

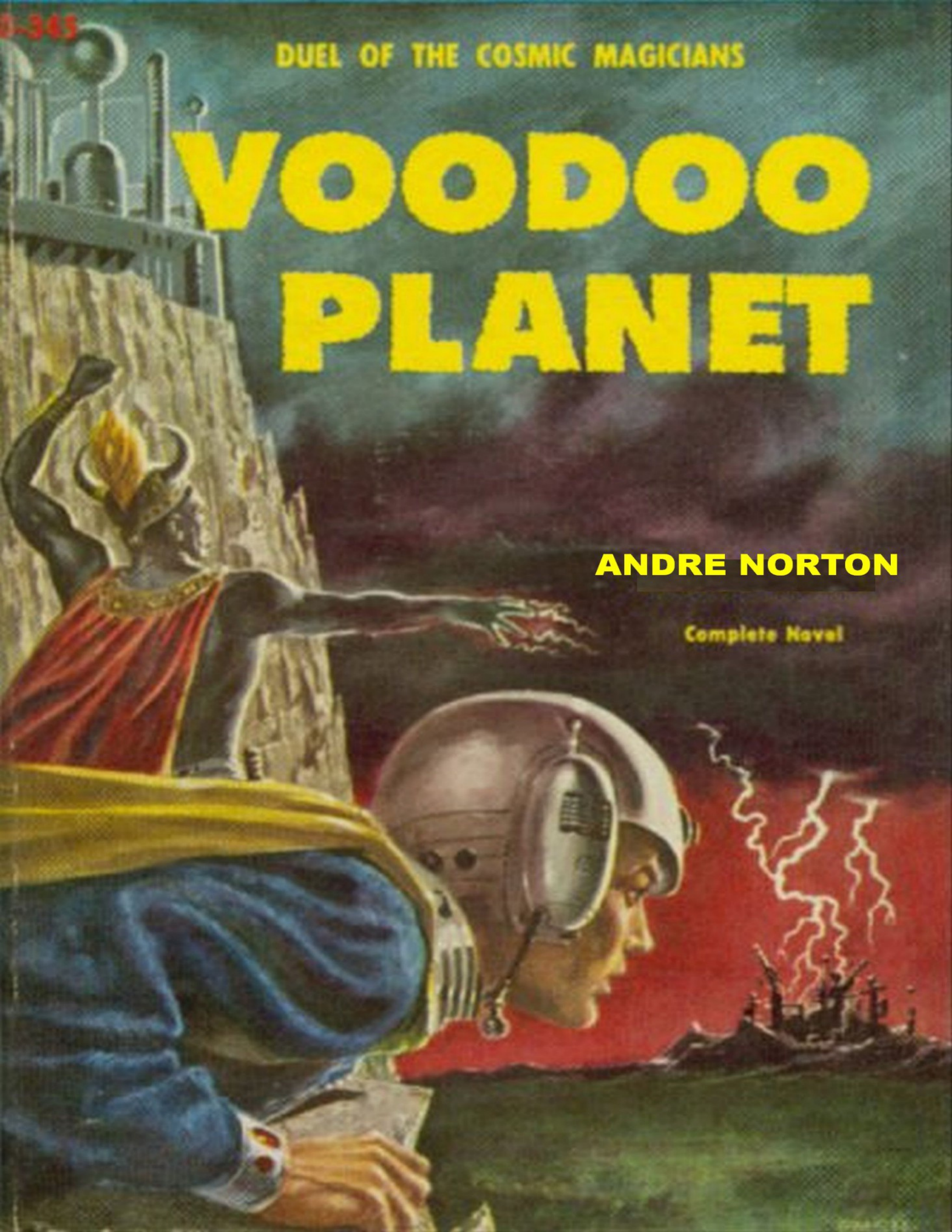
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DUEL OF THE COSMIC MAGICIANS

VOODOO PLANET

ANDRE NORTON

Complete Novel



VOODOO PLANET

by

ANDRE NORTON

CHALLENGE ME WITH MONSTERS!

"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 killer.... Words issued from between those curved fangs, words which Dane might not understand....

"Dane slid his blade out surreptitiously, setting its point against the palm of his hand and jabbing painfully; but the terrible creature continued to advance.... There was no blurring of its lines...."

Dane Thorson of the space-ship *Solar Queen* knew there was only one way to win out over this hideous thing—a battle to the end between his rational mind and the hypnotic witchcraft of Lumbrilo, the mental wizard of the planet Khatka.

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

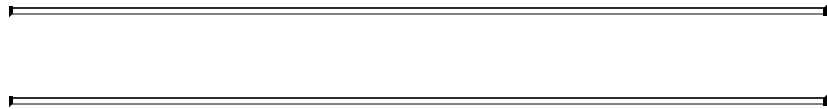
ghosts?

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.



VOODOO PLANET

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I

Talk of heat—or better not—on Xecho. This water-logged 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 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!"