

BLACK PANTHER SERIES

2. THE MAN-EATERS OF TSAWO



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THE MAN-EATERS OF TSAWO

by

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SUMMARY

In the heart of the African wilderness, a gripping tale unfolds as a ragged hermit, Paul Verhoef, harbors a dark secret, knowledge of a legendary Lost City of Jewels hidden deep in the jungle. This city, guarded by mysterious black giants, has captivated adventurers for generations. Paul's life takes a dramatic turn when his secret is discovered by ruthless fortune seekers led by the cunning Baum, who will stop at nothing to claim the riches.

As danger closes in, Verhoef teams up with Pieter Beukes, his bold daughter Sonet, and the enigmatic Black Panther, a shadowy figure as much a legend as the treasures they seek. The Black Panther, accompanied by his two trained leopards and cloaked in an aura of mystery, becomes the group's protector against relentless foes and the untamed wild. Amid betrayals, deadly encounters, and a quest for survival, the story navigates the tension between greed, loyalty, and the unknown perils of the jungle.

As secrets unravel and alliances are tested, *The Man-Eaters of Tsawo* reveals that the greatest battles are fought not in the wilderness but in the hearts of men. Will Paul's map lead to the city's fabled jewels, or will the shadows of the jungle claim them all? The answers lie in an adventure that pits humanity against nature, greed against honor, and myth against reality.

EXTRACT

With a mighty blow, Leon knocks the knife from his hands. It falls into the bushes. Something like a bloodcurdling war cry escapes the lips of the vengeful Gurkha. The two wrestle dangerously close to the fire. Mahabarak grabs Leon by the throat and tries to strangle him. However, the Black Panther's legs clamp around his head the next moment, and with a powerful kick, he pulls the Indian away from him like a rotten skin.

Now they stand facing each other again. The Indian hisses through his teeth, and saliva sprays from his mouth. His white teeth are clenched together. Enraged, he storms at the Black Panther man again, but runs into a hard left fist. He staggers back, but before he can recover, a heavy right blow lands on his stomach. He sinks to the ground. Finally, the Black Panther man's fist slams into his jaw.

Mahabarak doesn't even get a chance to groan and falls to the ground. The Black Panther man rubs his knuckles. He looks up at Sonet. She is speechless, and joy overwhelms her. She rushes towards the athletic figure and throws her arms around his neck.

"Oh, Leon, am I dreaming, or is it really you! I can't tell you everything I've been through these past few hours. Where have you been all this time?"

2. THE MAN-EATERS OF TSAWO

Chapter 1

THE HERMIT OF THE WOODS

The reeds along the waterfront are slowly pushed aside. A wrinkled, but hairy hand emerges. Then a face with a tangled bush of beard peers between the reeds at the rippling river water.

It is an elderly man and he is dressed in rags. In his right hand, on which the blue veins are clearly visible, he holds a tin bucket. A pair of small, but alert eyes closely watch the crocodiles that are lying and baking in an open patch in the reeds on the other side of the river. Then, he lightly descends the bank to the water. He bends down and quickly fills the bucket. No sooner does the bucket hit the stream with a metallic sound, the gigantic reptiles on the other side are the epitome of interest. A few, with their otherwise clumsy posture, have already quickly sailed into the water and are heading straight for the disturbance that their ears and eyes picked up over there.

But the hairy, ragged human figure is too quick for them. He is already standing high among the reeds on the bank. He knows these rough devils very well. All the years alone in these forests have trained him and have given him the senses of an animal.

Now he sneaks with his open bucket of water through the reeds. Under the tall trees along the way, he has already trampled open a path himself. He goes up the slope of the mountain, straight down to a steep cliff. Half hidden among the ferns, the dark opening of a cave gapes. The opening is just big enough to let a man inside without him having to bend over.

Inside, the cave is quite spacious. There, in the farthest corner, are a few bare bones of wild buck. Here and there are a few rickety boxes. Near the opening, a fire crackles and the scent of fresh game meat fills the air. In the roof of the cave is an iron hook from which half of a bushbuck hangs. The wrinkled, bearded hand also puts the bucket of water on the fire.

The pants he is wearing were made of strong khaki a long time ago. He made the shirt from bushbuck skins, but here and there it is already torn into strips. He stares into the fire with tearful eyes, lifts his head, and

lets his gaze wander over the peaceful landscape that lies in the morning rays of the sun. A smile suddenly creases around his mouth. He has been searching for six years, leading a hermit's life for six years, and now his task is finally done.

The "Hermit of the Blue Mountains" he is called, by the few inhabitants in the East African village, about 120 kilometers from his cave's home. He occasionally comes to the small village in the dense forests, but never during the day. When it gets dark, he sneaks through the streets to the little shop where he knocks up a German and buys his ammunition for about two months and sometimes a little groceries, because just eating game meat all day becomes too monotonous. In exchange for these goods, he drops the heavy bundle of game skins in front of the back stoop of the shop and then again disappears like a ghost through the desolate, dusty streets to a spot just outside the village, where his mule and cart patiently wait. But he doesn't drive off immediately. A large fire drives away the vermin that venture near his hiding place. So he waits until the early hours of the morning.

However, before he comes to his cave for shelter, he has to sleep another night in the forests. Fourteen kilometers from his cottage, he then unharnesses his mule cart. No further vehicle can come, because the forests are too rough and the mountainsides too rocky. The old mule goes further, rem-rem to his home.

Paul Verhoef has grown to love the field and the solitude of the dark cave. Even the little bit of bustling of people in the village, kilometers away from him, evokes something unpleasant in him...

But Paul Verhoef does not live here, completely cut off from the world because he prefers it. He is not a kind of mad hermit artist as the few people who have ever seen him think.

No, Paul Verhoef lives here in hermit solitude because he has a secret to discover and a secret to keep.

Twenty years ago, when Paul Verhoef's father was still alive, the burning desire to discover the secret flared up in him. His father was a big game hunter. One day, he went into the woods with two natives. None of them ever returned alive. After a week, Paul Verhoef, in turn, went into the woods to look for his father. Near this cave, he found him, half-eaten by the lions. And that was not all. In his right hand, he

clutched a handful of sparkling jewels. Colorful and breathtakingly beautiful were the gemstones. He still has them in his possession. The body was lying on his face. Pressed under his other hand was a note.

“My eyes have witnessed something incredible, something legendary. I am writing these few words because I have a feeling that I will never come out of these forests again. I have discovered a city, a lost city of jewels. My two natives have stayed behind. My eyes have never witnessed anything like this... Jewels in a deep hole under a tree... rubies, opals, diamonds, and sapphires. I greedily picked them up with my hands. My outriders too, but they are...”

Paul Verhoef again takes out the crumpled, dirty paper. The words are barely legible by this time, but he knows them by heart. The note ended abruptly. Near the body, he picked up a bloody dagger. Among the lion tracks and around the body were deep, trodden, bare footprints, large bare footprints.

The “Hermit of the Woods” entrusted his secret to only one person... an Afrikaner farmer who had always been well-disposed towards their family. However, the farmer never bothered with it. But now he will. The ragged figure goes to the rickety box in one corner of the cave. He takes a sheet of white paper from it. He smiles again, the smile of a soulless madman. Here is the map. Now they will easily find their way to the lost city of jewels. Paul Verhoef now knows that his father was not suffering from delusions and that the city of jewels does exist, the lost city deep in the heart of the jungle. He, Paul Verhoef, has seen it with his own eyes. His father’s secret is now his secret.

The Lost City of Jewels! It lies somewhere in the impassable, impenetrable jungle. In the forest depths where no man has ever been, no white man, except for him, Paul Verhoef, and his father.

After nine years of fruitless searching, he finally came across the lost city yesterday, deeply hidden among twisted jungle giants, covered with baboon ropes and climbing plants. And it is guarded by giants, black giants!

He stood frozen and hid behind one of the thickest trees. There before him was an image that reminded him of the sphinxes of Egypt. Just as cold and terrifying, as if it was half-animal, half-human, the figure loomed between the undergrowth. Nose, eyes, and ears could hardly be

distinguished. The climbing plants have overgrown it long ago. A large speckled cat suddenly landed on the head of the statue with a growling leap. Then an almost human sound echoed through the jungle. Paul Verhoef's heart pounded in his throat. He saw that the tiger was holding a large baboon in its claws.

He blinked his eyes, it was as if he was hypnotized. On the wall of one of the ruins that looked like a castle, a muscular black figure, large and square, appeared. A spear in his hand gleamed razor-sharp in the sunlight that penetrated the canopy of leaves here and there. The next moment it swooped through the air and landed among the tiger's leaves. At that moment, the instinct to flee took over Paul Verhoef. He turned in his tracks, but then immediately stopped again. No five steps in front of him, something shone among the bushes... jewels, scattered as if someone had just dropped them there in haste. It glittered in the sunlight. There was a conflict within him. The urge to run closer, regardless of the dangers that might lurk there, almost overwhelmed him, but the cold, mysterious fear that enveloped the whole scene compelled him to hastily leave the woods, back to the safety of his cave home.

Tomorrow, when the sun paints the east red, he will pack up and go to the village and persuade Pieter Beukes, the rich farmer, to send an expedition to the lost city of jewels.

For many here in the area, no, for everyone, the Swahili and all the other black tribes in this part of Africa, the Lost City was nothing more than a legend. Paul Verhoef slept restlessly that night and repeatedly felt in his worn trouser pocket whether the map he had drawn himself was still there.

He got up at four o'clock.

His heart beats faster with excitement as he approaches the village like a microscopic trifle between the dense bushes and trees. He waits under the same large fever tree where he has waited for the darkness for so many years, with his great secret hidden in his pocket.

At eight o'clock, he can no longer wait. Like a thief, the ragged hermit sneaks into the darkness. He stops. Something strange is going on. It seems as if the village is particularly busy tonight. He stops in front of the only hotel bar in this tropical stuffiness. He hears the people inside

frolicking and laughing. Do they have something to be happy about? He does. It has been nine years now that he has regularly walked past the swinging doors of this bar, without going inside, because the great secret that he wanted to discover burned like a fire inside him. But now he hesitates. Shouldn't he wash away the sweat with a little cold beer? But his rags?

He feels in his pocket again. The document is still there. His bearded face looks triumphantly around the door. The bar is full of people. They will wonder what kind of tramp is coming in here, but tonight he feels bigger than a king.

He recognizes Pieter Beukes immediately. What would he be doing here tonight, wonders Paul. He is not a person who usually visits the bar.

Paul Verhoef, shaky but with a radiant face, walks straight to his friend, the one who knows why he has stayed in the woods for so long. His hand searches for the paper on which he has drawn the route, the route to riches, to rest, and to luxury.

But Pieter Beukes pretends not to see him at all. He looks the other way. However, Paul does not let that stop him.

"Pieter, I have finally found the path, I have finally come across the treasures," he whispers softly to Beukes, a man with a neatly groomed goatee, muscular arms, and flashing blue eyes.

"Shush, Paul. Be quiet and for God's sake, go outside immediately before they see you."

He hesitates, bewildered, but the other people who are gathered around the bar table have already seen him. In a moment the rumbling voices are silent and they all look at him.

Someone remarked.

"Isn't that the hermit, the crazy hermit you've been talking about so fluently?"

A short, stunted man, the German Jew who always took Paul's skins in exchange for ammunition says.

"Yes, it's him."

A large man with a drooping mustache and a hard expression on his face, puts his glass of beer down on the counter in front of him and approaches the terrified Paul Verhoef with a powerful stride.

“I understand you are willing to provide us with information regarding the city, the lost city in the jungle?”

A great fear suddenly overwhelms Paul Verhoef. How do they know about the city? Everyone thought the place only existed in legends. After all the years of searching, his nerves are completely depleted. For a moment, he is completely thrown off course. Were all the years of struggle, of hardship in solitude and all the years in which he had defied so many dangers of the jungle, in vain? He takes a deep breath. He will never reveal anything to them. He clutches the paper on which the route is drawn tightly. His small eyes widen.

Chapter 2

AN ARROW FROM THE DARK

The burly man looks at him with eyes that are narrowed. He sees the fear in the shaky Verhoef. He hears the rustling of the map in the hermit's pocket. And then he knows immediately. His eyes are eagerly focused on the hand in the man's pocket, where a secret may be hidden. Startled, Paul Verhoef wants to flee through the door. He casts a look of despair at Pieter Beukes, who, however, remains motionless.

"It's pure nonsense, there is no lost city. There is no such thing," Paul Verhoef bellows out anxiously and nervously.

He storms out of the door and flees across the narrow street with the speed of a wild buck.

The burly man with the cruel eyes quickly turns to the other three people, who have also put down their glasses in the meantime.

"He knows a lot, Baum," squeaks the German Jew. "He wouldn't have fled so terrified if there was no lost city. He has been staying in the woods for nine years."

Baum's large fists come thundering down on the table.

"We must catch him, guys. He has something in his pocket that he wants to keep hidden from us."

Without finishing his glass, he bursts out of the door, followed by two men. One tall and slender, with a drooping mustache, and the other a stocky, built bantam. The stunted shopkeeper starts to smile and raises his arm to gulp down his beer. He looks at the spot where the muscular Pieter Beukes had still been standing. He is also gone.

Outside, the three men jump into a Ford car. In the blink of an eye, the machine is running. The sharp headlights pierce the darkness. Four hundred steps ahead of them in the shadows of the few small buildings, a ragged figure rushes forward. His rags flutter in the wind. He looks back hastily every now and then. When the car lights shine on him, a wild, untamed fear comes into his eyes. The first trees around the village are still about a hundred steps ahead of him. With surprising speed for such an elderly person, he rushes towards a large marula tree. The sharp lights are relentlessly getting closer. Verhoef instinctively knows that they are pursuers. Verhoef swerves sharply to the left. He

won't make it. The brakes scream behind him and two figures jump out of the car. The car shoots forward again, makes a wide turn, and tries to cut him off from the woods. The footsteps of the two figures behind him are coming closer rapidly. They are catching up with him quickly. The hermit suddenly swerves to the right again to avoid the car in front of him. But the two behind him are now almost an arm's length away from him. He makes a series of turns, but to no avail. A shot cracks in the dark darkness. It is Baum who has now brought the car to a stop and shoots at the fleeing figure. With a last burst of energy, the ragged old man tries to reach the trees. There he might be able to escape his pursuers.

He is close to a few thorn trees on the edge of the forest. He prepares himself to dive between the trees. If they want the document, they can drag him out of there dead, but then the map will already be burned.

From the darkness ahead of him, there is suddenly a growl, the warning roar of a tiger! Paul Verhoef knows it, but there is also something strange about the growl. Is he now running straight into the jaws of a tiger?

The two pursuers are moving slower now. They also heard the growl. Both immediately pulled out their revolvers.

"Stop or we'll shoot, hermit," they bellow.

Verhoef is at the board trees. There is a narrow opening. He bursts through it. He sees a black figure in front of him. An arm flashes forward and grips his mouth. His scream sounds muffled. He hears a growl again. Bullets are whistling around him. The car lights are coming closer and the three men outside are screaming incoherently.

The hermit is faint with fear. Here in the dark of the board hook-and-stick, someone grabbed him and is now dragging him deeper into the jungle. He struggles helplessly in the strange thing's grip. His first thought is that it is a gorilla.

A voice speaks in his ear.

"Don't struggle. Don't resist. You'll only get hurt. I'll let go of your mouth. I'm just freeing you from your pursuers."

The voice speaks in Afrikaans, the language of Verhoef's Afrikaner mother. He feels the blood leaving his head. The grip around his mouth loosens. It feels to him as if his lips were in a turn screw. He tries to

recognize something of the figure that is still dragging him along. He only sees a black figure.

The shots are still cracking behind them. His pursuers have no intention of giving up anytime soon. The car lights are swinging back and forth. The light seeps through the leaves. It illuminates his face... the terrifying face of a panther, a black panther, a man-panther! Verhoef goes limp in the hands of the black thing. He is now vaguely aware of a rope being tied around his waist. Then he is thrown down to the ground in a bundle. And then his body is hoisted up. He goes higher and higher. He is hanging halfway between heaven and earth. He feels a thick branch pressing against his back. He opens his eyes. Below him stands a black figure with the lower body of a man and the head of a panther. Fear must have gotten to him. It is an image from his feverish, nervous brain. He sees the thing's arm swinging under him. The other end of the rope whips around another branch. An arm again catches the end of the rope and the thing pulls its own body with it onto the other branch.

Soon Verhoef is also lifted up. He feels the muscular arms around his waist. He comes into a sitting position on the thick branch.

"Who are you?" he asks weakly.

But now the voices are approaching quickly. His three attackers have also penetrated the woods in the meantime.

The broad-shouldered Baum is walking ahead. He has a rifle at the ready. The other two follow closely behind with revolvers in their hands.

The black thing that rescued Verhoef, jumps back into the woods, light-footed as a cat. He swings himself onto a thick branch. The three men stand in the board thorn bush, no fifteen steps from him. They stand in the bright lights of their car that they have pulled up close to the woods. He looks down at them.

"Damnation, now we only have this strip of light. Why didn't one of you think of a flashlight?"

The other two behind him are listening with wide eyes.

"But Master, what I cannot understand is how the devil did the man disappear so tracelessly? The tiger couldn't have caught him. There are no drag marks here."

"Yes, it's incomprehensible. But if he's still alive, we'll get him. As

sure as two times two is four. I didn't bring my trackers for nothing. My Gurkhas and my dogs will sniff him out quickly."

"Let's turn back, Master! I think I heard a leopard or something growling again."

All three of them stop and listen attentively. The black figure in the tree is watching them. His hand glides like lightning to his left side. In the night, a bow can be vaguely distinguished. From his big open mouth comes the growl of a leopard, hollow-sounding, deep from his belly, muffled, and frightening.

The three men in the light patch stiffen. A revolver bullet whistles in the direction of the sound. Further down in the woods, a mane lion rumbles out its roar and the almost human voice of a night eagle sounds blood-curdlingly up between the bushes.

Something whips past them and sticks tremblingly into the tree trunk just behind them. All three duck too late and then they swing around. The taller figure's eyes widen.

"Heavens, Master, Bushmen or dwarf-negroes! Let's get out of here!" His tall figure quickly bends under an overhanging branch. However, Baum grabs him.

"Keep your head, Spies! Look, there's a piece of paper attached to the arrowhead. Satz, please get it."

Tense, Baum stares in the direction from which the arrow just came. His rifle is against his shoulder.

Satz, the short-built one with bulgy forearms, nervously fiddles to remove the paper from the arrow shaft. The tropical night is warm. The sweat pearls on all three of their foreheads. Their helmets are pressed far back on their heads.

Satz comes closer and his face turns as pale as wax.

"It's a note, Master," he says to Baum. "There's something written here... yes, it looks like mud writing. And at the bottom is a black mark, also written in mud. Yes, it looks like a drop of water like the claw of a leopard."

"Read man, read! What does it say? Or can't you read?"

Baum's eyes are still directed towards the figure in the sights of the tree, but he cannot see him.

Satz reads.