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the
red
hot
deal

by . . . Joseph Farrell

This was a wretched planet—cold and damp! It was incredible that these natives had anything worth stealing!

LANDO the Vegan crossed his crimson legs and curled his red, barbed tail in his lap. He glared across the cave at Avaros, a dried-up little humanoid from Aldebaran XVI.

"You're damned right you'll make it worth my while," he rumbled. "It's worth a thousand measures just to set foot on this damp planet. Whatever kind of a confidence game you're working on the natives here, I want a piece of it. And if it's not good—"

He straightened his horns against his glowing skull, grinned evilly and blew a hot breath in Avaros' direction.

Avaros shriveled a little more. "You know me, Lando. And I really have a live one this time. One of the natives here, a great scientist, has lived past his time and is in his second childhood. He's become interested in what they call Black Magic, which means calling up devils and so on—"

"Devils? What're devils?"

"Well—" Avaros shrunk away cautiously. "They're evil creatures of supernatural powers and, don't be angry at this, Lando, but you Vegans fit the description perfectly. They

We've been hearing stories about golden-haired aliens from other planets, mostly from Venus (we don't hear much about the girls from Venus, though), all dedicated and wise Teachers of the Truths. But—what about the comen from the other planets who must also have come here from time to time?

live in a very hot place and their main pleasure is tormenting people—”

Lando wasn't offended. His bel-lowing laughter filled the cave. "Why, then there must be other Vegans on this planet. When the Vegan police catch me and encase me in ice, I'll have company!"

Avaros shook his head. "I thought so, too, but Melnick says no, there haven't been any devils around lately. They inhabit the hot interior of this planet and must be called up by certain spells. Melnick is working on a spell now and that's why I sent for you."

"To help you con this senile human." Lando turned up the portable heater and let a blast of sizzling air caress his skin. "What a wretched planet this is—cold and damp. How could the natives here have anything worthwhile? What are you after and what kind of bait are you using?"

Avaros patted a micro-scroll. "This contains the writings of one of my people who visited this planet a thousand years ago. He describes the primitive search for knowledge made by their alchemists and magicians. I came here in the hope that somehow they had achieved their goals—"

"What goals?" Lando belched out a sulphurous blast that drifted across the cave and made Avaros gasp. "Get to the point. I'm charging you by the hour for my services—and I'm not looking for overtime. Not on this freezing planet."

"They sought two things—a means of transmuting lead into gold, and the secret of eternal life. Either would be worth our while, of course."

Lando hooted and turned up his heater another notch.

"Why, you fool—what chance do the primitives have of finding such secrets? I've read that micro-scroll you have there—these humans have nothing but ignorance. Did you call me all the way—"

"Please, Lando. These people have progressed. Take a quick look around the planet, as I did. You'll see the cities and machines—great changes since this micro-scroll was scratched. And this scientist, Melnick, has told me that they've discovered one of the secrets—transmuting lead into gold."

"He's lying! A fine con man you are, falling for a tale like that. You're the one who'll end up being taken."

"He was telling the truth." Avaros displayed a small wiry instrument. "He let me apply this brain wave analyzer while he repeated his claim—and here's the reading—absolute proof he was telling the truth!"

Lando bent forward, interested, and Avaros shrank back from the heat.

"Then they really have a method of transmuting lead into gold! Why, Avaros, we really have something this time, old partner. But how do we get this senile genius to part with his secret?"

"Well, it's not strictly his secret. I understand other scientists developed the process, but he has a copy of the formula. And the price he's asking is the other goal of the old alchemists—the secret of eternal life."

Lando scratched himself thoughtfully with the point of his tail. "Can we deliver? Or make him think we're delivering?"

"We can—with this." Avaros showed the Vegan a bottle containing a murky liquid. "This is a drug used on my planet—it's strictly against the law, but I know where to get things. It's used as an aphrodisiac—it'll make anybody feel much younger, even turns gray hair dark and puts a spring into stiff joints. We can let Melnick sample it and it'll pep him up good for a while—he'll be sure he's got the real stuff."

Lando stared curiously at the bottle. "The way you say it, it sounds like the real stuff. I'd like some of that for my own old age—if the Vegan police don't store me in the ice box first."

"The effect only lasts a few days—and the user will be worse off after, it's habit-forming and hastens death quite a bit, so stay off it. Now, here's what we'll do. Melnick won't deal with me because he won't believe I'm a real devil. What he thinks I am I don't know, but that's not important."

He leaned forward. "He's preparing a spell now to call up a real ding-dong devil who wants to buy his soul—"

"His soul—! Now, what possible use—"

"I know, Lando—so here's the way we'll have to work it. You tell him that I'm another alchemist from some other planet, and want to sell you my soul in return for the transmutation formula. You've already sold the formula for another soul and don't have a copy handy, so we make a three-way trade—you get my soul, he gets the elixir of life and I get the transmutation formula—"

"Icebergs and blizzards!" Lando cursed. "You're giving me a headache. Right here, above the horns. Go over that again, slowly. . . ."

Melnick, the last alchemist, hobbled happily about pouring the grayish powder onto the lines of the pentagram penciled on the floor of his desert shack. Once in a while he stopped to wipe off the drop of perspiration that kept accumulating on the end of his nose, and occasionally he peered into the ancient book that was open on the table.

"My goodness," he murmured happily to himself. "I do believe I'm going to succeed this time. It seems to be growing hotter, and I'm certain there's an odor of brimstone in this room."

Lando backed away from the window, fearing that he would be discovered too soon. He could hear the old man muttering inside.

"Hard to get real powdered unicorn's horn these days. But I think this is the genuine article. The fellow guaranteed it. And I know this

is the blood of a chicken killed in a graveyard at midnight, because I went to the cemetery myself with it—”

The Vegan shivered impatiently in the blazing desert sun and looked over at Avaros. His lips formed the word:

“Now?”

Avaros shook his head and whispered:

“Not much longer.”

The old man was chanting strange words. Lando had learned English by mesmertapes, but the language Melnick was using was not quite what he had learned. He listened, fascinated, to the sing-song of the alchemist's ancient spell. There was something hypnotic about the chant, and he stood listening to verse after verse of the weird incantation.

He became aware that Avaros was gesturing to him and came to attention. He followed the other to the door of the shack. There was a crash of a gong inside, and Avaros motioned him impatiently to the door.

Lando smashed the door open and strode imperiously in, as befitted a devil of the first water. The old man looked up.

“I've done it! You've come in answer to my call! But—” The wrinkles in his face deepened. “—through the door?”

“And why not?” Lando demanded. “We have doors where I come from.”

The senile scientist still frowned. “Inside the pentagram. You're sup-

posed to materialize inside the pentagram. But maybe there was something missing in the spell—some small thing. Main point is, you're here.”

“How dare you call me up?” Lando roared, casting his best evil eye at Melnick, who cackled and looked unimpressed. “If it weren't that you have something I happen to need, old man, I'd burn you to an ash before you could wipe off that foolish grin!”

“Heh, heh.” Melnick continued cackling, staring slyly back with his own version of an evil eye. “You'll pay a good price for my soul, Mister Devil—”

“Your soul be damned,” said Lando. “Which it will anyway, deal or no deal. It's another soul I'm after. I've been trying to close a deal with an alchemist from another planet—” He turned to the door and bellowed. “Come in, Avaros, you monster from outer space! Don't waste time; I want to get back to my heated quarters. It's cold here!”

The temperature in the desert shack was crowding 120. Melnick mopped the end of his nose and watched in surprise as Avaros entered.

“So he was telling me the truth—he *is* from another planet. Thought all the time he was a crackpot escaped from Carrville—that's the asylum, you know—or maybe one of these science fiction writers looking for material. Never would have believed it—”

"Well, it's true," Lando grumbled. "And he won't give me his soul unless I give him the secret of transmutation. So here's the elixir you want, old man. Now, I'll take the transmutation secret—"

"Heh, heh." The old man's claws snatched the bottle. His toothless gums worked in excitement. "That waitress down at Sam's Snack Shack—Dolores. You seen her? Wouldn't give me a look without laughing, but wait till I drink this stuff. And there'll be others." He sniffed at the liquid and suspicion appeared in his watery eyes. "How do I know you're giving me the real thing? It might be poison. Heh—pretty sharp devil, maybe."

Lando took the bottle away from him and pushed it into Avaros' hands.

"Show him it's not poison," he ordered.

Avaros unhappily lifted the bottle and took a short snort. Melnick, satisfied, did the same. While he had the bottle tipped, Avaros spat out his mouthful on the dirty floor where it wouldn't be noticed.

Melnick wiped off his lips with the back of his shirt sleeve.

"Is that enough?" he asked.

"Just about," Lando was shivering, but watched in interest.

Melnick clapped a hand to his chest as the fluid reached his stomach. For a moment he was panicked, feeling that it was poison, after all. Then he steadied, and began flexing his muscles expectantly. A dozen seconds passed.

"I can feel it going through my veins . . ."

More seconds passed, and the senile wrinkles in his face began to smooth out. He snatched a mirror from the trash piled on the sink and stared at himself. "It's working—!" He ran his hands over each other as the prominent veins subsided; then with a sudden pained expression, opened his mouth and tore out his false teeth. He fingered the sudden sharpness of the gums in amazement.

"New teeth coming through! It worked! It worked!" He started peeling off his filthy clothes, pulled a clean shirt and a pressed suit from the closet. "And my hair is darker. And most important of all—"

He made a descriptive gesture to Lando and started diving into the fresh clothes, "Dolores, here I come, and this time you'll notice me! A shave and haircut in town first, and then—boy, what a night this will be!"

Lando parked himself in the doorway. "You're forgetting something," he reminded.

"What's that? Oh, the formula." Melnick tore through a pile of old books and magazines, came up with a dusty volume. "Here you are. Page—ah, 127. The whole information. Sorry I must rush off, fellows. See you again sometime, maybe."

Something about his last words and the laughter that trailed behind him as he hurried out made Lando wonder who had made the best bargain.

Lando huddled miserably in the cave, wrapped in a heavy blanket, shivering, his feet immersed in a bucket of boiling water. His heater was going full blast, and Avaros sat as far away as he could.

"Ah-choo!" Lando sneezed out a violent sulphurous sneeze. "I knew I'd catch something, standing around in that cold shack so long. Well, read the formula, Avaros. How do we turn lead into gold?"

Avaros was puzzling over the "*Quarterly Journal of the Brundage University Alumni Society of Atomic Physicists*," his lips moving silently as he read through the difficult text.

"This article," he said, "is entitled: '*An Account of the Preparation of Certain Isotopes in Atomic Quantities During Transmutation Experiments at the Brundage University Physics Foundation Laboratory.*'"

"What does it mean?" Lando demanded, choking back another sneeze.

"Well," said Avaros, "I haven't finished it yet. Now, it says here, *E* equals *em* squared . . ."

A week later the two were waiting near Melnick's shack. They stared grimly down the lonely road from time to time. The Vegan turned himself now and then so both sides could get some benefit from the portable heater. He swore bitterly.

"Icicles! He's not coming back. He's taken us, two of the best con

men in the galaxy. If word of this ever gets out, Avaros . . ."

He stared thoughtfully at the other, and Avaros squirmed uncomfortably.

"I've waited long enough," said Lando. "Remember, I got your soul as my share of the deal. It's about time I separated it from your body. Nobody can do a thing like this to Lando the Vegan . . ."

Avaros reached frantically for his weapon, but he died in a burning flash. Lando walked over and let the theta ray pistol play on the body for several more seconds, enjoying the heat of it.

A motion down the road caught the corner of his eye. He squinted toward it.

"Melnick's car. So Avaros guessed right—the elixir is wearing off and he's coming back for the bottle he left behind. I'll just get under cover until I see if he's alone. He'll find he can't pull a fast one on Lando the Vegan. Transmutation! In atomic quantities! A process that costs a thousand measures of gold to create one measure!"

From behind the ancient barn he watched the car pull up. Melnick climbed out, walked a little creakily around the car and opened the other door. A woman emerged and stared at the shack. She was blonde and buxom and stiffly corseted and a bit past the first bloom of youth. Her jaw was determined and her air domineering.

"George Melnick!" she exclaimed. "Is this the romantic desert hide-

away you've been telling me about? I must say I'm terribly disappointed. What a broken-down place and not a neighbor for miles! I think—" and her jaw became even more determined, "we'll be out of here soon and moved into town." She created a smile that was intended to be demure. "Well, George, aren't you going to carry your bride across the threshold?"

Melnick appeared to have lost about half the effect of the elixir. Lines were reappearing in his face and the erectness was weakening. He worked manfully to lift the woman. His eyes popped with exertion and his knees wobbled as he struggled into the shack with his burden.

Lando hurried over to the window to listen.

"You're looking awfully tired," said the woman. "Of course, you had yourself quite a ball this past week in town. Good heavens, this place is worse inside than out. We'll get together with a broom and a mop—get rid of this trash, like this bottle on the table—"

Lando chanced a look through the window in time to see the last of the elixir being poured down the sink. Melnick, a horrified look in his eye, tried to salvage the bottle.

"No, Dolores—no!"

"Why, George! It's only some vile old liquor. And you've had enough to last you a long time. Now, let's get the place in order, George—this is our first night as husband and wife. Our wedding

night. Aren't you glad you waited, now?"

Lando peeked again and saw Melnick sitting miserably with his head in his hands. A sob shook the aging shoulders.

Lando strolled off, chuckling.

"Serves him right," he told himself. "Nothing I could do to him would punish him any more than he's getting now. What a woman! And the elixir worn off at that!"

Just as he rounded the barn there was a flash, a scarcely audible puff, and a spaceship stood before him. A slit appeared suddenly and two creatures who looked like Lando popped out of the ship.

"Vegan police," one of them explained. "We answered your call as fast as we could. What's the trouble here?"

"Uh—no trouble," said Lando uncomfortably. "The call was a mistake."

He reached suddenly for his weapon. The other policeman had been looking him over and Lando saw recognition suddenly break through the officer's questioning glance.

The policeman was quicker. Lando spread his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"It's Lando," the policeman who had recognized him told his companion. "Enough charges against him to put him in the ice mines for life."

Lando groaned. "It looks like a cold future for me. But how did you

know? What brought you to this particular spot? What's that you said about answering a call as fast as you could?"

"We received a call to come here." The policeman slipped some-

thing over Lando's claws and motioned him toward the ship. "Funny thing—it was one of the real old-fashioned signals . . . the kind where they used to use powdered unicorn's horn and such things. . . ."