

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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## exchange

by . . . Robert Epstein

**Human hate can be an explosive ingredient—in the mysterious, dark web which Time must weave.**

GAMEL RAN silently through the trees, except for the occasional soft rattling of the amulet of human bones which encircled his left ankle. Though the dark of the night was unrelieved by even the faintest glimmer of moonbeams, he followed the narrow path without the slightest hesitation.

He had lived his whole life in this small section of Haiti, and even as a child knew every rotten log or jutting stone that might well have conspired to trip him had he been less wary. Now as an adult, he found that knowledge still of immense value. As the high voodoo priest of his neighborhood, the feared and respected *Houngan* Gamel, he often found it expedient to come and go by paths known only to himself.

As Gamel approached his destination he slowed down and made sure that no one was secretly observing him. This was his private altar, his own personal *Hounfort*—and as such was taboo to all others. He had not reached his

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*However great the frustrations which may confront an editor in his search for unsuspected talent, it is always a pleasure to publish the work of a new young writer of exceptional promise. Robert Epstein won honorable mention in a recent prize-story contest conducted by the FANTASY WRITERS' WORKSHOP at the College of the City of New York, in conjunction with the editors of FANTASTIC UNIVERSE. In our last issue we published the winning story, an exciting documentary account of stark disaster in space. Mr. Epstein has chosen to remain on Earth, with the future as his proving ground.*

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powerful position by taking unnecessary chances, and he intended to make sure that his hated rival, *Houngan* Dorsema, did not discover his secret and use it as a weapon against him.

Just thinking of Dorsema made him rage inwardly and set his temples to pounding. Who was this upstart *Houngan* to think that he could so easily supplant the all-powerful Gamel in the hearts and minds of his devotees! Before the night was over Dorsema would no longer be a rival. Tomorrow Gamel would graciously officiate at the wretched pretender's funeral services.

He sternly disciplined himself before he began the ceremony, for it was necessary for him to think and act calmly. He could not afford to make the slightest mistake. He had learned the necessary invocations—precisely how to bring about the sudden death of another human being. But never before had he set himself the fearful task of actually sending a rival *Houngan* to his death. But if he did not carry it off on the first try, who could tell what cruel and savage revenge the aroused Dorsema might not attempt!

He was sorry that his acolytes were not present to help him. The rhythms of the three *Rada* drums were a great stimulus to him and made the proper prayers come easier. But this time he would have to be satisfied with no other instrument than the simple *Ogan*.

Momentarily his thoughts dwelt proudly upon his very special *Ogan*. Dorsema had only a small steel bar which he tapped with a spike. But he, Gamel, had an *Ogan* that had been made in heaven itself.

How well he remembered the night he had found its two magical parts. He had just completed the services bidding welcome to the new year when in the sky had appeared a fire-ball, flaming and immense. It had fallen to earth nearby, and in the fire-blackened hollow entombing it he had found the twin hard bars of strange material—neither metal nor stone, but harder than either. Surely the strange carvings on them had been inspired by no less a divinity than the *Loa Goro*.

How else explain the shimmering of the air and the twisted appearance of trees and rocks when he struck the bars together. It was the power of his *Ogan* that gave Gamel the assurance of victory as he began to chant.

He began to chant the sacred prayers, shivering a little as he lit the fire on the sacred stone altar. Without any break in the singing he started the *Veve*. He let the white cornmeal stream from his hands on the hardened black earth, and with deft, quick strokes he drew the cabalistic signs. Then, when the complicated design had been completed to his satisfaction, he placed the carved bone knife in its precise center.

With every muscle quivering and tensing, he began the dread dance of invocation—the plea to *Loa Gorn* to kill his enemy. The flames from the fire shimmered and sparkled like myriads of fireflies on the light-mirroring sheen of his writhing, perspiring ebony body.

Abruptly he stopped, raising the *Ogan* high, and remaining for an instant as motionless as a statue carved in stone. Then he struck the two parts of the instrument violently together.

Instantly, vertigo seized him. The scene before him twisted and melted, and the knife vanished. And at almost the same instant before the sudden disappearance could be impressed upon his consciousness, the pain came—sudden and sharp, and unbearably agonizing.

He screamed once, fell to his knees, and then forward on his face. He remembered nothing more.

CONRAD MALIN pushed a rigidly prescribed combination of buttons and was immediately rewarded by the appearance of Commissioner Andrews' pretty secretary on his visi-screen. She recognized him instantly.

"Good morning, Professor," she said. "The Commissioner just got in. I'll connect you."

Her image dimmed and vanished, and for a moment there was a faint humming sound. Then another face appeared on the screen.

The Commissioner's countenance

showed very little of the strain he was under, and his voice was astonishingly calm and unhurried. "Good morning, Malin!" he said. "What can I do for you?"

For just a fraction of a second Malin hesitated. Then he plunged in, not stopping to draw breath.

"Look Commissioner, suppose something *does* go wrong, and Boyd is incapacitated somehow and the lives of all those men are at stake, and the spaceship as well, and if I was there I could—"

Andrews interrupted him, an edge to his voice as cutting as the flick of a steel-pronged whip.

"Malin, stop it. We've gone through all this a dozen times, and my decision is still unchanged. I'm telling you for the last time that when the *Star Visitor* starts on the first interstellar flight tomorrow, Tom Boyd will be its captain. Do you understand? You will not be on board."

Andrews' voice became a little kinder. "You know we consider you as good an astro-physicist as Boyd. But there are only the two of you, and we can't put all our eggs in one basket—especially a highly experimental basket. Boyd has the seniority, and so he got the job. Now be reasonable, and don't add to our almost intolerable burdens. I'll see you tomorrow at the take-off."

Malin felt his anger begin to choke him, and a vicious retort rose to his lips. He broke off communication before he could give

himself away, telling himself bitterly that he couldn't take the Commissioner's high-handedness much longer. He had been battling with himself for fifteen years but it did not occur to him that he could be in the wrong, even though he clearly remembered the deadly rage that had overcome him for the first time when he was sixteen.

The only thing that had saved him then had been the fact that he'd been alone in the woods when he had beaten to death his pet Venusian bear for having accidentally destroyed the delicate Gravometer he had so painstakingly built.

He'd known then that something was wrong, that he was not as other men, for he had learned in school that for five hundred years—since the year 2400 to be exact—man had genetically removed from himself all traces of the destructive emotions. True, a few atavistic individuals had appeared from time to time.

But they had been found to be incurable, and had been separated from the community and forced to lead lonely, exiled lives. So since then he had fought not to betray himself, and yet he refused, paradoxically, to be ashamed of what he was.

It had been a losing battle, for the even-tempered calm civilization about him seemed both dull and stupid, and had served only to irritate him the more. The flight of the *Star Visitor* seemed to him to be his last chance to sublimate

and submerge his defiant, individualistic emotions in the many new problems that would confront a privileged few on man's first trip to the stars.

Now his mind was made up. His plea to the Commissioner would be his last attempt to reason his way on board the spaceship. It had only been a sop to his conscience anyway, for from the very first his logical mind had pointed out the one and only real solution to his problem.

If Tom Boyd found himself physically unable to take command of the ship, then he, Conrad Malin, would get it by default. If Tom Boyd were to die there could be no possible doubt of the outcome.

His mind had not flinched from the thought, although he knew that no crime of any kind had been committed for at least five centuries. His only concern was to make sure that in a day and age of perfected science no possible suspicion of guilt could attach itself to him.

Actual physical contact with Boyd he rejected out of hand. It was too clumsy and uncertain. The employment of any of the known energy beams was also too dangerous to be seriously entertained. Their use as power for transportation had forced the Government to completely monitor them in order to eliminate accidents, and the authorities would instantly note any strange beam and trace it to its source.

Therefore, when his recent experiments had shown him a new way to transmit energy, he had kept it a carefully guarded secret. Now it was time to put his secret knowledge to use.

Malin opened the bottom drawer of his desk and took out the synthetic flesh mask he had prepared. He carefully molded it over his head and face. Then he donned a plain white tunic with the blue arm band of the service mechanic—all that was needed to complete his disguise.

He stepped out of his office suite and ascended to the roof, unnoticed amidst a crowd of other busy people. From there he took a public helic directly to Boyd's home.

Boyd was unmarried and lived in a suite of rooms in a ninety-storey hotel with its own rooftop helic station. Malin had no trouble entering Boyd's apartment on the pretext of checking the astrophysicist's visi-screen. He did not anticipate meeting Boyd, for he had checked his rival's comings and goings carefully.

With quick precision he placed the minute, delicate tube directly behind the visi-screen. Then, without undue haste, he left the hotel at the underground level, and took a vacuo-car to the station nearest his laboratory.

Once inside his workshop, Malin removed his mask and tunic and threw them into his atomic fuel chamber where they would be reduced to infinitely small particles,

and used to power his generator. With loving pride he checked his apparatus. He traced all the connections to their final destination—a ring of cavorite.

Into the center of this ring he would direct a beam of electronic particles. They would disappear into a sub-etheric space channel, and reappear in all their deadliness from the little tube behind Boyd's screen!

Tom Boyd was a creature of strict routine. Every evening at 7:00 P.M. he sat in front of the screen, enjoying the latest scientific newscast. Tonight, he would miss that pleasure.

It was now 6:55 and Malin was ready. It gave him intense satisfaction to realize that he was not in the least bit nervous. His only emotion was regret that he would have to play it safe and destroy his new machine. He regretted that he would be denied an opportunity to really investigate a completely new means of energy transportation. He was not convinced, for example, that he had the real explanation of why the space inside the ring became misty and seemed to twist and warp.

It was 7:00 P.M. The time had come. Malin pushed the button. He saw the pale green energy beam dart to the center of the ring! It was Malin's last observation before he fell, impaled on a weapon of shining whiteness that had come out of nowhere to rip his chest apart.

GAMEL'S BODY was found by a white hunter who did not know that the densely shadowed part of the woods was taboo. Gamel's followers saw that he had come to his death in his own *Hounfort*, without any indication of physical violence. They were convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had been defeated by the superior power of *Houngan* Dorsema. It was easy to realize that he had been killed by some powerful voodoo spirit, for everyone could see the

pale green light that shone from his body—a light which neither flickered nor grew dim.

The death of Conrad Malin created two sensations. To the vast majority of the people of that future age, it was horrifying to even think of death by violence. But to a smaller and more select group of anthropologists and antiquarians the greater sensation was in discovering that the death weapon was a carved bone knife at least one thousand years old.

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