

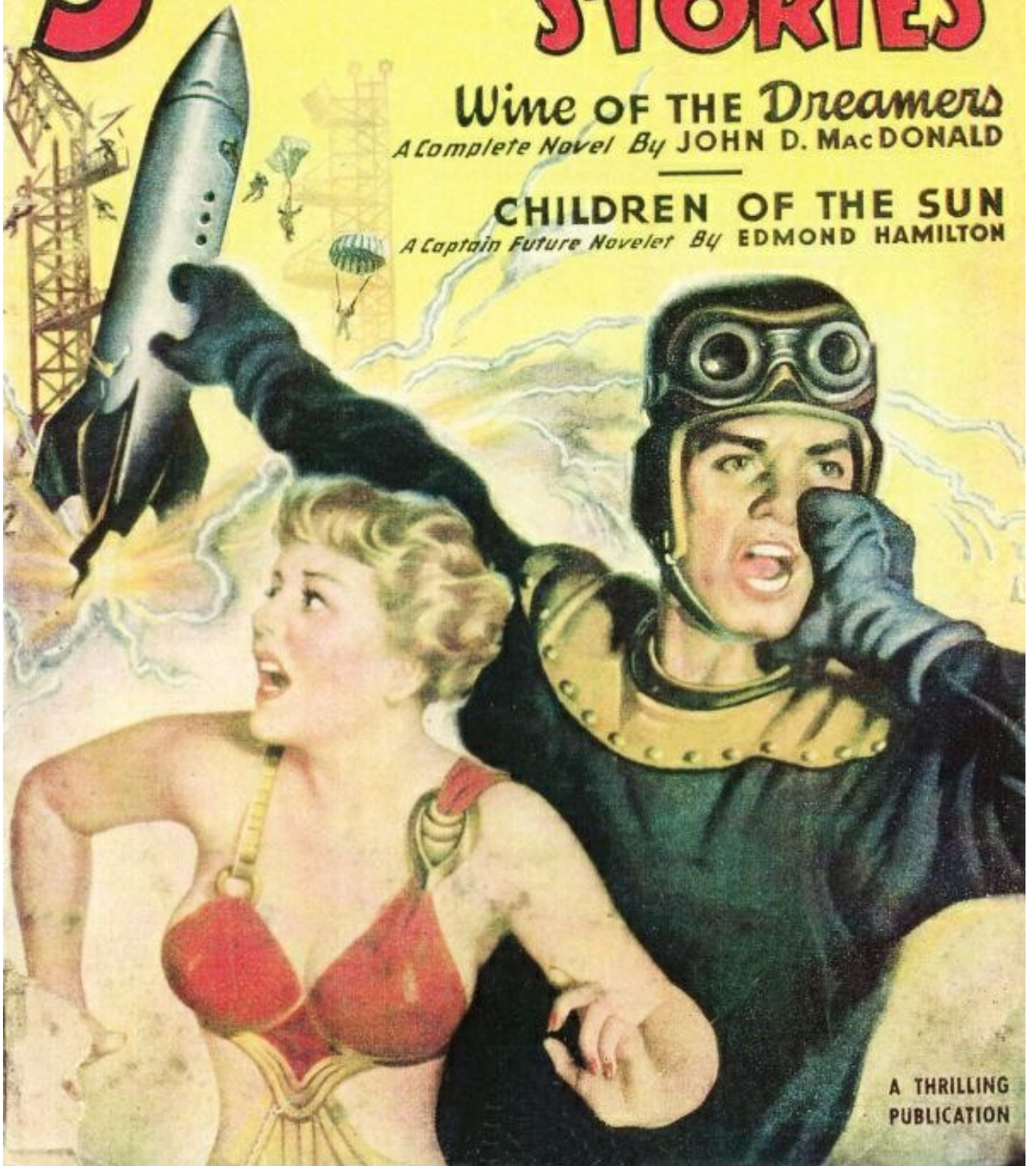
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A Complete Novel By JOHN D. MACDONALD

CHILDREN OF THE SUN
A Captain Future Novelet By EDMOND HAMILTON



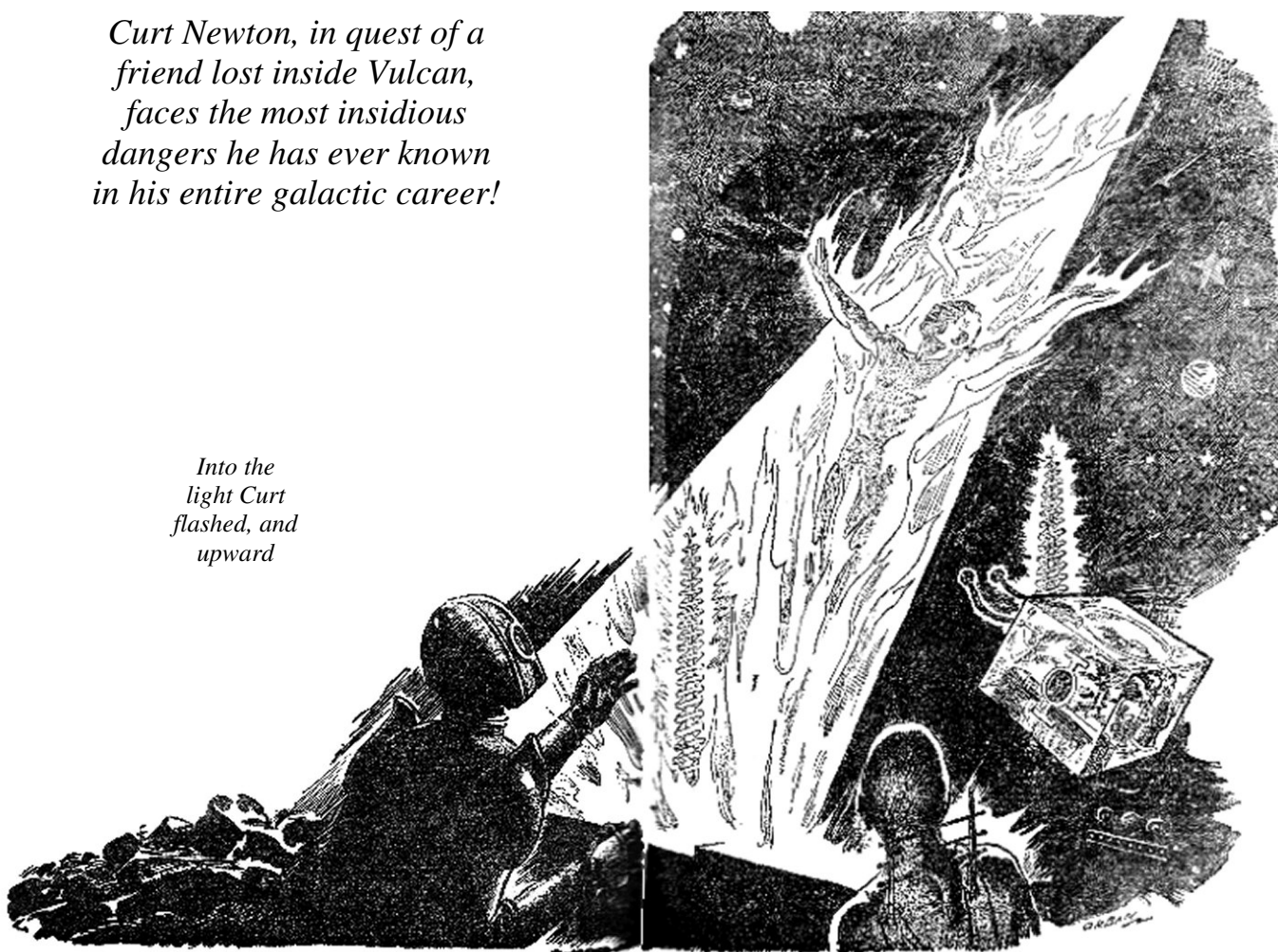
A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

CHILDREN OF THE SUN

by Edmond Hamilton

Curt Newton, in quest of a friend lost inside Vulcan, faces the most insidious dangers he has ever known in his entire galactic career!

Into the light Curt flashed, and upward



CHAPTER I

Quest of the Futuremen

THE ship was small and dark and unobtrusive, speeding across the Solar System. It had a worn battered look, its plates roughened by strange radiation, dented by tiny meteors, tarnished by alien atmospheres.

It had been far, this ship. In its time it had voyaged to the farthest shores of infinity, carrying its little crew of four on an odyssey unmatched in human annals. It had borne them to perils far around the universe – and back again.

But not even the man who sat at its controls could dream that now, here inside the familiar System, it was bearing him toward the most strange and soul-shaking experience of all ...

Curt Newton was oppressed, not by premonitions

but by a self-accusing regret. The deep worry that he felt showed in the tautness of his face, in the set of his lean body. His red head was bent forward, his gray eyes anxiously searching the sunbeaten reaches of space ahead.

The little ship was inside the orbit of Mercury. The whole sky ahead was dominated by the monster bulk of the Sun. It glared like a universe of flame, crowned by the awful radiance of its corona, reaching out blind mighty tentacles of fire.

Newton scanned the region near the great orb's limb. The impatience that had spurred him across half the System grew to an intolerable tension.

He said almost angrily, "Why couldn't Carlin let well enough alone? Why did he have to go to Vulcan?"

"For the same reason," answered a precise metallic voice from behind his shoulder, "that you went out to Andromeda. He is driven by the need to learn."

"He wouldn't have gone if I hadn't told him all about

Vulcan. It's my fault, Simon."

Curt Newton looked at his companion. He saw nothing strange in the small square case hovering on its traction beams – the incredibly intricate serum-case that housed the living brain of him who had been Simon Wright, a man. That artificial voice had taught him his first words, the lens-like artificial eyes that watched him now had watched his first stumbling attempts to walk, the microphonic ears had heard his infant wails.

"Simon – do you think Carlin is dead?"

"Speculation is quite useless, Curtis. We can only try to find him."

"We've *got* to find him," Newton said, with somber determination. "He helped us when we needed help. And he was our friend."

Friend. He had had so few close human friends, this man whom the System called Captain Future. Always he had stood in the shadow of a loneliness that was the inescapable heritage of his strange childhood.

Orphaned almost at birth he had grown to manhood on the lonely Moon, knowing no living creature but the three unhuman Futuremen. They had been his playmates, his teachers, his inseparable companions. Inevitably by that upbringing he was forever set apart from his own kind.

Few people had ever penetrated that barrier of reserve. Philip Carlin had been one of them. And now Carlin was gone into mystery.

"If I had been here," Newton brooded, "I'd never have let him go."

A BRILLIANT scientist Carlin had set out to study the mysteries of that strange world inside Vulcan which the Futuremen had discovered. He had hired a work-ship with heavy anti-heat equipment to take him to Vulcan, arranging for it to come back there for him in six months.

But when the ship returned it had found no trace of Carlin in the ruined city that had been his base of operations. It had, after a futile search, come back with the news of his disappearance.

All this had happened before the return of the Futuremen from their epoch-making voyage to Andromeda. And now Curt Newton was driving sunward, toward Vulcan, to solve the mystery of Carlin's fate.

Abruptly, from beyond the bulkhead door of the bridge-room, two voices, one deep and booming, the other lighter and touched with an odd sibilance, were raised in an outburst of argument.

Newton turned sharply. "Stop that wrangling! You'd better get those anti-heaters going or we'll all fry."

The door slid open and the remaining members of the unique quartet came in. One of them, at first glance, appeared wholly human – with a lithe lean figure and finely-cut features. And yet in his pointed white face

and bright ironic eyes there lurked a disturbing strangeness.

A man but no kin to the sons of Adam. An android, the perfect creation of scientific craft and wisdom – humanity carried to its highest power, and yet not human. He carried his difference with an air but Curt Newton was aware that Otho was burdened with a loneliness far more keen than any he could know himself.

The android said quietly, "Take it easy, Curt. The unit's already functioning."

He glanced through the window at the glaring vista of space and shivered. "I get edgy myself, playing around the Sun this close."

Newton nodded. Otho was right. It was one thing to come and go between the planets, even between the stars. It was a wholly different thing to dare approach the Sun.

The orbit of Mercury was a boundary, a limit. Any ship that went inside it was challenging the awful power of the great solar orb. Only ships equipped with the anti-heat apparatus dared enter that zone of terrible force – and then only at great peril.

Only the fourth of the Futuremen seemed unworried. He crossed to the window, his towering metal bulk looming over them all. The same scientific genius that had created the android had shaped also this manlike metal giant, endowing him with intelligence equal to the human and with a strength far beyond anything human.

Grag's photoelectric eyes gazed steadily from his strange metal face, into the wild shaking glare. "I don't know what you're jumpy about," he said. "The Sun doesn't bother me a bit." He flexed his great gleaming arms. "It feels good."

"Stop showing off," said Otho sourly.

"You'll burn out your circuits and we've better things to do than trying to cram your carcass out through the disposal lock."

The android turned to Captain Future. "You haven't raised Vulcan yet?"

Newton shook his head. "Not yet."

Presently a faint aura of hazy force surrounded the little ship as it sped on – the anti-heater unit building up full power. The terrible heat of the Sun could reach through space only as radiant vibrations. The aura generated by the anti-heaters acted as a shield to refract and deflect most of that radiant heat.

Newton touched a button. Still another filter-screen, this one the heaviest of all, slid across the window. Yet even through all the screens the Sun poured dazzling radiance.

The temperature inside the ship was steadily rising. The anti-heaters could not deflect all the Sun's radiant heat. Only a fraction got through but that was enough to make the bridge-room an oven.

An awed silence came upon the Futuremen as they looked at the mighty star that filled almost all the firmament ahead. They had been this close to the Sun before but no previous experience could lessen the impact of it.

You never saw the Sun until you got this close, Newton thought. Ordinary planet-dwellers thought of it as a beneficent golden thing in the sky, giving them heat and light and life. But here you saw the Sun as it really was, a throbbing seething core of cosmic force, utterly indifferent to the bits of ash that were its planets and to the motes that lived upon those ashes.

They could, at this distance, clearly see gigantic cyclones of flame raging across the surface of the mighty orb. Into those vortices of fire all Earth could have been dropped and from around them exploded burning geysers that could have shrivelled worlds.

Sweat was running down Curt Newton's face now and he gasped a little for each breath. "Temperature, Otho?" he asked without turning his head.

"Only fifty degrees under the safety limit and the anti-heaters running full load," said the android. "If we've miscalculated course –"

"We haven't," said Captain Future. "There's Vulcan ahead."

The planetoid, the strange lonely little solar satellite, had come into view as a dark dot closely pendant to the skyfilling Sun.

Newton drove the *Comet* forward unrelentingly now. Every moment this close to the Sun there was peril. Let the anti-heaters stop one minute and metal would soften and fuse, flesh would blacken and die.

Otho suddenly raised his hand to point, crying out, "Look! Sun-children!"

They had heard of the legendary "Sun-children" from the Vulcanian natives, had once glimpsed one far off. But these two were nearer. Newton, straining his eyes against the solar glare, could barely see the things – two whirling little wisps of flame, moving fast through the blinding radiance of the corona.

Then the two will-o-wisps of fire had disappeared in the vast glare. The eye searched for them in vain.

"I still think," Simon was saying, "that they're just wisps of flaming hydrogen that are flung off the Sun and then fall back again."

"But the Vulcanians told of them coming down into Vulcan," Otho objected. "How could bits of flaming gas do that?"

CURT NEWTON hardly listened. He was already whipping the ship in around Vulcan in a tight spiral few spacemen would have risked. Its brake rockets thundering, it scudded low around the surface of the little world.

The whole surface was semi-molten rock. The heat

of the planetoid's stupendous neighbor kept its outer skin half-melted. Lava sweltered in great pools, infernal lagoons framed by smoking rock hills. Fire burst up from the rocks, as though called forth by the nearby Sun.

Grag first saw what they were looking for – a gaping round pit in the sunward side of the planetoid. Presently Captain Future had the *Comet* hovering on keel-jets above the yawning shaft. He eased on the power-pedal and the little ship dropped straight down into the pit.

This shaft was the one way inside the hollow solar satellite. At the planetoid's birth gases trapped within it had caused it to form as a hollow shell. Those gases, finally bursting out as pressure increased, had torn open this way to the outer surface.

The ship sank steadily down the shaft. Light was around them for this side of Vulcan was toward the Sun now and a great beam entered.

Then, finally, the shaft debouched into a vast space vaguely lighted by that beam – the interior of the hollow world.

"Whew, I'm glad to be in here out of that solar radiance," breathed Otho. "Now where?"

Newton asked, "The ruins near Yellow Lake, wasn't it?"

"Yes," answered the Brain's metallic voice. "It was where the ship left Carlin and where it was to pick him up."

The Futuremen had been here inside Vulcan once before. Yet they felt again the wonder of this strangest world in the System as the *Comet* flew low over its inner surface.

Beneath their flying ship stretched a weird landscape of fern jungles. It extended into a shrouding haze ahead, the horizon fading away in an *upward* curve. Over their heads now was the hazy "sky" of the planetoid's central hollow, cut across by the tremendous, glittering sword of the giant beam of sunlight that gave light to this world.

As their ship slanted down over the fern jungle toward their destination a feeling of gray futility came upon Curt Newton. Months had passed since Philip Carlin had disappeared here. Could the scientist have survived alone so long in his wild world?

A city wrecked by time lay beneath them, almost swallowed by the giant ferns. Only scattered crumbling stones of massive dimensions had survived the ravages of unthinkable ages. It was like the flotsam of a lost ship, floating up out of the past.

The *Comet* came to rest upon cracked paving surrounded by towering shattered monoliths. The Futuremen went out into the steamy air.

"It was here that Carlin was to meet the ship when it came," said Captain Future. "And he wasn't here." He spoke in a lowered voice. The brooding silence of this memorial of lost greatness laid a cold spell upon them

all.

These broken mighty stones were all that remained of a city of the Old Empire, that mighty galactic civilization mankind had attained to long ago. On worlds of every star its cities and monuments had risen, then had passed – had passed so completely that men had had no memory of it until the Futuremen probed back into cosmic history.

Long ago the mighty ships of the star-conquering Empire had come to colonize even hollow Vulcan. Men and women with the powers of a brilliant science and with proud legends of victorious cosmic conquest had lived and loved and died here. But the Empire had fallen and its cities had died and the descendants of its people here were barbarians now.

"The first thing," Newton was saying, "is to get in touch with the Vulcanians and find out what they know about Carlin."

Grag stood, his metal head swivelling as he stared around the ruins. "No sign of them here. But those primitives always are shy."

"We'll look around first for some trace of Carlin here then," Newton decided.

The quartet started through the ruins – the man and the mighty clanking robot, the lithe android and the gliding Brain.

Newton felt more strongly the oppressive somberness of this place of vanished glory, as he looked up at the inscriptions in the old language that were carved deep into the great stones. He could read that ancient writing and as he read those proud legends of triumphs long sunken into oblivion he felt the crushing sadness of that greatest of galactic tragedies, the fall of the Old Empire.

Simon's sharp, metallic voice roused him from his preoccupation. "Curtis! Look *here!*"

Captain Future instantly strode to where the Brain hovered beside one of the towering monoliths.

"Did you find some trace, Simon?"

"Look at that inscription! It's in the old language – but it's *newly* carved!"

Newton's eyes widened. It was true. On that monolith, a few feet above the ground, was a chiseled legend in the language that had not been used for ages. Yet the characters were raw, new, only faintly weathered.

"It was carved less than a year ago!" he said. His pulses suddenly hammered. "Simon, Carlin knew the old language! He had me teach it to him, remember!"

"You mean – Carlin carved this one?" Otho exclaimed.

"Read it!" cried Grag.

Curt Newton read aloud, "*To the Futuremen, if they ever come – I have discovered an incredible secret, the strangest form of life ever dreamed. The implications of that secret are so tremendous that I am going to investigate them first hand. If I do not return be warned*

that the old citadel beyond the Belt holds the key of a staggering power."

CHAPTER II

Citadel of Mystery

AS the echoes of Curt Newton's voice died away the four looked at each other in troubled wonder. The rank ferns drooped unstimulating in the weird half-light over the broken arches and falling colonnades. Somewhere in the jungle a beast screamed harshly with a sound like laughter.

Otho finally broke the silence. "What could Carlin have found?"

"Something big," Captain Future said slowly. "So big that he was afraid of anyone else finding it. That's why he wrote this in the language of the Old Empire that no one but Simon and I could read."

Simon said practically, "The Belt is what the natives call the strip burned out by the Beam, isn't it? Well – we can soon find out."

"Shall we take the ship?"

Newton shook his head. "Too tricky navigating in here. The Belt isn't far away."

Grag flexed mighty metal limbs. "What are we waiting for?"

Presently the quartet was moving through the jungle of giant ferns. All about them was silence in the heavy gathering twilight. The bright sword of the Beam was fading, angling away as the opening in the crust was rotated away from the Sun.

Newton knew the direction of the Belt, that seared blackened strip in which the terrible heat of the Sun's single shaft permitted nothing to live. He steered their course to head around the end of the Belt.

Again a beast-scream came from far away. There seemed no other sound in the fern jungle. But presently the Brain spoke softly. "We are being followed," he said.

Curt Newton nodded. Simon's micro-phonic ears, far more acute than any human auditory system, had picked up faint rustlings of movement among the ferns. Now that he was listening for it Newton could hear the stealthy padding of many naked feet, moving with infinite caution.

"I don't understand it," he murmured. "These Vulcanian natives were friendly before. This furtiveness –"

"Shall we stop and have it out with them?" Otho demanded.

"No, let's go on. We have to find that citadel before dark. But keep alert – a thrown spear can be just as final as a blaster."

"Not to me it can't," rumbled Grag.

"Curt didn't mean you – he meant us humans," gibed

Otho.

"Listen, plastic-puss," Grag began wrathfully. "I'm twice as human as you and –"

"That's enough," Newton rapped. "You can carry on that old argument some other time."

They went on and the unseen escort went with them. Soon they encountered the end of the Belt.

Black calcined soil, smoking rocks, a wave of dull heat from the ground itself attested to the awful heat of the Sun whose single great ray once each day traveled across this strip of Vulcan's interior.

They made Captain Future feel again the terrible power of the gigantic solar orb so close by that could reach in through a single loophole and wreak this flaming devastation where it touched.

They crossed the end of that blackened strip, Curt and Otho hastening over the hot rocks, Grag plodding stolidly, Simon gliding ahead.

Before them the fern jungle rose into olive-colored hills, growing dark as the dusk deepened. Almost at once Newton noticed something on the slope of the nearest hill. It was a raw lumpy scar where a landslide had recently occurred.

"Simon, look at that landslide! Notice anything?"

The Brain hovered, his lens-eyes surveying the dusky hillside. "Yes, the outline. Definitely unnatural."

Otho and Grag were staring now, too. "I don't see anything unnatural about it," boomed the metal giant.

"It covers a building that stood on that hillside," Newton informed him. "Look at the symmetry of it, even masked by soil – the central cupola, the two wings."

Otho's bright eyes flashed. "The citadel Carlin mentioned?"

"Perhaps. Let's have a look."

They moved on. In a brief time they were climbing the slope to that great lumpy scar of new soil.

Newton looked back down at the jungle. No one had followed them out of it onto the bare slope. The giant ferns stretched far away and he could catch the tawny gleam of Yellow Lake in the distant dusk.

THROUGH the twilight jungle, the Belt stretched like a stygian river of deepest black. He could see no building or ruin of any kind on his side of the ebon strip.

"This *must* be the citadel Carlin meant," he said. "Apparently a landslide has covered it since he was here. We'll have to dig a way in."

They found flat stones in the loose soil of the slide. Using them as hand-spades Newton and the android and robot began pushing aside the ocher soil above the cupola of the buried building.

Something flashed and hissed in the dusk. Curt Newton whirled. A long quivering spear stuck in the slope some distance below them.

"I *thought* the Vulcanians were still with us!" Otho muttered.

Newton said quietly, "Just stand still. Let me talk to them."

He faced down the slope toward the fern jungle. He called out in the language he had learned on his first visit to this lost world – a debased form of the once-beautiful language of the Old Empire, sunk now into barbarism like the men who spoke it.

"Show us your faces, my brothers! We come as friends and our hands are empty of death!"

There was utter silence. In the distance the fading shaft of sunlight lay like a tarnished sword across the dusk. The dense jungle below was untouched by wind or motion of any kind. Even the beasts were stilled by that strong human voice, speaking out across the desolation.

Newton did not speak again. He waited. He seemed to have endless patience, and complete assurance. After a time, half furtively and yet with a curious and touching pride, a man came out of the jungle and looked up at them.

He was clad in garments of white leather and his skin was white and the falling mane of his hair was white and his eyes were pale as mist. His only weapons were a knife and a spear.

In his carriage, in the fine modeling of his head, Newton could still see lingering traces of the heritage that had given the men of the Old Empire supremacy over two galaxies. And it seemed sad that this man should look up at him with the shy feral untrusting eyes of a wild thing.

Simon Wright said quietly, "Do you not know him, Curtis?"

"Of course." In the Vulcanian dialect Newton said, "Is the memory of Kah so short that he does not know his brothers?"

They had had dealings with Kah before. He was lord over a third of the tribes of Vulcan and had proved a man of his word, aiding the Futuremen in many ways. But now the suspicious catlike eyes studied them, utterly without warmth or welcome.

"Kah remembers," said the man softly. "The name of the great one is Grag – and you are the flame-haired one who leads."

Behind him, by twos and threes, his men gathered silently at the foot of the slope. They were all the same tall snow-haired stock, wearing the white leather, bearing the sharp spears. They watched, and Newton saw that their eyes dwelt in wonder upon the towering Grag. He remembered that they had been much impressed by Grag before.

Kah said abruptly, "We have been friends and brothers, and therefore I have stayed my hand. This place is sacred and forbidden. Leave it while you still live."

Newton answered steadily, "We cannot leave. We seek a friend who came here and was lost."

The Vulcanian chieftain voiced a long, harsh *Ah-h!* and every man with him lifted his spear and shook it.

"He entered the forbidden place," said Kah, "and he is gone."

"Gone? You mean he's dead?"

Kah's hands shaped an age-old ritual gesture. Newton saw that they trembled. The Vulcanian turned and pointed to the fading Beam, which was to him a symbol of godhead.

"He has gone *there*," Kah whispered, "along the path of light. He has followed the Bright Ones, who do not return."

"I do not understand you, Kah!" said Newton sharply. "Is the body of my friend in this buried place? What happened? Speak more clearly."

"No, I have talked too much of forbidden things." Kah raised up his spear. "Go now! Go – for I have no wish to slay!"

"You cannot slay, Kah, for your spears will not fly this far. And the great one called Grag will be as a wall against your coming."

Rapidly, under his breath, Newton spoke to the robot. "Keep them back, Grag!, They can't harm you, and it'll leave us free to dig."

CLANKING ponderously down the slope, a terrifying gigantic form in the dusk, Grag advanced on the Vulcanians. And Newton cried aloud to Kah, "We will not leave this place until we have found our friend!"

Kah flung his spear. It fell short by no more than two paces but Newton did not stir. The Vulcanian drew back slowly before the oncoming Grag, who spread out his mighty arms and roared and made the ground tremble under his feet.

"The big ham!" whispered Otho. "He's enjoying it."

There was a wavering among the ranks of the natives. A ragged flight of spears pelted up the slope and some of the obsidian points splintered with a sharp ringing sound on Grag's metallic body. Grag laughed a booming laugh. He picked up a slab of stone and broke it in his hands and flung the pieces at them.

"That does it," said Otho disgustedly. "I'm going to be sick."

Kah screamed suddenly, "The curse will fall on you as it fell on the other who entered there! You too will go out along the Beam, lost forever from the sight of men!"

He turned then and vanished into the jungle.

"I have been studying this landslide," said Simon Wright irrelevantly. "I believe that it was artificially caused by the natives to seal this place after Carlin entered it."

"Very likely," Captain Future answered. He stood for a moment in deep thought. "I wonder what Kah meant by the 'Bright Ones who do not return'?"

"Probably an euphemism for the dead," said Otho pessimistically. "We'll know better when we've found a way inside."

They turned to and began to dig again. The citadel stood on a sort of promontory, partly blocked now by the slide, so that the natives could only come at them up the slope, and Grag effectively barred the way. Now and again a spear whistled harmlessly into the dirt but there was no attack.

The last glowing thread of the Beam narrowed into nothingness and was gone. Utter darkness descended on the hidden world of Vulcan. Newton and Otho worked on by the light of belt-lamps.

They struck the solid stone of the building, and the work went faster. After a few minutes Otho cried, "There's an opening here!"

They discarded their improvised spades. The loose dirt flew under their hands and presently they had uncovered the upper arches of a triple window. From there the way was easy.

Curt Newton was the first one inside. A great quantity of dirt had poured in through the open arches but most of this upper level was clear. Otho slid agilely after him, and then the Brain.

The lamps showed them a circular gallery, high up in the central cupola. Below was a round and empty shaft. Newton leaned out over the low carved railing. Far down in the pit he could see a soft and curdled luminescence, like spectral sunlight veiled in mist. The source was hidden from him by the overhang of other galleries lower down.

The silence of age-long death was in the place and the mingled smell of centuries and of the raw new soil. Newton led the way around the gallery, his footsteps ringing hollow against the vault of stone.

He found a narrow stairway, going down.

They descended, passing the other galleries, and came at last into a small chamber. It had had a door to the outside, a massive, age-tarnished metal door that had buckled somewhat with pressure and had let dirt sift through the cracks.

Opposite the door was a low, square opening in the stone wall. Above it was an inscription. Holding his lamp high, Curt Newton read slowly, "Here is the birth-place of the Children of the Sun."

CHAPTER III
Dread Metamorphosis

WONDERINGLY they went through into the central chamber of the citadel. Dirt had spilled down from above, covering a good part of the floor. Newton realized that only the upper gallery, serving as a stop for the soil to dam itself against, had saved the interior of the citadel from being heavily inundated.

He scrambled up onto that heap of rock and soil, and then stood still, gazing in puzzled wonder. He saw now the sources of that dim, eerie light. Set in deep niches on opposite faces of the curving wall were two seeming identical sets of apparatus, like nothing he had ever seen before.

The bases were of some dark metal, untouched by the passage of time. They were wide and low, separated so that their centers formed a dais. Each base bore two soaring coils of what seemed to be crystal tubing, as high as a tall man, braced in frames of platinum.

The coils pulsed and glowed with misty light – one set giving forth a gleam of purest gold, the other a darker hue of bluish green. Opposite the arch through which they had entered was a third niche, much smaller, having within it a complicated bank of instruments that might have been a control panel.

"Birthplace of the Children of the Sun," said Otho softly. "Look, Curt – there above the niches."

Again Captain Future read aloud, the warning messages cut deep in the ageless stone. Above the apparatus of the golden coils it said, "Let him beware who steps beyond this portal. For death is the price of eternal life!"

Above the one of somber hue, the inscription read "Death is a double doorway. On which side of it is the true life?"

Simon Wright had approached the niche that held the strange glow of sunlight and was hovering over the edge of the fallen soil there. "Curtis," he said, "I think we have found what we sought."

Newton joined him. He bent and picked something up, shaking it free from the dirt that half buried it. Mutely he nodded and showed the thing to Otho. It was a coverall of tough synthetic cloth, much stained and worn. On the label inside the collar was woven the name, *Philip Carlin*.

"He was here then, Otho. "But what happened to him? Why would he strip – wait!"

The android's sharp eyes had perceived a mound in the soil, vaguely manlike in shape. Together he and Newton uncovered it and then looked at each other in vast relief.

"It's only his knapsack and bedroll," said Newton thankfully.

"And his boots." Otho shook his head "I don't get it at all. There's no sign of blood on his clothes –"

Newton was looking now at the yel-crystal coils, the suggestive dais-like space between them. The thing was close to him, almost close enough to touch.

"He stripped here," said Newton slowly. "He left his clothing and his kit behind and –" His eyes lifted to the inscription and he added very softly, "Phil Carlin went through the portal, whatever it is and wherever it leads."

"I agree with your assumptions, Curtis," said Simon Wright. "I suggest that you search Carlin's effects for any data he may have left relative to this apparatus and its uses. It is obvious that he spent months in study and such a record seems inevitable."

Simon's lens-eyes turned toward the small niche with the cryptic bank of controls.

"See, there are many close-packed inscriptions on those walls, presumably instructions for the operation of these machines. He would surely have written down his translations for reference."

Captain Future was already going through Carlin's pack. "Here it is!" he said and held up a thick notebook. "Hold your light closer, Otho."

He thumbed rapidly through the pages until he found what he was hoping and praying for – a section headed, in Carlin's meticulous script, TRANSLATION OF FORMULAE, CONTROL NICHE.

"Long, complicated and heavily annotated by Carlin," he said. "It will take us the rest of the night to puzzle this out, but it's a godsend all the same."

He sat down in the dirt, the book open on his knees. Simon hovered close over his shoulder. The two were already absorbed in those all-important pages.

"Otho," said Newton, "will you go up and give Grag a hand in? The natives won't dare to follow us in here on forbidden ground."

AND that was the last thing he said that night, except to exchange a few terse remarks with Simon on the intricacies of some formulae or equation.

Grag and Otho waited. They did not speak. From beyond the high windows came a distant sound of voices that was like a bitter dirge.

Curt Newton read on and on in Carlin's record. And as he read the terrible suspicion that had been born in his mind took form and shape and crystallized at last into a truth as horrifying as it was inescapable.

There was more in that record than mere scientific data. There were history and hope and terror and a great dream and a conclusion so staggering that the mind reeled before it – a conclusion that brought in itself a dreadful punishment.

Or was it, after all, a punishment?

Curt Newton flung the book from him. He leaped up and found that he was trembling in every limb, his body bathed in sweat. "It's ghastly, Simon!" he cried. "Why would they have let such an experiment go forward?"

Simon's lens-like eyes regarded him calmly. "No knowledge can be wrong in itself – only in its application. And the men of the Old Empire did forbid the use of this apparatus when they learned its effect. Carlin quotes here the inscription he found in the ruined city that so states. Also he mentions that he himself broke the seals on the great door."

"The fool," whispered Newton. "The crazy fool!" He glanced at the twin sets of glowing coils and then upward at the dome.

"He changed and went out along the Beam. And the natives, horrified by what he had done, caused the landslide to seal this place."

"But Carlin did not come back," said the Brain.

"No," said Newton, broodingly. "No, he didn't. Perhaps for some reason he couldn't."

The android's bright eyes were watching him. "What was it that Carlin changed into, Curt?"

Curt Newton turned and said slowly, "It's an almost unbelievable story. Yet Carlin notes every source, here and in the ruined city."

He paused as though trying to shape what he had learned into simpler terms.

"In the days of the Old Empire the Vulcanian scientists had a predominant interest in the Sun. In fact it appears that Vulcan was first settled as an outpost for the study of solar physics. And somewhere, in the course of those centuries-long researches into the life of the Sun, one man discovered a method of converting the ordinary matter of the human body into something resembling solar energy – a cohesive pattern of *living* force able to come and go at will into the very heart of the Sun.

"This was not destruction, you understand – merely conversion of a matter-pattern into an analogous functioning energy-pattern. By reversing the field the changed matter could be returned to its original form. And, since the mental and sensory centers remained functioning in the altered pattern, thought and perception remained intact though different.

"Never before had there been such a possibility of uncovering the inmost secrets of solar life – and the study of suns was vital to a transgalactic civilization. The scientists entered the conversion field and became – Children of the Sun."

Otho caught his breath with a sharp hissing sound.

"So that's the meaning of the inscription – and the legend! Do you mean that those little wisps of flames we saw were once *men*?"

Newton did not answer, looking away at the tall golden coils that seemed to pulse with the Sun's own

light. But the Brain spoke dryly.

"Curtis did not tell you quite all. The lure of the strange life in the Sun proved too much for many of the men who were changed. They did not come back. And therefore the use of the converters was forbidden and this laboratory was sealed – until Carlin came and opened it again."

"And now he's out there," said Captain Future as though to himself. "Carlin changed and went out there, and then couldn't get back." He swung around suddenly to face them. His tanned face was set. "And I'm going after him," he said. "I'm going to bring him back."

OTHO cried out, "No! Curt, you're mad! You can't do such a thing!"

"Carlin did."

"Yes, and maybe he's dead or worse!" The android caught Newton's arm. He pleaded, "Even if you went after him how could you find him? And if you did suppose you found that *you* couldn't get back either? These machines are ancient and might fail."

"For once," said Grag emphatically, "Otho is right. Every word of it!"

"And I must agree with both of them," said Simon Wright. "Curtis, this course of action is both madness and folly."

Newton's gray eyes had grown cold with a remoteness that made Otho step back away from him. His face was now flint-like in its stubborn resolution. "Carlin was our friend," he said quietly. "He stood by us when we needed him. I have to go after him."

"Very well, Curtis," Simon answered. "But you are not going for friendship nor to save Philip Carlin. You are going because you yourself want to."

NEWTON turned a sharp and startled glance upon the Brain.

"And remember," Simon added, "if you do not return none of us can go after you."

The stone vault was silent then. High above through the triple windows a gleam of light came dancing in, cruel and bright as a golden spear. Vulcan had turned her face sunward and the Beam was come again.

Newton said softly, "I'll come back. I promise you. Now come here and study these controls."

In somber surrender Simon Wright said, "Your eagerness for the unknown was bound to bring disaster some time. I think this may be the time."

But he came to the controls. These were simple and the careful translation of the inscriptions made their operation quite clear. They found that Carlin had adjusted them with great delicacy.

He had meant to return. Yet he had not returned. Why not? Newton could not believe that a landslide of soil could be barrier to a shape of living energy that

could penetrate the depths of the Sun.

Why then had Carlin not come back? What was there out in the blazing thundering fury of that Sun-world that held and trapped those who went there? Captain Future remembered the inscriptions above the niches and the somber words of Simon Wright and shuddered, somewhere deep within him.

Almost in that moment he wavered. But over his head the light of the Beam burned and brightened and he could not have stopped then, even if he had so wished.

"You understand now?" he asked his comrades. "The machines draw their power from the magnetic field of Vulcan itself, which is tremendous – cutting as it does across the magnetic field of the Sun. So there is a never-failing power source. The controls are properly set. Your job will be to see that they aren't touched."

Grag and Otho nodded silently. Simon Wright said nothing. He was watching Curt with a bitter concentration.

Newton walked toward the converter. He stood where Carlin had stood and stripped himself naked. Then he paused, looking at the tall coils of crystal that were full of golden fire. The corded muscles of his body quivered and his eyes were strange. He stepped up onto the dais between the coils.

A blaze of golden light enveloped him. He could see the others through it as through a burning veil, Otho's pointed face full of fear and sadness and a kind of rage, huge Grag looking almost pathetically puzzled and worried in the way he leaned forward with outstretched arms, Simon hovering and watching broodingly.

Then the light curdled and thickened and they were gone. Newton felt the awful subtle strength that sprang from the glowing coils, the intricate force-fields that centered their focus in his flesh. He wanted to scream.

He had no voice. There was a moment – an eternity – of vertigo, of panic, of a dreadful change and dissolution.

And then he was free.

Blurred and strangely he could perceive the interior of the citadel, the three silent Futuremen watching, above the bright insistent shaft of light that drew him like a calling voice. He wished to rise toward it and he did, soaring upward with a marvelous swiftness that was a thing of joy and wonder even in that first confusion of the change.

He heard a name cried out and knew it for his own. He did not answer. He could not. Sight and hearing he still had though in a different way. He seemed now to absorb impressions through his whole being rather than through the limited organs of the human body.

And he was no longer human. He was a flame, a core of brilliant force, infinitely strong, infinitely free. Free! Free of all the clumsy shackles of the flesh, light and swift – eternal!

He flew upward toward the triple arch that meant delivery from the confining stone. Into the light he flashed and upward. Neither space nor time had any meaning for him now. With the strange perceptive sense that he still thought of as sight he looked toward the Beam, stabbing its searing length along the blackened land. He rushed toward it, a small bright star against the tented gloom of Vulcan's inner sky.

As a swimmer plunges into a long-sought stream the Sun-Child that had been Curt Newton plunged into the path of the Beam. The blinding glare, the deadly heat had no terrors for him now. The alien pattern of his new being seemed to gather strength from them, to take in the surging energy and grow upon it.

Far away he saw the gap in the planet's surface that let in the mighty Beam. He willed himself toward it, consumed with a strange hunger to be quit of the planetary walls that hid the universe.

He was part of all that now, the vastness of elemental creation. Child of the Sun, brother to the stars – he wanted to be free in open space, to look upon the naked glory to which he himself was kin.

Out along the Beam he sped, eager, joyous, and faintly as an echo out of some forgotten past he remembered the words of Kah. "He has followed the Bright Ones who do not return!"

CHAPTER IV

The Bright Ones

THE firmament was filled with fire. All else was blotted out, forgotten – the farther stars, the little worlds of men. There was nothing else anywhere but the raging storming beauty of the Sun.

The little wisp of flame that had been a man hung motionless in space, absorbing through every sentient atom of his being the overmastering wonder. He had come up out of shadowed Vulcan into the full destroying light, the unmasked splendor of the burning star that was lord of all the planets.

He had risen toward it, rapidly at first, then more and more slowly as his new and untried perceptions brought home to him the magnitude of the scene. Awe overcame him and he remained poised in mid-flight, struggling with sensations not given to any creature of corporeal form.

He could *feel* the pressure of light. It came in a headlong rush from out of the boiling cauldron of atomic dissolution, reaching away to unguessed limits of space, and he that had been Curt Newton felt its strength pushing against him.

Particles of raw energy struck the tenuous fires of his new body, with a myriad of bright and tingling shocks. They pleased him and he fed upon them. And

he found that he could hear the Sun. It was not hearing as he had known it. There was no medium here to carry sound waves. It was a more subtle thing, an inner pulsation of his own new being.

Yet he heard – the vast solemn savage roar of the never-ending tumult of destruction and rebirth, the hissing scream of world-high tongues of flame, the deep booming thunder of solar continents and seas of fire, shaped eternally out of the maelstrom and eternally sundered, only to be shaped again in different form.

He watched the wheeling of the Sun upon its axis. With a perception that sensed intensely every color of the spectrum he saw the heaving mountains, the seas and plains and storming clouds of fire, as spectral shapes of amethyst and crimson, emerald and gold, barred and streaked with every conceivable shading from palest violet to deepest angry red.

Gradually, lost in the wonder of his new life, his sense of awe abated. He began to feel a sort of power as though the last of his human fetters had fallen away, leaving him completely free. The void was his, the Sun was his. He was beyond harm or fear or death. He was alive and eternal as the stars.

He shot inward toward the Sun and the shimmering veils of the corona wrapped him in a mist of glory.

He was in no hurry. Time had ceased for him. The delicate diamond fires of these upper mists were inexpressibly beautiful. He played among them, a fleck of living golden flame, darting and wheeling like some fabled bird. He saw how the veils of the corona were whipped and shaken as though by great winds, now curling upon themselves in dense amethystine folds, now torn wide to show the sullen chromosphere below.

He dropped down through one of those sudden chasms, countless miles, with the speed of a shaft of light, and plunged into the red obscurity of the chromosphere.

It seemed to him that here was concentrated all the anger of the Sun. Torrents of raging scarlet gases swept by, twisted here and there into blood-red whirlpools the size of a continent, their edges whipped to a burning froth where they chafed against other currents, meeting sometimes head-on in a spout of savage flame as dark as cinnabar.

Elemental rage, the fury of life – the new-born Child of the Sun scudded along on the crimson tides, whirling, dancing, tossing high on the crests, probing the darkest ruby of the whirlpools. Below him still, a vague rolling sphere of fire, lay the photosphere.

He dropped down lower still, and looked upon the surface of the Sun.

Upheaval, chaos, beauty unimaginable, strangeness beyond belief. An immensity of golden flame, denser than those outer layers, writhing, surging, lifting up huge molten ranges that clawed at the crimson sky and

then slid down in titanic cataclysm to be lost in a weltering plain of fire.

Cresting waves that could have swallowed worlds raced and ravaged across the face of the Sun, crashing down in wild thundering avalanches, spouting, spuming, unutterably brilliant, majestic beyond any sight given to human eyes.

He watched, and felt the pattern of his new being tremble. His humanity was still too recent for him to look upon that unthinkable Sun-world without awe and fear.

Two great waves, thousand of miles in height, reared up and rushed together across a hollow trough wider than all of Earth. They met and out of that sun-dering collision was born a prominence that burst upward in a pouring river of flame.

CURT NEWTON felt himself caught in that titanic current. He fought it, finding that he could stand against it, finding a glory in his own new strength. A kind of ecstasy shot through him. He let himself go and the current took him and whirled him up, swift almost as light, past the chromosphere, past the corona, sheer into empty space. He rode it out, wild with exhilaration.

He emerged from the prominence, swooping in a great circle, catching a fleeting glimpse of distant worlds spangled with light, and a memory came to him of his mission here and why he had left his human form to make this pilgrimage into the Sun.

More soberly now he plunged again through the pale mists and the crimson tides and hovered over the photosphere, seeking others of his kind.

Across unthinkable distances he searched and found no one. A terrible loneliness came upon him. He entered an area of storm where the great vortices of the sun-spots whirled and thundered in a maelstrom of electronic currents.

He fled from them, deafened, shaken, and found himself crying out desperately, "Carlin! *Carlin!* Where are you?"

Crying not with tongue or voice but with the power of his mind. And when he understood that he could speak that way he called again and again, darting this way and that across the burning oceans, heading the vast funnels of the solar storms.

"Carlin! *Carlin!*"

And someone answered. He heard the voice quite clearly in his mind or the part of his new being that was sensitive to the reception of thought.

"Who calls, little brother?"

Golden bright against the crimson chromosphere above, he saw winging toward him another of the Children of the Sun.

He went to meet the stranger. Wheeling and dancing like two incredible butterflies of flame they hovered

above a burning river that ran across the face of the Sun. And they talked.

"Are you – were you Philip Carlin?"

"Philip Carlin? No. In human I was Thardis, chief physicist to Fer Roga, Lord of Vulcan. That was long ago."

Silence, except for the booming thunders of the Sun.

"Tell me, little brother. You are new here?"

"Yes."

"Do they still come then, the Bright Ones? Is the portal open still?"

"It has been lost and forgotten for many ages. And then he found it, who was my friend – and he came through. Do you know him, Thardis? Do you know of Philip Carlin?"

"No. My studies keep me much alone. Do you know, little brother, that I have almost attained the boundaries of pure thought? The greatest minds of the Empire said that was impossible. But I shall do it!"

Two flecks of living fire, whirling, tossing on the solar winds above the flaming river. And Thardis said, "What of the Empire? What of Vulcan? Was the portal forbidden and did our scientists forget?"

"It was forbidden," Newton answered. "And then ..." He told Thardis slowly how the Old Empire had crashed and died, how its far-flung peoples had sunk into barbarism, how only yesterday as time goes in the universe they had climbed back part way up the ladder of knowledge.

He told Thardis many things and most of them were bitter and sad. But even as he told them he knew that to the other they were less than dreams. He had gone too far away into some strange distance of his own.

"So it is all gone," mused Thardis. "The star-worlds, the captains, the many-throned kings. It is the law. You will learn it here, little brother. You will watch the cycle – birth and death and eternity – repeated forever in the heart of the Sun."

His tenuous body rippled, poised for flight. "Farewell, little brother. Perhaps we shall meet again."

"Wait! *Wait!*" cried Newton. "You do not understand. I can't remain here. I must find my friend and then go back with him."

"Go back?" repeated Thardis. "Ah, you are new! Once, I remember, I started to go back."

His thought was silent for a long while and then it came again with a kind of sad amusement. "The little Sun Child, who is so very new! Come then, I shall help you find your friend."

He led off across the tortured moving mountains of the Sun, across the lashing burning seas. Newton followed and as Thardis went he called and presently from out of the veils and clouds of fire came two others who joined them.

Thardis asked, "Do you know of one called Carlin? He is new."

One did not but the other answered, "I know him. He has gone deep into the inner fires to study the Sun's life."

"I will take you to him," Thardis said to Newton. "Come."

He dropped swiftly downward into the raging wilderness of flame. And Newton was afraid to follow.

Then he was ashamed. If Carlin had gone that way he could go. He plunged down after the fleeting Thardis.

THE crested waves of holocaust reached up and received them and buried them in depths of smoky gold, shot through with goutts and shafts of blazing color. They entered a region of denser matter and to Newton it was like swimming under troubled waters, sensible of the pressure and the awful turmoil, blending his own substance with the medium that held him.

He clung close to Thardis. Gradually as they sank deeper and deeper beneath the surface the golden depths grew quieter, the flashing colors softer. Buried currents ran fiercely like rivers under the sea. Thardis entered one of these, breasting the mighty flowing force as a man walks against the wind, finding exhilaration in the battle.

Newton joined him, and felt his own strength surge in joyous pleasure.

The gold began to fade, gathering the diamond shards of color into itself, lightening, paling. Newton became aware of a glow ahead, more terrible than all the fires he had yet seen – a supernal whiteness so searing in its intensity that even his new senses found it hard to bear.

The patterned energy of his flame-like body was shaken by waves of awful force. He had been afraid before. Now he was beyond fear. He crept after Thardis like a child creeping to the feet of Creation. He would have stopped but Thardis led him on into the inmost solar furnace, into the living heart of the Sun.

And he who had been Philip Carlin was there, wrapped in a silent awe, watching the mystic terrible forges beating out the unthinkable energies of the death and renascence of matter.

Newton had no thought for Carlin now. The awful voices of creation were hammering against his senses, dazing them, numbing them. He shuddered beneath that godlike fury of sound. The stripped and fleeing atoms burst through him, filling him with an exalted pain. He too watched, lost utterly in a cosmic awe of his own.

Atomic change exploded ceaselessly here, thundering, throbbing – hydrogen flashing through all the shifting transformations of the carbon-nitrogen cycle to final helium, the residual energy bursting blindly outward in raving power.

Newton began to be aware of his own danger. He knew that if he stayed too long he would never go again. He was a scientist and this was the ultimate core of learning. He would remain, drunk and fascinated with the lure of knowledge, with the incredible life that could exist in this crucible of energy. He would remain forever, with the other Children of the Sun.

Temptation whispered, "Why go back? Why not remain, a clean, eternal flame, free to learn, free to live?"

He remembered the three who waited for him in the citadel and the promise he had made. And he forced himself with a bitter effort to speak. "Carlin! Philip Carlin!"

The other Sun Child stirred, and asked, "Who calls?"

And when he heard his rapt mind woke to emotion. "Curt Newton? You here? I had almost forgotten."

Strange meeting of two friends no longer human, in the thundering solar fires! Newton forced himself to think only of his purpose. "I've come after you, Carlin! I followed you to bring you back!"

The other's response was a fierce, instinctive recoil. "No! I will not go back!"

And Carlin's thought raced eagerly. "Look – look about you! How could I leave? A million years from now, two million, when I have learned all I can ... No, Curt. No scientist could leave this!"

Newton felt the fatal force of that argument. He too felt the irresistible attraction of the undying life that had trapped men here for a million years.

He felt it – too strongly! He knew desperately that he must succumb to it unless he left quickly. The knowledge nerved him to clutch at the one persuasion that might still sway Carlin.

"But if you stay here all the knowledge you have gathered here will be lost forever! The secrets of the Sun, the key to the mysteries of the universe prisoned here with you, never to be known!"

He had been right. It was the one argument that could move this man whose life had been spent in the gathering and interchange of knowledge. He felt the doubt, the turmoil, in Carlin's shaken mind. The unwillingness and yet the strong tug of lifetime habits of mind.

The thunders of the Sun's heart roared about them as Newton poised waiting. And at last, reluctantly, Carlin said "Yes. Yes, I must take back what I have learned. And yet ..."

He burst out, bitter, passionate, "And yet to leave all this!"

"You must, Carlin!"

Another pause. And then, "If I must go let us go at once, Curt!"

Newton became aware then that Thardis still hovered beside them. And Thardis told them, "Come, I will guide you."

They three went winging upward from the depths of the Sun – swiftly up through the golden many-tinted photosphere, past the angry crimson tides above, high, high, through the whipping veils of the corona into empty space.

DAZED, his shaken senses reeling, Newton perceived across the gulf the tiny semi-molten ball of Vulcan. He fixed upon it, knowing that if he faltered now he was lost.

Thardis said, "Go quickly, little brothers. I know. I too once started back."

"Come!" cried Newton desperately.

He plunged out across the gulf, swift as a shooting star, and by the very force of his mind he dragged the wavering Carlin with him.

Too much had happened, too much to bear. Newton's mind was clouded, torn between exaltation and pain of loss, dazed with sights and sounds beyond human power to endure. It was as in a dream that they rushed toward Vulcan.

Down the Beam into the hollow world they flashed and he perceived only vaguely the jungle and hills and the citadel. They passed together through the triple arch and sank down into the dimness where the Futuremen waited.

Carlin went first into the space between the somber coils. Newton saw him enter the force-field, a tenuous thing of flame, and step forth from it a man – a dazed and reeling man. Otho caught him as he fell.

Curt Newton followed him, into the blue-green light. And all consciousness left him.

He found himself standing upright with Grag's great arm around him. It was as though his body was encased in lead now, his senses muffled, the very life in him dimmed.

Otho was shouting at him. Grag's voice boomed in his ear. "Curt, you got back! And you brought him –"

Simon Wright's metallic cry cut across their excited babble. "*Carlin!*"

Newton swung around. Philip Carlin had recovered consciousness. He stood, swaying, in the center of the chamber. He was not looking at them. He was looking down at his own body, slowly raising his own arms and staring at them.

And in his face was such white misery as Newton had seen on no man's face before.

"I can't," whispered Carlin, his voice rusty, croaking. "I can't be like this again, prisoned in leaden flesh. *No!*" With the word he moved with clumsy reeling swiftness toward the tall golden-shining coils of the other converter.

Newton sprang shakily to intercept him but his own legs buckled and he went to his knee.

"*Carlin, wait!*"

The scientist turned a face transfigured by agony of

resolve. "You weren't there as long as I, Curt. You don't know why I have to go back to that other life, that *real* life.

"But you'll understand at least. You'll remember and maybe you too some day."

He hurled himself forward onto the dais and was lost in a flare of yellow light.

A small bright star flashed upward toward the triple arch – a living star, swift and free and joyous, seeking the Beam, the pathway to the Sun.

And below, on the dark floor of the citadel, Curt Newton bent his head and hid his face between his hands.

* * * * *

The *Comet* rose on blasting keel-jets, gathered speed and roared out above the blackened Belt toward the gap in Vulcan's crust. Curt Newton sat at the controls. He who had ridden the Beam before, free and unfettered,

now maneuvered the man-made ship along that pathway. His face was harsh with strain and in his eyes was something strange and haunted.

The three who were with him in the bridge-room kept silent as by tacit agreement while the little ship sped swiftly through the opening into the naked glare of the Sun.

Newton's eyes were dazzled but he could not turn them away from that mighty orb of flame.

And he remembered.

Would he always remember how he had looked upon the Sun unveiled and seen the beating of its heart? Would he always feel the tearing pang he felt now, remembering the freedom and the strength? Would he some day return alone to that buried citadel that held the secret of life and death?

In fierce denial he pressed down the firing-keys. The *Comet* leaped forward and behind it Vulcan dwindled and was lost, a tiny mote swallowed in the eternal fires of the Sun.