

Heist Job on Thizar

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In the future, we may discover new planets; our ships may rocket to new worlds; robots may be smarter than people. But we'll still have slick characters willing and able to turn a fast buck—even though they have to be smarter than Einstein to do it.

Anson Drake sat quietly in the Flamebird Room of the Royal Gandyll Hotel, listening to the alien, but soothing strains of the native orchestra and sipping a drink. He knew perfectly well that he had no business displaying himself in public on the planet Thizar; there were influential Thizarians who held no love for a certain Earthman named Anson Drake.

It didn't particularly bother Drake; life was danger and danger was life to him, and Anson Drake was known on half a hundred planets as a man who could take care of himself.

Even so, he wouldn't have bothered to come if it had not been for the fact that Viron Belgezd was a pompous braggart.

Belgezd had already suffered at the hands of Anson Drake. Some years before, a narcotics gang had been smashed high, wide, and handsome on Thizar. Three men had died from an overdose of their own thionite drug, and fifty thousand credits of illicit gain had vanished into nowhere. The Thizarian police didn't know who had done the job, and they didn't know who had financed the ring.

But Belgezd knew that Anson Drake was the former, and Drake knew that Viron Belgezd was the latter. And each one was waiting his chance to get the other.

A week before, Drake had been relaxing happily on a beach on Seladon II, twelve light-years from Thizar, reading a newsfax. He had become interested in an article which told of the sentencing of a certain lady to seven years in Seladon Prison, when his attention was attracted by another headline.

VIRON BELGEZAD BUYS ALGOL NECKLACE

Thizar (GNS)—Viron Belgezd, wealthy Thizarian financier, has purchased the fabulous Necklace of Algol, it was announced today. The necklace, made of matched Star Diamonds, is estimated to be worth more than a million credits, although the price paid by Belgezd is not known.

The coronation on Thizar was a thing of vast magnificence.

Such an interesting bit seemed worthy of further investigation, so Drake had immediately booked passage on the first space liner to Thizar.

And thus it was that an immaculately dressed, broad-shouldered, handsome young man sat quietly in the Flamebird Room of Thizar's flushiest hostelry surveying his surroundings with steady green eyes and wondering how he was going to get his hands on the Necklace of Algol.

The police couldn't touch Belgezd, but Anson Drake could—and would.

„Hello, Drake,“ said a cold voice at his elbow.

Drake turned and looked up into the sardonically smiling face of Jomis Dobigel, the heavy-set, dark-faced Thizarian who worked with Belgezd.

„Well, well,“ Anson said, smiling, „if it isn't Little Bo-Peep. How is the dope business? And how is the Big Dope Himself?“

Dobigel's smile soured. „You're very funny, Earthman. But we don't like Earthmen here.“

„Do sit down, Dobbie, and tell me all about it. The last I heard—which was three hours ago—the government of Thizar was perfectly happy to have me here. In fact, they were good enough to stamp my passport to prove it.“

Dobigel pulled out a chair and sat down, keeping his hands beneath the table. „What are you doing here, Drake?“ he asked in a cold voice.

„I couldn't help it,“ Drake said blandly. „I was drawn back by the memory of the natural beauties of your planet. The very thought of the fat, flabby face of old Belgezd, decorated with a bulbous nose that is renowned throughout the Galaxy, was irresistible. So here I am.“

Dobigel's dark face grew even darker. „I know you, Drake. And I know why you're here. Tomorrow is the date for the Coronation of His Serenity, the Shan of Thizar.“

„True,“ Drake agreed. „And I wouldn't miss it for all the loot in Andromeda. A celebration like that is worth traveling parsecs to see.“

Dobigel leaned across the table. „Belgezd is a Noble of the Realm,“ he said slowly. „He'll be at the Coronation. You know he's going to wear the Necklace of Algol as well as anyone, and you—“

Suddenly, he leaned forward a little farther, his right hand stabbing out toward Drake's leg beneath the table.

But Anson Drake was ready for him. Dobigel's hand was a full three inches from Drake's thigh when a set of fingers grasped his wrist in a viselike hold. Steely fingers bit in, pressing nerves against bone. With a gasp, Dobigel opened his hand. A small, metallic cylinder dropped out.

Drake caught it with his free hand and smiled. „That's impolite, Dobbie. It isn't proper to try to give your host an injection when he doesn't want it.“

Casually, he put the cylinder against the arm which he still held and squeezed the little metal tube. There was a faint pop! Drake released the arm and handed back the cylinder. Dobigel's face was white.

„I imagine that was twelve-hour poison,“ Drake said kindly. „If you hurry, old Belgezd will give you the antidote. It will be painful, but—“ He shrugged.

„And by the way, Brother Dobigel,“ he continued, „let me give you some advice. The next time you try to get near a victim with one of those things, don't do it by talking to him about things he already knows. It doesn't distract him enough.“

Dobigel stood up, his fists clenched. „I'll get you for this, Drake.“ Then he turned and stalked off through the crowd.

No one had noticed the little by-play. Drake smiled seraphically and finished his drink. Dobigel was going to be uncomfortable for a while. Twelve-hour poison was a complex protein substance that could be varied in several thousand different ways, and only an antidote made from the right variation would work for each poison. If the antidote wasn't given, the victim died within twelve hours. And even if the antidote was given, getting over poison wasn't any fun at all.

Reflecting happily on the plight of Jomis Dobigel, Anson Drake paid his bill, tipped the waiter liberally, and strolled out of the Flamebird Room and into the lobby of the Royal Gandyll Hotel. The Coronation would begin early tomorrow, and he didn't want to miss the beginning of it. The Shan's Coronation was the affair of Thizar.

He went over to the robot newsvender and dropped a coin in the slot. The reproducer hummed, and a freshly-printed newsfax dropped out.

He headed for the lift tube, which whisked him up to his room on the eighty-first floor. He inserted his key in the lock and pressed the button on the tip. The electronic lock opened, and the door slid into the wall. Before entering, Drake took a look at the detector on his wrist. There was no sign of anything having entered the room since he had left it. Only then did he go inside.

With one of the most powerful financiers on Thizar out after his blood, there was no way of knowing what might happen, and therefore no reason to take chances.

There were some worlds where Anson Drake would no more have stayed in a public hotel than he would have jumped into an atomic furnace, especially if his enemy was a man as influential as Belgezad. But Thizar was a civilized and reasonably well policed planet; the police were honest and the courts were just. Even Belgezad couldn't do anything openly.

Drake locked his door, sang to himself in a pleasant baritone while he bathed, put on his pajamas, and lay down on his bed to read the paper.

It was mostly full of Coronation news. Noble So-and-So would wear such-and-such, the Archbishop would do thus-and-so. There was another item about Belgezad; his daughter was ill and would be unable to attend. Bloody shame, thought Drake. Too bad Belgezad isn't sick—or dying.

There was further mention of the Necklace of Algol; it was second only to the Crown Jewels of the Shan himself. The precautions being taken were fantastic; at a quick guess, about half the crowd would be policemen.

The door announcer chimed. Drake sat up and punched the door TV. The screen showed the face of a girl standing at his door. Drake smiled in appreciation. She had dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a smooth, tanned complexion. It was a beautiful face, and it showed promise of having a body to match.

„Who, may I ask, is calling on a gentleman at this ungodly hour, and thus compromising her reputation and fair name?“

The girl smiled, showing even, white teeth, and her eyes sparkled, showing flickers of little golden flames against the brown. „I see I've found the right room,“ she said. „That voice couldn't belong to anyone but Anson Drake.“ Then she lowered her voice and said softly: „Let me in. I'm Norma Knight.“

Drake felt a tingle of psychic electricity flow over his skin; there was a promise of danger and excitement in the air. Norma Knight was known throughout this whole sector of the Galaxy as the cleverest jewel thief the human race had ever spawned. Drake had never met her, but he had definitely heard of her.

He touched the admission stud, and the door slid silently aside. There was no doubt about it, her body did match her face.

„Do come in, Norma,“ he said.

She stepped inside, and Drake touched the closing button. The door slid shut behind her.

She stood there for a moment, looking at him, and Drake took the opportunity to study the girl more closely. At last, she said: „So you're Anson Drake. You're even better looking than I'd heard you were. Congratulations.“

„I have a good press agent,“ Drake said modestly. „What's on your mind?“ He waved his hand at a nearby chair.

„The same thing that's on yours, I suspect,“ she said. „Do you have a drink to spare?“

Drake unlimbered himself from the bed, selected a bottle from the menu and dialed. The robot bellhop whirred, a chute opened in the wall, and a bottle slid out. Drake poured, handed the tumbler to the girl, and said: „This is your party; what do you have in mind?“

The girl took a sip of her drink before she answered. Then she looked up at Drake with her deep brown eyes. „Two things. One: I have no intention or desire to compete with Anson Drake for the Necklace of Algol. Both of us might end up in jail with nothing for our pains.“

„Two: I have a foolproof method for getting the necklace, but none for getting it off the planet. I think you probably have a way.“

Drake nodded. „I dare say I could swing it. How does it happen that you don't have an avenue of disposal planned?“

She looked bleak for a moment. „The man who was to help me decided to back out at the last minute. He didn't know what the job was, and I wouldn't tell him because I didn't trust him.“

„And you trust me?“

Her eyes were very trustful. „I've heard a lot about you, Drake, and I happen to know you never doublecross anyone unless they doublecross you first.“

„Trade about is fair play, to quote an ancient maxim,“ Drake said, grinning. „And I am a firm believer in fair play.“

„But that's neither here nor there. The point is: what do you have to offer? Why shouldn't I just pinch the gems myself and do a quick flit across the Galaxy? That would give me all the loot.“

She shook her head. „Belgezac is on to you, you know. He knows you're here. His own private police and the Shan's own Guard will be at the Coronation to protect all that jewelry.“ She cocked her pretty head to one side and looked at him. „What's between you and Belgezac, anyway?“

„I stole his toys when he was a child,“ said Drake, „and he hasn't trusted me since. How do you propose to get the Necklace of Algol if I can't?“

She smiled and shook her head slowly. „That would be telling. You let me take care of my part, and I'll let you take care of yours.“

Drake shook his head—not so slowly. „Absolutely not. We either work together or we don't work at all.“

The girl frowned in thought for a moment, and then reached into the belt pouch at her side and pulled out a square of electro-engraved plastic. She handed it to Drake.

Underneath all the flowery verbiage, it boiled down to an invitation to attend the post-Coronation reception. It was addressed to „Miss Caroline Smith“ and was signed and sealed by the Shan of Thizar himself.

„I'm *Caroline Smith*,“ she said. „I've managed to get in good with the family of Belgezac, and he wangled the invitation.“

„Now, the plan is this: Right after the Invocation, while the new Shan is being prepared in his special Coronation Robes, the Nobles have to change their uniforms from red to green. Belgezac will go into his suite in the Palace to change. He'll be accompanied by two guards. One will stay on the outside, the other will help Belgezac dress. I've got the room next to his, and I've managed to get the key that unlocks the door between them. I'll use this—“ She pulled a small globe of metal from her belt pouch. „It's a sleep-gas bomb. It'll knock them out for at least twenty minutes. No one will come in during that time, and I'll be able to get the necklace and get out of the palace before they wake up.“

„They'll know you did it,“ Drake pointed out. „If you're still missing when they come to, the thief's identity will be obvious.“

She nodded. „That's where you come in. I'll simply go out into the garden and throw it over the wall to you. We'll meet here afterwards.“

Drake thought it over and smiled devilishly. „It sounds fine. Now let's coordinate everything.“

They went over the whole plot again, this time with a chart of the palace to mark everything out and a time schedule was arranged. Then they toasted to success and the girl left.

When she was gone, Anson Drake smiled ruefully to himself and opened a secret compartment in his suitcase. From it, he removed a long strand of glittering jewels.

„A perfect imitation,“ Drake said. „And you’re very pretty. It’s a shame I won’t be able to hang you around the neck of Belgezd in place of the real Necklace of Algol.“

But his original plan had been more dangerous than the present one, and Anson Drake was always ready to desert a good plan for a better one.

Coronation Day dawned bright and clear, and the festivities began early. There were speeches and parades and dancing in the streets. A huge fleet of high-flying rockets rumbled high in the stratosphere, filling the sky with the white tracers of their exhausts. For all of Thizar, it was a holiday, a day of rejoicing and happiness. Cheers for the Shan filled the streets, and strains of music came from the speakers of the public communications system.

Anson Drake missed most of the fun; he was too busy making plans. The day passed as he worked.

Thizar’s sun began to set as the hour for the actual Crowning of the Shan approached. At the proper time, Drake was waiting in the shadows outside the palace walls. There were eyes watching him, and he knew it, but he only smiled softly to himself and waited.

„Ssssst!“

It was the girl, on the other side of the wall.

„I’m here,“ whispered Drake.

Something that glittered faintly in the soft light of the twin moons of Thizar arced over the wall. Drake caught it in his hands. The Necklace of Algol!

He slipped it into a small plastic box he was carrying and then glanced at the detector on his wrist. The screen showed a pale blue pip which indicated that someone was hidden in the shadows a few yards to his right.

Drake didn’t even glance toward the spy. He put the plastic box containing the necklace into his belt pouch and strode away from the palace. He had, he figured, about twenty minutes.

He headed directly for the spaceship terminal. Never once did he look back, but the detector on his wrist told him that he was being closely followed. Excellent!

Inside the terminal, he went directly to the baggage lockers. He found one that was empty, inserted a coin, and opened it. From his pouch, he took a plastic box, put it in the locker, switched on the lock with his key, and strolled away.

He glanced again at his detector. He was no longer being followed by the same man; another had taken up the trail. It figured; it figured.

He went straight to the Hotel Gandyll, making sure that his tail didn’t lose him. Not until they were in the lobby did he make any attempt to shake the man who was following him. He went into the bar, ordered a drink, and took a sip. He left his change and the drink on the bar and headed out the door in the direction of the men’s room. Whoever was following him wouldn’t realize

for a minute or two that he was leaving for good. A man doesn't usually leave change and an unfinished drink in a bar.

Drake took the lift tube up to his room, attended to some unfinished business, and waited.

Less than three minutes later, the door was opened. In walked Viron Belgezd and his lieutenant, Jomis Dobigel. Both of them looked triumphant, and they were surrounded by a squad of Royal Police.

„There he is,“ said Dobigel. „Arrest him!“

A police officer stepped forward. „Anson Drake, I arrest you in the name of the Shan,“ he said.

Drake grinned. "On what charge?"

„The theft of the Necklace of Algol.“

Drake looked directly at Belgezd. „Did old Fatface here say I took it?“

„You can't talk that way,“ Dobigel snarled, stepping forward.

„Who says so, Ugly?“

At that, Dobigel stepped forward and threw a hard punch from his shoulder—straight at Drake's face.

It never landed. Drake side-stepped it and brought a smashing uppercut up from his knees. It lifted Dobigel off his feet and sent him crashing back against old Belgezd, toppling them both to the floor.

The policemen had all drawn their guns, but Drake was standing placidly in the middle of the room, his hands high above his head regarding the scene calmly.

„I'll go quietly,“ he said. „I've got no quarrel with the police.“ One of the officers led him out into the hall while the others searched his room. Belgezd was sputtering incoherently. Another policeman was trying to wake up Dobigel.

„If you're looking for the Necklace of Algol,“ Drake said, „you won't find it there.“

The captain of the police squad said: „We know that, Mr. Drake. We are merely looking for other evidence. We already have the necklace.“ He reached in his belt pouch and took out a small plastic box. He opened it, disclosing a glittering rope of jewels. „You were seen depositing this in a baggage locker at the spaceship terminal. We have witnesses who saw you, and we had it removed under police supervision.“

Viron Belgezd smiled nastily. „This time you won't get away, Drake! Stealing anything from the palace of the Shan carries a minimum penalty of twenty years in Thizar Prison.“

Drake said nothing as they took him off to the Royal Police Station and locked him in a cell.

It was late afternoon of the next day when the Prosecutor for the Shan visited Drake's cell. He was a tall, imposing man, and Drake knew him by reputation as an honest, energetic man.

„Mr. Drake,“ he said as he sat down in a chair in the cell, „you have refused to speak to anyone but me. I am, of course, perfectly willing to be of any assistance, but I am afraid I must warn you that any statement made to me will be used against you at the trial.“

Drake leaned back in his own chair. One thing nice about Thizar, he reflected; they had comfortable jails.

„My Lord Prosecutor,“ he said, „I’d like to make a statement. As I understand it, Belgezd claims he was gassed, along with a police guard who was with him. When he woke up, the necklace was gone. He didn’t see his assailant.“

„That is correct,“ said the Prosecutor.

Drake grinned. That was the way it had to be. Belgezd couldn’t possibly have bribed the cop, so they both had to be gassed.

„If he didn’t see his assailant, how does he know who it was?“

„You were followed from the palace by Jomis Dobigel, who saw you put the necklace into the baggage locker. There are several other witnesses to that.“

Drake leaned forward. „Let me point out, my Lord Prosecutor, that the only evidence you have that I was anywhere near the palace is the word of Jomis Dobigel. And he didn’t see me inside the palace. I was outside the wall.“

The Prosecutor shrugged. „We admit the possibility of an assistant inside the walls of the palace,“ he said. „We are investigating that now. But even if we never find your accomplice, we have proof that you were implicated, and that is enough.“

„What proof do you have?“ Drake asked blandly.

„Why, the necklace itself, of course!“ The Prosecutor looked as though he suspected Drake of having taken leave of his senses.

Drake shook his head. „That necklace is mine. I can prove it. It was made for me by a respectable jeweler on Seladon II. It’s a very good imitation, but it’s a phoney. They aren’t diamonds; they’re simply well-cut crystals of titanium dioxide. Check them if you don’t believe me.“

The Lord Prosecutor looked dumbfounded. „But—what—why—“

Drake looked sad. „I brought it to give to my good friend, the Noble Belgezd. Of course it would be a gross insult to wear them at the Shan’s Coronation, but he could wear them at other functions.“

„And how does my good friend repay me? By having me arrested. My Lord Prosecutor, I am a wronged man.“

The Prosecutor swallowed heavily and stood up. „The necklace has, naturally, been impounded by the police. I shall have the stones tested.“

„You’ll find they’re phonies,“ Drake said. „And that means one of two things. Either they are not the ones stolen from Belgezd or else Belgezd has mortally insulted his Shan by wearing false jewels to the Coronation.“

„Well! We shall see about this!“ said the Lord Prosecutor.

Anson Drake, free as a lark, was packing his clothes in his hotel room when the announcer chimed. He punched the TV pickup and grinned. It was the girl.

When the door slid aside, she came in, smiling. „You got away with it, Drake! Wonderful! I don’t know how you did it, but—“

„Did what?“ Drake looked innocent.

„Get away with the necklace, of course! I don’t know how it happened that Dobigel was there, but—“

„But, but, but,“ Drake said, smiling. „You don’t seem to know very much at all, do you?“

„Wha—what do you mean?“

Drake put his last article of clothing in his suitcase and snapped it shut. „I'll probably be searched pretty thoroughly when I get to the spaceport,“ he said coolly, „but they won't find anything on an innocent man.“

„Where is the necklace?“ she asked in a throaty voice.

Drake pretended not to hear her. „It's a funny thing,“ he said. „Old Belgezad would never let the necklace out of his hands except to get me. He thought he'd get it back by making sure I was followed. But he made two mistakes.“

The girl put her arms around his neck. „His mistakes don't matter as long as we have the necklace, do they?“

Anson Drake was never a man to turn down an invitation like that. He held her in his arms and kissed her—long and lingeringly.

When he broke away, he went on as though nothing had happened.

„Two mistakes. The first one was thinking up such an obviously silly plot. If it were as easy to steal jewels from the palace as all that, nothing would be safe on Thizar.

„The second mistake was sending his daughter to trap me.“

The girl gasped and stepped back.

„It was very foolish of you, Miss Belgezad,“ he went on calmly. „You see, I happened to know that the real Norma Knight was sentenced to seven years in Seladon Prison over a week ago. Unfortunately, the news hadn't reached Thizar yet. I knew from the first that the whole thing was to be a frame-up. It's too bad that your father had to use the real necklace—it's a shame he lost it.“

The girl's eyes blazed. „You—you thief! You—“ She used words which no self-respecting lady is supposed to use.

Drake waited until she had finished, and then said: „Oh, no, Miss Belgezad; I'm no thief. Your father can consider the loss of that necklace as a fine for running narcotics. And you can tell him that if I catch him again, it will be worse.

„I don't like his kind of slime, and I'll do my best to get rid of them. That's all, Miss B.; it was nice knowing you.“

He walked out of the room, leaving her to stand there in helpless fury.

His phony necklace had come in handy after all; the police had thought they had the real one, so they had never bothered to check the Galactic Mail Service for a small package mailed to Seladon II. All he'd had to do was drop it into the mail chute from his room and then cool his heels in jail while the Galactic Mails got rid of the loot for him.

The Necklace of Algol would be waiting for him when he got to Seladon II.

