forward on his hands and knees, his head up and his nostrils expanding as he, too, tested the scent from the cave mouth.

Scent? It was closer to a stench, and one ripe enough to turn the stomach of an off-worlder. But the Hunter glanced back over his shoulder and nodded reassuringly.

"Lion. But old. Not here within five days at least."

“Well enough. And even old lion scent will keep away rock apes. We’ll clean some and then we can rest undisturbed,” was his superior’s comment.

The cleaning was easy for the brittle bedding of dried bracken and grass the beast had left burned quickly, cleansing with both fire and smoke. When they raked the ashes out with branches, Asaki and Nymani brought in handfuls of leaves which they crumpled and threw on the floor, spreading an aromatic odor which banished most of the foulness.

Dane, at the stream with the canteens to fill, chanced upon a small pool where there was a spread of smooth yellow sand. Knowing well the many weird booby traps one might stumble into on a strange world, the Terran prospected carefully, stirring up the sand with a stick. Sighting not so much as a water insect or a curious fish, he pulled off his boots, rolled up his breeches and waded in. The water was cool and refreshing, though he dared not drink it until the purifier was added. Then, with the filled canteens knotted together by their straps, he put on his boots and climbed to the cave where Tau waited with water tablets.

Half an hour later Dane sat cross-legged by the fire, turning a spit strung with three small birds Asaki had brought in. One foot closer to the heat began to tingle and he eased off his boot; his cramped toes suddenly seeming to have doubled in size. He was staring wide-eyed at these same toes, puffed, red, and increasingly painful to the touch, when Nymani squatted beside him, inspected his foot closely, and ordered him to take off his other boot.

“What is it?” Dane found that shedding the other boot was a minor torture in itself.

Nymani was cutting tiny splinters, hardly thicker than a needle, from a stick.

“Sand worm—lays eggs in flesh. We burn them out or you have bad foot.”

“Burn them out!” Dane echoed, and then swallowed as he watched Nymani advance a splinter to the fire.

“Burn them,” the Khatkan repeated firmly. “Burn tonight, hurt some tomorrow; all well soon. No burn—very bad.”

Dane ruefully prepared to pay the consequences of his first brush with the unpleasant surprises Khatka had to offer.

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