

# CAPTAIN FUTURE

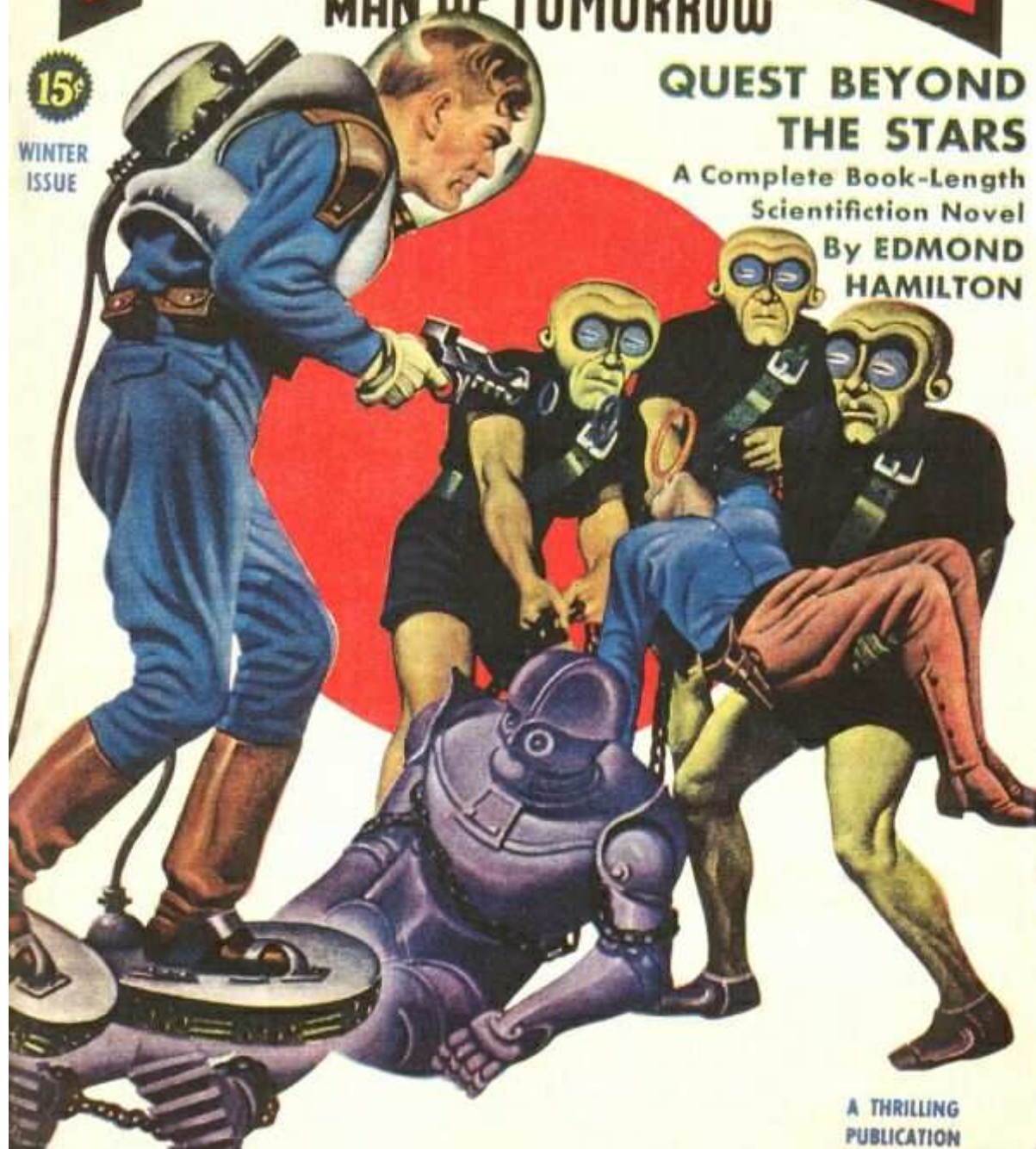
## MAN OF TOMORROW

15¢

WINTER  
ISSUE

QUEST BEYOND  
THE STARS

A Complete Book-Length  
Scientifiction Novel  
By EDMOND  
HAMILTON



A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

# The Quest Beyond the Stars

By **EDMOND HAMILTON**



These were not men. Their faces were flat and unhuman. (Chap. V)

**Ride With Curt Newton, the World's Greatest Space-Farer,  
and the Futuremen as They Leave the Known Star  
Trails to Penetrate the Source of Cosmic  
Rays, the Very Core of the Universe !**

## **Chapter I Waning World**

**T**HE unchanging dusk of a dying planet reigned over the somberly silent city. The huge red orb of the Sun hung perpetually at the horizon, peering like a giant eye at the tragedy

that was being enacted in this ancient metropolis of the little planet Mercury. Thin and cold was the air. It was so thin, indeed, that the lungs had to gulp it feverishly to secure enough oxygen to maintain life. And it was so dry that its touch seemed to wither the

skin. Year by year, the air and water of the little world had failed, until now —

A pathetic parade was winding through the gleaming chromaloy towers of this city of the Twilight Zone. Mercurian men and women and children, swarthy small-statured people, clutched bundles of their most precious possessions as they dully shuffled toward the spaceport.

“Move along, please,” came the constant quiet urging of uniformed officers of the Planet Police.

The tragic-eyed marchers made no answer. And the throngs of their fellow Mercurians who lined the streets and watched them pass also maintained a dead silence in which an aching agony was implicit.

“Move along!”

The shuffling throng wound on to the edge of the big spaceport on which a score of mammoth, cigar-shaped space-liners lay waiting.

Then the heavy silence of tragedy was abruptly broken. A pallid Mercurian man in the forefront of the marchers, who had been leading his wife and two small children, suddenly stopped and turned.

“Why should we go?” he cried, his voice raw with desperation. “Why should we be the ones who have to leave our home world?”

A sad-eyed old man answered.

“We were chosen in the great lottery, Than Thabar. We must be the ones to migrate to Ganymede this time.”

“But why should *any* of us have to leave Mercury?” Than Thabar cried

rebelliously. “Our ancestors have lived here for ages. We know no other world. Yet each few months, the System Government holds the accursed lottery that condemns thousands of us to migrate to distant Ganymede, to leave our native planet forever.”

An officer of the Planet Police, a handsome Venusian, hurried up. His face showed sympathy as he cautioned the desperate Mercurian.

“You can’t help feeling like that, I know,” the officer admitted. “But there’s no help for it. You know as well as I do that these migrations must continue, that the air and water of the planet are waning so constantly that it can support fewer and fewer people.”

Than Thabar was unappeased. He pointed agitatedly toward a group of massive cubical structures near the spaceport. They were immense buildings from which giant nozzles speared into the dusky sky.

“The artificial atmosphere-plants are still operating!” he declared. “They have for many generations kept our people from perishing, and they have not failed. There’s no reason for these forced migrations!”

**HIS** words were a spark in tinder, to the throng behind him. The Mercurian emigrants grasped at a last straw of hope that might save them from leaving their world. They took up Than Thabar’s cry, desperate for any chance to avoid the sundering of ancient ties.

“Than Thabar is right! The

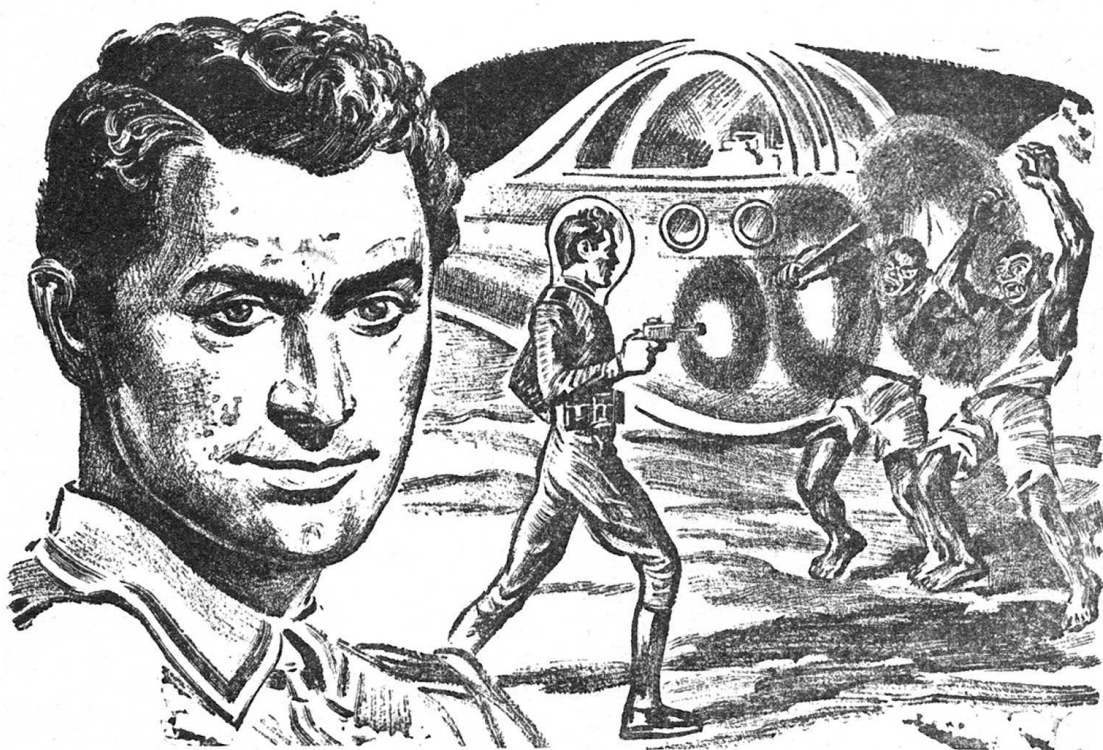
atmosphere plants are still operating and there's no reason for forcing us to leave Mercury!"

"It's all a scheme of the System Government — they want to have Ganymede colonized, so they — force us Mercurians to emigrate there by this excuse!"

Younger, wilder spirits raised a new cry.

world! Wreck the ships!"

The migrants dropped their bundles. Clubs and stones were snatched up and brandished as weapons. A few atom-guns appeared in the crowd. They began surging in a menacing tide of humanity toward the big spaceships parked out on the tarmac.



## CAPTAIN FUTURE

"Let's refuse to go! Let's wreck those ships to show them we mean to stay here!"

A chorus of shouts roared approval. Not only the desperate migrants, but also their fellow Mercurians, who had gathered to watch the tragic exodus, now flamed into rebellion.

"No more migrants for Ganymede! Mercurians, hold together and do not let them force us from our

A thin line of Planet Police tried in vain to hold them back. The Venusian commander of the officers looked badly worried. He could not order his men to use their atom-guns on these people. Such an action would set Mercury aflame with revolt. Yet if he did not quell this mutiny, the orders of the System Government would be henceforth ignored.

"Mercurians, listen to me!" he cried to the shouting crowd. "You

can't do this. The decision of the Government —"

He was swept aside like a straw. The Mercurian crowd poured out onto the tarmac, bent on destroying the ships.

A single man was running toward the ships from a different direction, from the big atmosphere-plants west of the spaceport. He reached the ships first, and, with a bound, sprang up onto the stern of one of the craft and faced the coming crowd.

He was a striking figure, his tall, stalwart young form clad in a drab zipper-suit, his red hair bathed in the fierce brilliance of the brooding sun. That red hair marked him as an Earthman.

He cried out in a clear, ringing voice.

"Mercurians, do you want your wives and children to die?"

That question caught the crowd. These rebellious men were husbands and fathers. They stopped, looking up at the tall dauntless Earthman.

They saw a young man, whose bronzed, handsome face bore the Stamp of powerful intelligence, whose clear gray eyes possessed an earnest sincerity, whose magnetic quality held them.

"Do you want your families to die of asphyxiation and thirst?" the red-haired young Earthman repeated forcibly. "It's what will happen if you halt the migrations ordered by the Government. There won't be enough air or water on Mercury for all your people. Your weakest, the old and the

very young, will be the first to die."

The man Than Thabar, whose action had precipitated the mutiny, made answer. "Why should that happen? The artificial atmosphere-plants are operating the same as they have always done in the past!"

The tall young Earthman shook his head vigorously.

"The plants are failing. They are failing for lack of sufficient raw materials." The red-head's voice rang out.

"You ail know the peculiar problem of Mercury. You know that this little planet has such small mass and such consequent low velocity of escape for molecules of air that its atmosphere tends constantly to dissipate into space. That process has been counterbalanced by the atmosphere-plants that produce air and water synthetically from mineral oxides. But now the supply of available oxides on this planet is becoming exhausted.

"It is impractical to bring oxides from other planets. All the spaceships in the System could not bring enough. Therefore the only course possible at present is to remove part of your population to Ganymede until some way of increasing the artificial supply of air and water can be found. Then you can all return to Mercury."

"How do we know that the System Government will ever find such a way?" demanded one still mutinous Mercurian.

"It is marshaling all its powers to solve that problem," assured the Earthman earnestly. "We will find a



way. I promise you that I will not rest until I have discovered the means of replenishing the exhausted atmosphere and hydrosphere of Mercury."

"And who are you that your promise should mean anything to us?" skeptically cried one doubtful mutineer.

The tall young Earthman answered simply.

"My name is Curtis Newton. Some of you may have heard of me under another name, that of Captain Future."

"Captain Future!"

It was a low cry of wonder that broke from the lips of the Mercurian throng. They stared up at the man whose tall figure stood outlined in the red blaze of the enormous Sun. This man was one of the great mysteries of the Solar System. Everyone had heard of him, but few had seen him. Everyone had repeated tales of Captain Future's incredible exploits as a scientist, as a space-farer, as the most audacious of all planeteters.

Everyone knew his name and that of the three strange Futuremen who were his comrades.

But probably never before had so large a throng heard him announce his identity. Wonder replaced their desperation for the moment. And Curt Newton took quick advantage of the opportunity.

"I came here to Mercury at the Government's request, to try to find a way to revive its wasted atmosphere," he told them earnestly. "Somehow, somewhere, I will find that way! And

when I do, Mercury will live again, and you will all be able to return here.

"Until then," he went on rapidly, "You must obey the orders of the Government. Those of you chosen for migration must go to Ganymede. You and your families will be safe there till you can return to Mercury."

A doubtful silence reigned. The crowd looked up at the man who had just made that promise. And something in Captain Future's strong face, something in his quiet gray eyes, convinced them.

"We will go, Captain Future." It was Than Thabar who spoke. "We have heard of the great feats you have accomplished on other worlds and we know that you will keep your promise to revive Mercury."

He turned to his companions.

"Come, men — we had better get aboard the ships."

**I**N A half hour, all the migrants had embarked. The space-ships lifted one by one into the dusky heavens, and arrowed out into the void toward Jupiter's moon to the echo of thundering rockets.

Curt Newton watched them depart from the side of the spaceport. He had been joined by a curious-looking individual who seemed a man of no known planetary race.

He was a lithe, rubbery-looking, white-skinned man with oddly slanted green eyes in a keen, mobile face. His head was quite hairless, and his voice made a curious hissing as he spoke anxiously to Curt.

"Chief, you were crazy to make that promise! Oh, it got them quieted

down to promise them that you'd revive Mercury's atmosphere, but how in the name of ten thousand suns are you going to *do* it?"

"I wish I knew, Otho," Curt answered ruefully. There was a quirk of humor in his gray eyes as he added, "It's going to make a nice little problem."

"A nice little problem!" groaned Otho. "Devil take such problems. Now we'll have to sweat in laboratories and workshops when I had a jaunt to Pluto all planned."

Otho was one of the Futuremen. He was almost the strangest of that strange group, for he was a synthetic man or android. Otho's body had been created in the laboratory, long ago. He had mental genius of high type, he had physical skill and agility and swiftness beyond any human in the System, but he was different from other men.

He was different, and deep down in his mind he brooded over that basic difference. The gay, mocking humor, the devil-may-care recklessness of Otho, were a psychic shield for that brooding.

"How *can* you restore Mercury's atmosphere?" he was expostulating. "You agreed with me that those atmosphere-plants can't solve the problem — can't produce enough synthetic air or water for lack of oxides."

"Yes, that's so," Curt Newton admitted, gazing thoughtfully across the dusky spaceport. "There aren't enough oxides in the System to provide Mercury with synthetic air

and water for an indefinite time."

"Then where are you going to get your air and water for this world?" Otho demanded exasperatedly. "You can't make matter out of nothing!"

Curt's gray eyes suddenly gleamed.

"No, you can't make matter out of nothing," he muttered slowly. "Or — can you?"

He turned, pulling the bewildered android with him across the tarmac to a small space-ship parked at its farthest edge.

"Otho, you've given me an idea. We're going home at once to consult Simon and Grag. I think I have a glimmer of the answer."

"Where *is* that answer, then?" Otho demanded puzzledly. Curt pointed into the dusky sky.

"Out there, Otho — out beyond everything we know, if I'm right. Out where even we have never ventured before! Come on — we're rocketing home in a hurry!"

## Chapter II Cosmic Secret

**I**N THEIR unique home beneath the surface of the Moon, the four greatest scientific adventurers of the age held a conference. Curt Newton lounged back in his chair, his space-bronzed face bathed in the flood of softened sunlight from the glassite ceiling window overhead. He spoke with almost casual calm.

"There you have it, boys," he finished quietly. "Mercury's atmosphere must be replenished, or that agony of enforced migrations will

go on to a bitter end. I've given my word that we would find a way to do it."

"But you still haven't told us *how* you expect to accomplish that!" exclaimed Otho.

The android, always restless, had been pacing up and down the room as he listened. It was a big room, biggest of all the chambers hollowed out of the solid rock here beneath the surface of Tycho's crater. Telescopes, generators, transformers, scientific equipment of bewildering complexity of design, crowded this room. It was the main laboratory of the Futuremen. The other two of Captain Future's famous three comrades had listened intently. They were even stranger looking than Otho. One of them was Grag, the metal robot, and the other was Simon Wright, the living Brain. Grag's great figure would have caught the eye first. He was a metal giant, seven feet tall, with ponderous limbs hinting unmatched strength. His bulbous metal head, with its gleaming photo-electric eyes and lipless speech-resonator, masked a spongelike metal brain whose powers of reason and initiative equalled the human.

The Brain was different. He had no real body at all. Once he had had a human body, once he had been Doctor Simon Wright, famed Earth scientist. But his living brain had been taken surgically from his aging, dying body, and had been implanted in the square case of transparent metal that he now inhabited. Inside that case circulated the serums that kept

him living, and on its face were his glass lens-eyes, his microphone-ears and artificial voice, and the orifices from which he could jet traction-beams so that he could poise or move at will.

"Otho is right," the Brain said in his rasping, metallic monotone. His lens-eyes held Curt's face. "You must have some plan in mind for reviving Mercury, lad."

Captain Future hesitated.

"I have a plan. You may think it fantastic —"

"Let's hear it," rumbled Grag. The giant metal robot's booming voice shook delicate instruments around the room.

Curt's gray eyes were deep with earnestness. For Curt was a dreamer, at bottom. Beneath his love of danger and excitement, beneath his gay humor, throbbed an aching earnestness of purpose — to use the powers given him by his unique birth and education to help the struggling System peoples.

"It's not only Mercury we must think of. Mercury faces today the grim prospect of planetary death from failing atmosphere. But other worlds will face it tomorrow. And no makeshift expedients such as have been unsuccessfully tried on Mercury will solve this problem. No attempt to manufacture oxygen from mineral sources by chemical conversion can meet this situation.

"What is needed," — his brilliant eyes swept them — "What is needed is a way of making limitless supplies of oxygen and nitrogen out of nothing. And I think there is a





Curt triggered the fire-rod. The bolt of energy

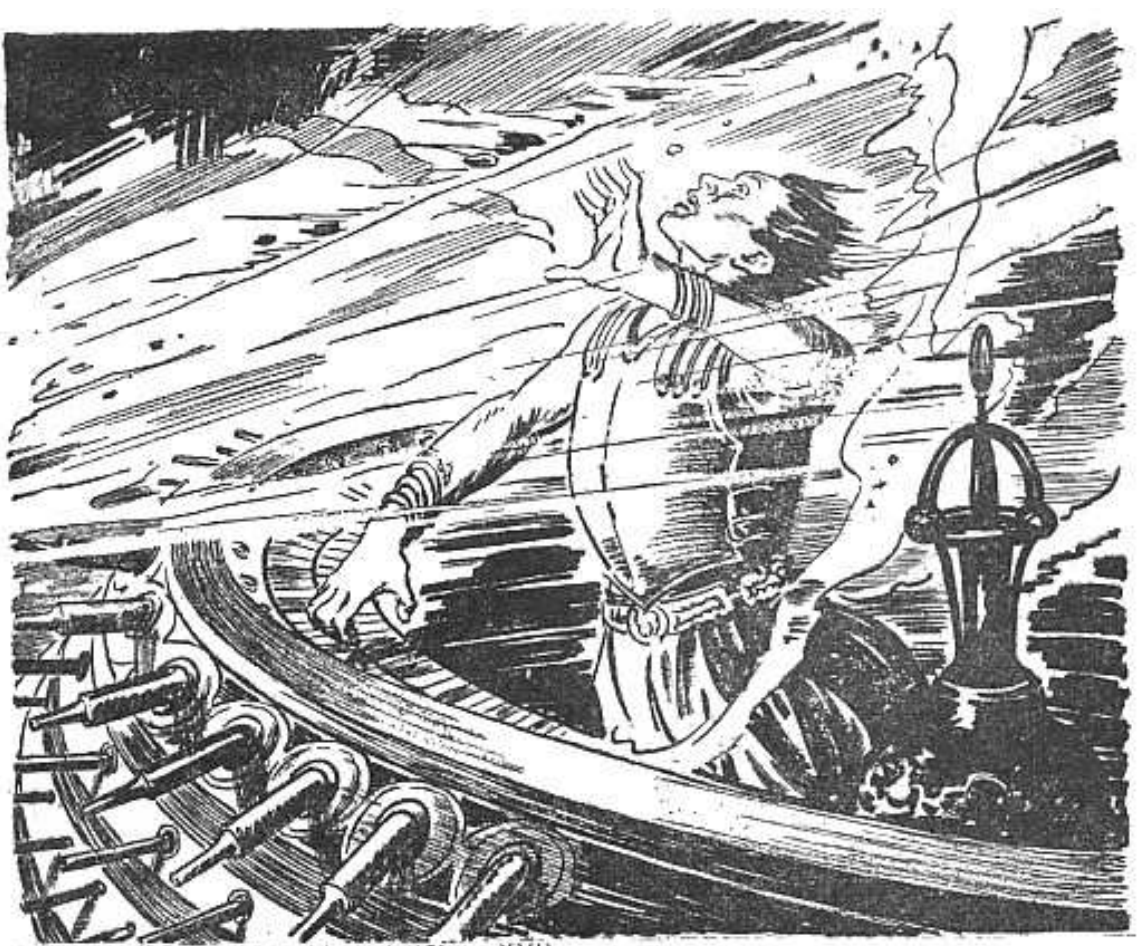
possibility that we can find an expedient way of doing that.”

Simon Wright, the Brain, listened to Curt with a strange feeling of pride. For to the Brain, as to the other two Futuremen, Curt was not only a leader but a son. The three unhuman beings had reared him from helpless babyhood to brilliant manhood.

Years ago, Roger Newton, young Earth scientist, had come to the Moon to establish a hidden laboratory. With him had — come his youthful bride and his scientific colleague, the Brain. They had built this laboratory-home beneath Tycho crater. Here they had labored at their great experiment of creating artificial

life. Here they had created Grag, the intelligent metal robot, and Otho, the synthetic man. And here, too, Curtis Newton had been born.

It was in this very laboratory, soon afterward, that Curtis Newton's young parents had been slain by enemies. And in this citadel on the barren, airless satellite, the Brain and the robot and the android had reared the orphaned infant. They had given him an education of unparalleled depth and scope. That education and his inherited genius made Curt Newton the audacious, brilliant scientific adventurer and crusader whom the whole Solar System knew as Captain Future.



struck Larstan's head and breast. (Chap. XVI)

"Make unlimited supplies of matter out of *nothing*?" Otho was echoing incredulously to Curt. "How in the sun's name is that possible?"

"All matter," Curt reminded, "is electrical in nature. Electrons are really particles of immaterial electricity. Why couldn't matter be synthesized out of units of immaterial electric force?"

"It might be theoretically possible," Grag rumbled unbelievably to Captain Future. "But actually, it has never been done."

"It has never been done by any scientist," Curt corrected quietly. "But it has been done, and is being done right now, by the forces of nature."

He pointed upward at the big

glassite window in the ceiling, which framed a circle of burning stars and space in which swam the great green bulk of Earth and the dazzling Sun.

"Far in the central depths of our galaxy of stars, thousands of light-years away, matter is constantly being created out of electrical energy upon a gigantic scale."

"You refer to the Birthplace of Matter?" rasped the Brain, startled. Curt nodded. "That's what I'm thinking of, Simon. If we could learn the secret of the Birthplace —"

"The Birthplace? What are you talking about, chief?" rumbled big Grag puzzledly.

Curt countered with a question.

"You know the theory that

Millikan first proposed away back in the 20th century, that was later proved — the theory of the cyclic change of radiation and matter?”

“Sure, even a dumb robot like Grag knows that,” Otho cut in impatiently. “The matter of the galaxy’s suns tends constantly to melt away into radiation, into heat, light and other electromagnetic energy. It was thought for a while that the process would go on until all matter disappeared. Then Millikan guessed the truth, that somewhere in the galaxy is a point where radiation is somehow retransformed into matter, and that the so-called cosmic rays are the ‘birth-cry’ of newborn matter.”

“That’s right,” Captain Future nodded. “And it was found that that Birthplace of Matter is somewhere at the center of our galaxy, in the region of thick star-clusters and nebulae beyond Sagittarius. From that point stream out the tides of cosmic dust which are the new-born matter, and from that point emanate the cosmic rays, their ‘birth-cry’.

“We have no idea of *how* radiation is built into matter at the Birthplace,” Curt went on, as calmly as though he were not about to make the most audacious proposal in the history of the System. “But there is a chance that if we went to the Birthplace we could *learn* how. With that secret, we could create unlimited matter from radiation, could solve the problem of reviving Mercury’s wasted atmosphere.”

“**IS THAT** your idea?” Otho yelled unbelievably. The

android’s slitted green eyes were wide with amazement. “You must be spacestruck, chief. That point in the galaxy where the Birthplace is located is thousands of light-years away!”

“How would we ever get there?” Grag chimed in. “Our *Comet* may be the fastest ship in the System, but its rockets would never take us across all those millions of millions of miles. Even at the fastest speed it would take centuries!”

“Not if we used the vibration-drive we experimented with last year,” Curt retorted. “You remember — Simon and I designed it to propel the *Comet* by the reactive push of high-frequency electromagnetic vibrations projected from a drive-ring at the stem of the ship. We calculated it would build up velocities many times the speed of light.”

“You *calculated*, yes,” replied Otho significantly. “But you didn’t dare try the vibration drive once you had it built, lest living creatures couldn’t stand such acceleration.”

“Otho is right, lad,” rasped the Brain. “We had to give up the vibration-drive because our first tests showed that the acceleration necessary to build up to velocities faster than light would first ‘black out’ brains, then crush vital organs and finally pulp bodies.”

“I know,” Captain Future admitted impatiently, “but you must remember that I figured out a way to overcome that objection, by throwing our bodies into a stasis of force that would protect them completely from the acceleration pressure. Before I could build and try out such a stasis

projector, the case of the Magician of Mars broke, and I've not had a chance since then. But I'm sure it will work. And with it, we'll be able to force the ship to speeds so many times the velocity of light that we can fly across the whole starry universe."

The android, always most reckless and adventuresome of the quartet, kindled. "Devils of space, what an adventure if we *could* do it!" he said eagerly. "To get clear out of our Solar System, to explore the hidden heart of the universe, new suns and worlds and nebulae —"

"It wouldn't be any wild, hair-raising pleasure jaunt, you *cockeyed* son of a test-tube," Grag growled at him. "It's those poor Mercurians and their dying world that the chief is thinking of."

Simon Wright had been silent. Now the Brain's rasping, metallic voice gave utterance to his doubt.

"Lad, I fear this stupendous voyage you propose is beyond our powers. I don't think that even such a stasis of force as you designed can withstand that terrible acceleration pressure. And then —"

"And then we'd be corpses somewhere out in interstellar space," Curt Newton admitted. His expression became earnest. "Simon, I know the danger you speak of is real. But I hope that I can guard against it. Shall we risk it? Or shall we let a world die, let its people be driven homeless to alien worlds?"

"We go, of course," came the Brain's cool answer. "I only wished to point out the possibilities. For myself, the scientific value of finding the

secret of the Birthplace outweighs all risks."

"Then we begin work at once," Curt declared eagerly. "It'll take plenty of it to fit up the *Comet*."

**I**N THE days that followed, the matchless scientific ability of the four Futuremen focused unceasingly upon the task of preparation. The deft skill of Otho with tools, the un-human strength and precision of Grag, the supreme technical knowledge of the Brain — these were the instruments unerringly wielded by the genius of Curt Newton.

The underground hangar of the *Comet* was the chief scene of activity as the long lunar evening waned to night. The four heavy cylindrical generators of the vibration drive were installed in the cabin of the streamlined space-ship. The terbium drive-ring was fitted around the tapering stern of the craft, just forward of the tail rocket-tubes, and linked to the generators by coaxial cables.

Captain Future himself labored upon the stasis projector. It was the very heart of their plan, for without its shield of force their bodies could not for a moment withstand the stupendous acceleration they meant to exact of the ship. He recessed the projector beneath the control-room floor, so that it showed only the fiat silver disk from which the protective force would emanate.

"It *seems* to work perfectly," Curt declared when he had tested the stasis effect. "We'll soon know if it doesn't work," Otho muttered. "The

pressure will splash us all over the ship if the stasis breaks down.”

The Brain said nothing. But Curt read from his silence the doubt that still haunted Simon’s mind.

While Grag and Otho stocked the *Comet* with the last cases of supplies and tanks of oxygen and water, Captain Future made a final anxious check of instruments. “No, you don’t, Grag!” he exclaimed suddenly. “You’re not going to smuggle Eek aboard — I told you that he and Oog stay home this time.”

Grag stopped guiltily. The robot and concealed his pet, a small, gray, bearlike moon-pup, in some cases he was carrying aboard.

“Eek will be lonely here,” Grag protested worriedly.

“He’ll have Oog to keep him company,” Curt retorted, pointing to a fat little white “meteor-mimic” that was Otho’s pet. “The automatic feeder will take care of their food. And those two would be in our way on a crowded, dangerous trip like this.”

As Grag reluctantly carried his cherished pet out of the ship, the Brain looked inquiringly at Captain Future.

“Lad, should we have told our friends on Earth what we plan? Joan Randall, and Marshal Ezra Gurney, and the others?”

“I thought it wiser not to tell them,” Curt said soberly. “They’re working night and day with the other Planet Police to handle the migration from Mercury. And I didn’t want to raise their hopes.”

The last supplies were aboard.

As casually as though about to start an ordinary interplanetary voyage, the four entered the ship. In a moment the great roof-doors of the hangar folded silently back, and the *Comet* rose on roaring rocket-tubes from the surface of the Moon.

Captain Future was in the control-chair. He drove the roaring ship up on a steep slant across the barren lunar plains and peaks, that lay bathed in the soft green glow of the hanging Earth. He was looking beyond the planet, toward the glittering star-streams that flowed together near the constellation Sagittarius.

“Tens of thousands of suns, planets, dark stars, nebulae, bunched there together at the galaxy’s heart,” he murmured. “The densest, most dangerous part of the universe, hiding the supreme mystery of the Birthplace. It’s mad, perhaps, to think we can —”

“To think we can penetrate that secret?” rasped the Brain. “It’s on the knees of the space-gods now, lad.”

**T**HE ship flew outward through the Solar System under the full power of its rockets. Curt had not as yet touched the switches of the vibration drive. There were ten such switches, for the vibration drive could be used in ten different stages of power and speed.

At last they were beyond the orbit of Pluto, running infinity itself. Behind the Sun and its planets were a small bright disk circled by gleaming dots. Ahead glittered the bunched star-

clouds of Sagittarius, unthinkable light-years away.

Curt's hand moved to the switches of the vibration drive. "All ready," he said calmly. "Stand by."

"We'll know in a few minutes whether the protective stasis works," muttered Grag. "Feeling jumpy, Otho?"

"What are you trying to do, you perambulating junkpile, scare me?" Otho demanded belligerently.

Curt closed the switch. The great generators back in the cabin began throbbing in a low murmur that mounted to a loud drone.

A dim blue force flooded the whole interior of the ship. It emanated from the silver floor-disk of the stasis projector, which was designed to go into operation automatically when the drive was turned on.

The pervading blue force of the stasis had a strange effect upon the Futuremen. They felt as though submerged within a dense, super-elastic medium, a force that tended to "fix" every atom in the ship, should cushion them against acceleration.

"Stasis seems okay," Captain Future murmured. "Here goes."

He shut a switch that turned the propulsion vibrations back into the drive-ring. The Futuremen, cradled in their stasis of elastic force, felt almost no pressure. But the pointers on the accelerometers leaped as though suddenly gone mad. The *Comet*, under the terrific reactive push of the vibrations streaming back from its stern, was being flung forward through outer space at a

velocity nobody in the System had ever before attained.

"One quarter light-speed already," Curt muttered, reading the meters. "Half- light-speed now — Lord, what acceleration! And the stasis is working perfectly."

"It seems that my fears concerning it were groundless," admitted the Brain. The *Comet*, within an unbelievably short time, was traveling faster than light itself toward the distant star-clouds of Sagittarius. Yet its velocity continued steadily to build higher. To the eyes of the awe-stricken Futuremen, they seemed hardly moving. The glittering star-streams and nebulae and clusters bunched in Sagittarius seemed as far away as ever. For the first time, Curt Newton and his comrades realized the truly awful immensity of the universe into whose great depths they were flying on their desperate and perilous quest..

### Chapter III Nebula Danger

"**C**HIEF, look at that!" cried Otho, pointing ahead. "It makes me almost *afraid!*"

Curt had just entered the control-room. He strained his keen gray eyes against the glare ahead.

"We're getting close, all right," muttered Captain Future. "It's time we changed course to avoid that nebula."

The other two Futuremen came into the control-room to peer at the brilliant spectacle ahead. The *Comet*



was now approaching the boundaries of the congested region in which their destination was hidden. Across the heavens ahead flamed thousands upon thousands of stars, blazing points of light, each point a great sun. Masses of these suns were gathered in gigantic clusters that looked like swarming bees of light. Between and beyond the clusters and their trailing star-streams shone the glowing clouds of nebulae. Deep in this great wilderness of the galaxy they could make out the black bulk of a cloud of cosmic dust.

Their ship was a tiny midge crawling toward this vast cosmic jungle. They were heading toward a giant glowing nebula whose shining gases stretched for billions of miles across their path, partly hiding the starry wilderness beyond.

"We'll have to veer around that nebula," Curt declared. "It contains meteoric debris, according to our meteorometers."

"But according to the cosmic ray compass, our course lies right through it," Otho objected, pointing to the instrument.

Straight toward the glowing nebulae ahead pointed the needle of the apparatus. It was an instrument that Captain Future had devised for their expedition, an electroscopic device sensitive to cosmic rays. Its needle pointed always toward the far, mysterious source of the radiation, their unguessable goal.

Days passed as they followed the needle across interstellar space. The vibration drive flung them on at

continually mounting velocity until they were traveling at fully two thousand times the speed of light. Yet they had small sensation of speed, so perfectly had the cushioning stasis of force protected them from the pressure of acceleration.

Nor had there been any sun or star in the vast void near enough to show their progress. The shoreless emptiness stretched unbroken to the sector of the heavens far ahead, where the great star-streams converged in the starry whirlpool of suns and nebulae whose outer edge they were now at last approaching.

"If we go around that nebula, we'll get off the course the cosmic ray compass indicates," Otho objected. "It'll waste a lot of time."

"Sure, why don't we run the nebula?" Grag demanded. "It would be a real thrill."

Captain Future hesitated, then shrugged and grinned.

"I guess there's not much real danger. The meteorometers will keep us warned of debris. All right, you excitement eaters, here goes."

The *Comet* plunged on toward the vast sea of glowing light. Curt had already begun to decelerate their tremendous velocity, since they could not safely use such an outrageous speed inside the clusters and star-streams of this region. The stasis force, operating perfectly, continued to cushion them against the great pressure.

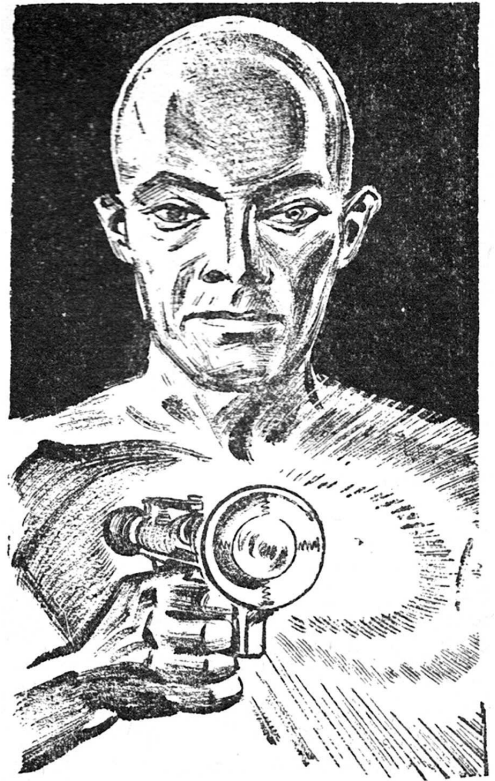
**A**LL the firmament ahead flamed with pearly white light. They

were now too close to the nebula to distinguish its limits. A twinge of regret at his decision tugged Curt's mind. This vast ocean of glowing gas was much more awesome at close hand. But already the ship was racing into it. They sped through a universe of flaming light; On every side stretched leagues of glowing, brilliant gas. Curt's keen eyes alertly watched the dials on the control panel for signs of possible danger.

The intrinsic heat of a gaseous nebula is not great. It consists of a great cloud of very tenuous gas illuminated to a flaming glow by reflected and refracted light of nearby stars. The gas was too tenuous to cause dangerous frictional heat, even at the great velocity at which they were traveling. But the meteorometers buzzed frequently, indicating the presence of solid debris in the gas. Captain Future's quick hands kept the *Comet* swerving to avoid these possibly dangerous masses. He had to rely on instruments for he could see nothing but the flaming glow of white light that seemed to fill all space around him.

Curt Newton noticed that the needles of the electroscopes were bobbing wildly. "There's some queer radiant force inside this nebula," he said uneasily. "I can *feel* it."

A strange tingling sensation was



OTHO

running through him. At the same time Captain Future became aware that he possessed an exhilarating clearness of mind. He had never before felt his brain so powerful, so capable of solving any problem. Simon Wright and Otho and Grag were showing a similar reaction. The Brain spoke rapidly, in answer to Curt's statement.

"I feel the force too, lad. It must be that continuous atomic collision here in the nebula releases radiant energy high in the spectrum."

The Brain stopped.

"But how did I figure that out?" he said surprisedly. "My mind seems to be working better than ever before."

"I see now what's happening to us, Simon!" Curt exclaimed excitedly. "This freakish force is one that

stimulates the brain to more rapid functioning. That's why we feel more intelligent, capable of more brilliant reasoning. You others feel it, don't you?"

"I'll say I feel it!" Otho cried. "Why, chief, I could solve twelfth-order equations in my head. We ought to hang around in this nebula awhile. We'd soon know everything there is to be known."

Grag spoke sharply, with an authority and confidence that was foreign to the big robot.

"No, we must get out of the nebula at once!" he declared. "It will be fatal to us if we linger here long."

Captain Future stared.

"What makes you say that, Grag?"

"Isn't it clear to you?" Grag demanded, "This super-stimulation of our brains will cause a rapid neuronc disintegration that will end in complete mental collapse, by crushing of the synaptic web."

"I can't quite follow your reasoning, even though I feel I have more mental power than ever before," Curt admitted puzzledly.

"Neither can I," Otho said bewilderedly. "Devils of space, this force has made Grag the smartest of all of us!"

"Of course, I thought you already understood that," Grag boomed authoritatively. "My brain, being of sponge metal instead of living tissue like yours, conducts the stimulating force more readily and is thus more stimulated. Your minds have been doubled in power, but mine

has been quadrupled."

Captain Future's preternaturally clear mind perceived the strength of the robot's reasoning. This freakish nebular force had temporarily made big Grag the greatest mental genius of them all.

CURT, realizing their peril, instantly sought to take advantage of Grag's sudden brilliance. That their danger was great was evidenced by the dim blackness that was beginning to creep across his mind.

"Can you estimate the shortest way out of the nebula, Grag?" he asked thickly. "Should we try to turn back out of it?"

Grag bent over the electrosopes, studying their readings, and then stood for a few seconds in deep thought.

"To turn and back out would be risky," he said sharply. "We're so deeply in the nebula that our brains would burn out before we got clear. I calculate that the nebula is an irregular ovoid and that we are nearest its northeastern limb. Steer in that direction."

Captain Future hastily changed the course of the *Comet*. The unnatural clearness of their minds was beginning to fade before a creeping tide of unconsciousness against which they struggled desperately.

The reckless speed at which Curt was driving the ship through the nebula hinted at disaster. There was no time to heed the ominous alarms of the meteorometers. His darkening

mind sensed the greater peril of mental annihilation threatening them. Abruptly the ship burst out of the nebula into the black void of space. They had quartered one end of the gigantic sea of light. And the force that had been destroying their minds now faded away.

"Thank the space-gods we're out of that!" Captain Future breathed. "Even though I don't feel like such a mental giant any more." He looked to Grag. "If it hadn't made you a supermental giant, Grag, it would have been the end of us. We'd never have got out in time."

Grag seemed vastly pleased by the fact that for a short time his had been the most brilliant mind of the four. "Aw, that was nothing, chief," he boomed grandiloquently. "It just happens my mind is more capable of learning, I guess."

"Listen to the big son of a tin can!" Otho blurted. "Now he'll go around thinking he's a great unsuspected genius." "Are you kidding?" Grag retorted to the android.

As he spoke, Captain Future had been sharply decelerating their speed for they were now well inside the region of great clusters. There, stretched before them was the deeper interior of this awesome Sagittarius wilderness. Ponderous balls of gathered suns that trailed banners of scattered stars across trillions of miles stood out against the dark, brooding cosmic cloud behind them. The immensity of this starry jungle silenced even the dauntless

Futuremen. Unutterably grand and solemn seemed this crowded heart of the universe into which they were audaciously penetrating. It was a long time before Curt Newton spoke.

"Well, we've reached the region of the universe in which the Birthplace of

Matter is located. But that's only the first step."

"Where does the Birthplace lie from here?" Otho asked.

Curt checked the cosmic ray compass. Its quivering needle pointed slightly to the left, deeper into the jungle of sun clusters, nebulae and star-streams that clogged space ahead. The needle pointed toward the vast, brooding black cloud beyond.

"The Birthplace must be somewhere behind that cloud," Curt observed thoughtfully. "Check the intensity reading, Simon."

The Brain utilized an improvement of the old Geiger device to test the intensity of the cosmic rays whose guidance they followed.

"That's very strong, lad," he commented. "We must be nearer the Birthplace than I thought,"

Curt nodded seriously.

"We'll have to be on the alert every minute now. We don't know what we're going to find, but we do know that it must be at the center of inconceivable cosmic forces."

He steered the *Comet* forward along the course indicated by the quivering needle of the cosmic ray compass. They skirted the flaming coast of the gigantic nebula for some hours, flying at a steady velocity of

more than a hundred light- speeds.

## Chapter IV

### Dark Mystery

**N**ERVOUS tension gripped Curt, such as he had never felt before. It was not alone the numbing majesty of the great stars and glooms about him which caused his feeling. It was his knowledge that they were fast approaching the mysterious place of their search, the so-called Birthplace of Matter that was the very core of the whole universe.

What would it be like, that unknown wellspring of creation in which new matter for the universe was somehow ceaselessly built up from radiation? What was the secret of that miraculous natural creation? And could they hope to snatch the innermost riddle of the cosmos? For many hours, they flew through apparently empty space toward the vast black cosmic cloud. The cosmic ray compass pointed always toward it. It bulked here amid the thronging suns and nebulae like a great, brooding presence of awesome ebon majesty, extending for at least twenty billion miles across space in front of them. Surprisingly, the friction-alarms began sounding again. A rapid check of instruments disclosed to Curt and the Brain that, as they flew onward, space was becoming ever thicker with streaming cosmic dust.

"It's what we might have expected, lad," the Brain rasped thoughtfully.

"We knew that matter is born in the Birthplace as tiny particles of

cosmic dust, which are carried out in streams to all parts of the galaxy by light-pressure. As we near the Birthplace, the streams of outflowing dust will become ever denser and stronger."

Captain Future nodded agreement.

"It means that we're very near the Birthplace, comparatively speaking. It may be on the other side of that black cloud."

He was forced to throttle down their velocity further, to avoid heating the hull. The cosmic cloud now blotted out half the starry universe ahead.

"Time we started detouring around the cloud," Captain Future remarked, veering the flying ship onto a new course.

"Why don't we just go through it?" Grag inquired.

"Listen to Grag, the genius, talking!" jeered Otho. "A dark cloud like that might have anything in it from a dark-star to a meteor swarm, you bucket-head. It'd be suicide to go blundering in there."

As the *Comet* crawled around the edge of the gigantic area of blackness, it was tossed by increasingly stronger dust-streams. The vast black mass to their right was an even more awe-inspiring spectacle than the gaseous nebula. Its darkness was impenetrable. Scattered along its borders were a few bright suns, whose rays luridly illuminated the coiling fringes of dust and an occasional dark star, a burned-out ember of the universe.

"It's strange," came the uneasy voice of the Brain, "but according to my observation, these dust-streams seem to come from the cloud itself."

"There's something a lot stranger than that," Curt Newton rapped. "We're halfway around the cloud, but the cosmic ray compass still points right toward the center of the cloud itself."

**H**E HAD been watching the quivering needle, closely, and had felt an increasing astonishment as it crept steadily to one side of its card. It was Otho who blurted out the suspicion that had come to all of them. "Is it possible that the Birthplace of Matter is somewhere *inside that cosmic cloud?*"

"It couldn't be!" Grag declared. "Or could it? Jumping moon-demons, I don't know what to think!"

"It's logical," muttered the Brain. "That unprecedentedly huge black cloud is composed of cosmic dust. If the Birthplace is somewhere inside it, that would account for the existence of the dust — it is born in the Birthplace itself and streams out from it, but great masses of it remain clustered around the Birthplace."

"Just as though they were hiding the core of creation from the rest of the universe," Otho murmured awedly.

"We don't know yet that the Birthplace *is* inside the cloud," Curt Newton reminded them. "Let's keep on until we reach the other side."

But in his own mind, little doubt remained. As he guided the flying *Comet* around the cloud, the cosmic

ray needle continued to veer further to the right, so that it still pointed back into the cloud. There was no doubt whatever in Curt's mind when they had finally reached the other side of the vast black mass. The cosmic ray needle pointed back in the direction from which they had originally come.

"So the Birthplace is in there, all right," muttered Simon Wright, his lens-eyes surveying the enormous, swirling wall of blackness. "This complicates things, lad." "I'll say it does!" Otho remarked gloomily. "How in the name of all the space-devils are we going to find anything in that universe of dust?"

Captain Future did not share their gloom. Pleasant and good-humored when all went well, he acquired a steely quality when confronted with opposition. To the red-haired Planeteer, the challenge of either natural or human forces was an invitation to battle that he accepted almost gaily.

"The Birthplace is in there," he shrugged. "All we have to do is go in and find it. It's simple."

"Sure, it'll be easy," said Grag loudly. "However, I just remembered that I've got a date over on the other side of the galaxy, so I guess I'll have to be leaving the party —" Otho turned on him with withering scorn.

"Trying to back out, huh? I always knew you hadn't any backbone inside that iron carcass." The android swung toward Captain Future.

"Don't let Grag run out on you,



chief. I'd stay with you myself, only I just recalled that I left my favorite proton-pistol on the Moon, so I'll have to go back for it."

**CURT NEWTON** grinned understandingly at the two. He knew very well that neither of them had a trace of apprehension over the dangerous adventure ahead. But they were pretending to be shaking with fear. Simon Wright moved restlessly. The Brain had little appreciation of humor in his austere mentality.

"If you two idiots are through pretending, we can go on," he rasped caustically. "Let 'em have a good laugh, Simon," Curt rejoined. "They may have little *enough* left of this life to enjoy."

"Ouch, that sounds too near the truth," said Otho ruefully. "Okay, chief — let's make the plunge."

Captain Future scanned the edges of the cloud. He perceived one point where a deep bay ran into the vast mass of dust, and he steered the *Comet* toward that.

**AS THE** ship crawled through billions of miles toward the cosmic blackness, it was rocked ever more violently by the almost invisible dust-streams flowing out of the cloud. The pitching and tossing of the craft became so pronounced that they were forced to strap themselves into the space-chairs.

"It'll be worse the further in we get, I suppose," Curt thought. "It's as though nature itself were trying to keep us away from the Birthplace."

That uncanny thought deepened as the dust-streams became more violent with each million miles. By the time they were proceeding up the empty bay of space that indented the cloud, it required all the power of the vibration-drive to hold the *Comet* steady. They passed not far from a large dark star that floated on the edge of the cloud, accompanied by two small planets. They finally reached the very edge of the area of blackness.

"We'll try the fluoroscopic searchlights but I doubt if they'll do much good in dust this dense," Curt called to the others. "Otho, take the cover off the cosmic ray compass, so that we can check it by touch."

Otho removed the glassite face of the instrument. It was difficult work, for the ship was now lurching drunkenly.

"Goodbye, universe!" exclaimed Grag. "Here's where poor old Grag gets blacked out for good."

Next moment, the flying ship had plunged into the dust of the cloud. At once, they were surrounded by an impenetrable blackness. Curt hastily switched on the fluoroscopic searchlights, whose beams were designed to penetrate fog or dust. But the beams made only a thin red glow for a few hundred yards ahead. Even they could not penetrate far through the choking area of swirling particles.

The Futuremen could barely make each other out in the control-room. The currents of streaming dust hurled the *Comet* about like a chip in a maelstrom as Curt fought to keep it on its course. They seemed to have penetrated the bellowing, violent,

primal forces of the cosmos. The hull and struts of the ship creaked, boomed, shuddered and screeched beneath the impact of currents. A strut snapped with a crash back in the cabin.

"This is worse than bucking a blizzard over Pluto!" called Otho over the uproar. "If it's this bad near the Birthplace, what'll it be like when we actually find it?"

"It'll be like catching a Jovian moonwolf — but if you find one, it tears you to bits," Grag boomed.

Captain Future paid them little attention for he was definitely worried by the pounding the *Comet* was taking. The ship was the staunchest, strongest craft in the Solar System — but even it could not challenge with impunity the blind fury of interstellar forces.

The stubbornness of purpose that was Curt's dominant trait rose to meet the intensified challenge. He held the ship grimly on its course, bringing it back each time it was hurled spinning away by the roaring dust-streams. The throbbing vibration-drive continued to push it forward, but it was like breasting the tide of a super-Niagara to force a way against these appalling currents.

**H**E SOUGHT to find an easier path between the more violent dust-currents, but each time was sucked back into the raging stronger tides. The cosmic ray compass needle was shuddering spasmodically, for its mechanism was bearing the full terrific impact of the cosmic radiation whose unimaginable source they were

fighting to approach.

*Crack-crash!* A scream of tortured metal told of a slight warping of the *Comet's* stern hull plates. An instant later, the controls went dead under Captain Future's hands, and the ship was batted helplessly this way and that like a powerless derelict.

"What's the matter?" Grag yelled, clinging to his space-chair as the ship rolled and spun madly in the current's grip.

"The drive ring around the hull must have snapped!" Curt cried. "The vibration drive's useless. Now the currents *have* got us."

"Could we put on our space-suits and go out and repair it?" Otho called. "Not a chance. The currents would tear you off the hull in a minute!" Curt shouted back. "I'll try to use the rocket-drive. It won't buck these currents, but it may get us out of this devil's storm to where we can repair the drive-ring."

The roar of the rocket-tubes sounded thin and ineffectual when he threw them on. Their comparatively low power was puny against the raging dust-currents, but they helped to keep the ship from being tossed about too violently as the currents carried it outward.

Captain Future allowed the millrace tides of dust to sweep them out of the cloud. Further attempts to penetrate to the Birthplace were useless until the vibration drive ring was repaired. They were swept finally out of the vast black cloud into the clear vault of space again. Neighboring star-clusters and nebulae

blazed brightly to their eyes after their sojourn in the roaring darkness.

"Never saw a sun look so good to me as those do!" Grag vowed fervently. "Where'll we go to repair the ship, chief?"

"All those suns are too far for us to reach with the rocket-drive," Curt estimated. He pointed toward the dark star they had passed on their inward journey. "We'd better land there — it's the nearest world!"

The violence of the currents was less now that they were outside the cloud. Curt was able to steer toward the cinder-like dark star by means of the throbbing rockets. Limping on, the *Comet* approached the burned-out sun. A quick telescopic inspection showed that its two small planets were ice-sheathed.

"We'll need terbium for repairs and it'll be hard to get on those icy little worlds," Curt decided. "We'd better land on the dead sun itself and see if we can find any there."

Somber, black, desolate in death, loomed the burned-out star as they approached for a landing. In the starlight stretched cindery plains that rose to low hills of ashen drabness. There was a thin atmosphere of gaseous elements that remained after the solidification of the cooling star.

Curt brought the *Comet* to a landing on one of the desolate plains. He exhaled a long breath as he turned off the rockets. It was the first landing they had made since leaving the Moon in their own System, far across the universe.

"The air is breathable," reported

the Brain, from his check of the atmosphere tester, "but has a high percentage of inert gases."

They emerged from the ship and tramped cindery ashes underfoot as they moved aft to view the damage.

As Captain Future had guessed, the terbium drive-ring had been snapped when the hull was warped by impact of currents. Half of the ring was now missing.

"We can soon repair the drive ring," he declared, eyeing the damage, "if we find terbium on this dark star. But terbium is an unlikely element on a dead sun like this—"

He had turned to wave across the starlit, deathly plain as he spoke, but suddenly stiffened, his voice dying away. Unbelievably, Curt stared. From Otho came a gasp.

"Gods of space, what are *they*?"

Across the dim, ashen plain, a group of incredible figures advanced toward them..

## Chapter V

### Castaways of the Stars

THE grotesque creatures approaching them bore a dim resemblance to humanity. In the starlit distance, they looked like stooping, shambling men with stocky bodies and preternaturally long arms. Then Captain Future's keen eyes apprehended their full strangeness.

These were not men. Their bodies, even the hairless heads, were of gray, mineraline substance resembling asbestos. Their arms each ended, not in a fingered hand, but in a

great curved claw like that of a pick. And their faces were flat and unhuman, with huge-pupiled shining eyes and wide mouths equipped with enormous grinding-fangs.

"I can't be seeing these things for I haven't been drinking!" gasped Otho. "Last time I saw anything like these was when I had too many radium highballs that night on Uranus."

"They look as though they may have been human once," Curt muttered. "But look at that one!"

He was calling attention to the peculiar action of one of the mineral-men. The group of creatures was steadily approaching the *Comet*, their blank, shining eyes fixed upon the Futuremen. But one of the gray mineral-men had stopped and with a quick motion, had used his claw-like "hand" to dig out a chunk of gleaming ore from the cindery plain. The creature thrust it into his mouth, ground it between his massive teeth, swallowed the pulverized rock and came on with the others.

"Good Lord, they eat rock, just like Eek!" yelled Otho. "Let me out of here! I don't crave to tangle with guys who chew up a nice piece of iron ore for breakfast." The Brain's rasping voice came, coolly interested.

"Obviously, these creatures can ingest their food-elements in the rawest forms. They're an extreme instance of adaptation to an unusual habitat."

"They're a lot of nightmares!" Grag declared. "I don't like the way they're coming on."

The mineral-men were now

advancing in a rapid, shuffling trot, low humming cries came from their throats, and that the *Comet* and the Futuremen were the object of their advance could not be doubted.

"Stand by for trouble!" Curt said tersely. "I think they're after some of the chemical elements, either in our ship or ourselves."

He raised his proton-pistol in a warning gesture. But the shining-eyed caricatures of humanity appeared not to comprehend the menace of the weapon. They only quickened their advance. Curt sensed the weird-ness of the scene — these gray humanoid horrors shuffling toward them across the starlit, ashen plain of the dead sun.

But it was time to act. He drew aim on the foremost of the mineral-men and triggered swiftly. The thin blue beam of the proton-pistol lanced through the shoulder of the creature like a bolt of lightning. But the thing did not even flinch. It came on with the others, its two claw-like hands raised toward the Futuremen. Curt shot again, this time into the breast of the mineral-man. The creature did not stop or fall.

"Holy sun-imps!" yelled Otho as he too shot without effect. "Their bodies are so different, they don't even feel our beams!"

"Back to the ship!" yelled Captain Future, now thoroughly alarmed. "We'd better get out of here."

**I**T WAS too late. With a final rush, the mineral-men reached them. Two of the gray horrors seized big Grag and endeavored to tear his metal body apart with their huge claws.

Grag, bellowing furiously, balled his mighty fists and hammered his attackers with blows that would have felled a Jovian elephant. The creatures were knocked away, but they and others leaped back on the robot, bore him to the ground.

"Pull them off Grag!" Curt yelled to Otho, springing forward.

With indomitable courage, Captain Future seized the rough, mineraline body of one of the attackers and sought to tear him loose.

The creature appeared not even to feel his efforts. And a moment later, great claws seized Curt from behind, and he was torn away by another of the creatures. With a yell of warning to Otho, Captain Future twisted skillfully free before those grotesque claws could rip him to shreds. But Otho was hard put to keep himself from being torn apart. The mass of the creatures still piled upon Grag, clawing at the metal body of the angry robot. At this desperate juncture, a loud cry in a human voice smote

Curt Newton's ears. He glanced in the direction from which it came, and saw two men running toward the battle over the starlit plain.

They were men such as he had never seen before — men with brilliant crimson skins, stiff black hair and garments of black leather secured by red belts. The foremost of the pair was a giant in size, and both he and his companion brandished light metal spears tipped with a sticky, shining substance. The mineral-men uttered humming cries of alarm at sight of the

two newcomers. The gray monsters hastily halted their attack on the Futuremen and started a rapid retreat.

"Who are *they*?" blurted Otho bewilderedly, staring at the advancing crimson men.

"The mineral-men seem to know and fear them," Captain Future rejoined.

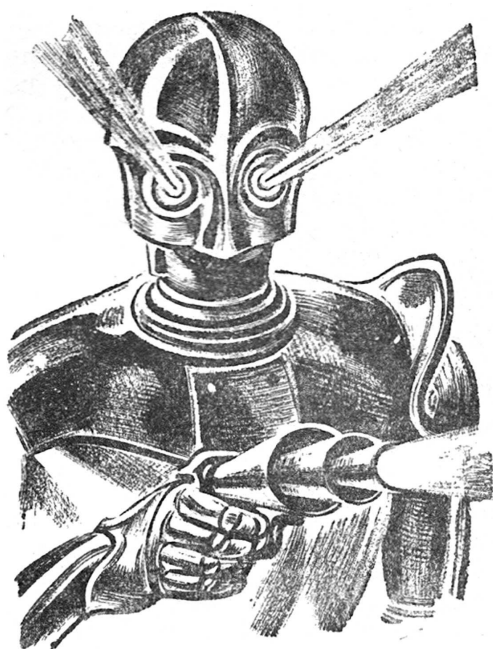
"Look at that!"

One of the gray mineral-men, more daring than his companions, turned to attack the crimson-skinned newcomers instead of fleeing. The red giant met the attacking monster with a roar of rage. The crimson man evaded the clutching claws by a quick movement and stabbed at the gray creature with his seemingly puny little spear. The point of the spear hardly more than touched the mineral-man's breast. But that was enough. The sticky, shining substance smeared on the point of the spear acted like an inconceivably rapid poison. A spreading, shining stain crept quickly across the breast of the monster. It hummed in mingled pain and rage, tore at, its breast and then fell prone. By this time, the other mineral-men had disappeared.

"Demons of Pluto!" swore Otho, gaping. "These crimson lads know how to deal with those gray fiends."

"Those monsters were trying to tear my body apart and eat it!" roared Grag furiously as he got to his feet.

"A nice lunch you'd have made for them," flipped Otho. "That old iron carcass of yours would have given them indigestion they'd never forget."



GRAG

Curt Newton paid no attention to them. His whole interest was focused on the two crimson-skinned men who were now approaching them. The hulking giant of the two stopped a few feet from Curt. He was a bristling-haired, massive-faced individual, with bleak, tawny-yellow eyes and the look of a veteran adventurer. His comrade, obviously of the same race, was slighter and younger-looking.

"They're obviously of a human race, but one from some other star than our own Sun System," rasped the Brain, studying them.

**T**HE crimson giant and his comrade gaped in astonishment at hearing the voice emanate from the floating case of the Brain. They stared at Simon Wright and then at Grag and Otho, in open wonder. Captain Future spoke clearly, holding out his hand in sign of friendship.

"We thank you for your aid. Can you

understand me?"

The crimson giant shook his head puzzledly. He spoke to Curt, but it was in a language Captain Future had never heard.

"Might have known our languages would be completely different," Curt muttered disappointedly. "I suppose there's nothing for it but to pick up their speech, if we can."

The crimson giant seemed to understand when Curt made signals of inquiry to him. He pointed to his own breast and said loudly, "Hol Jor."

Curt having responded, naming himself. Hol Jor repeated the name, "Captain Future," several times, then grinned in understanding. Then he pointed to his companion and said, "Skur Kal."

Then Hol Jor, the crimson-skinned giant, pointed to himself and his companion and then up into the western heavens. His finger stabbed in the direction of the distant red star Antares.

"Holy sun-imps, he means they're from Antares!" ejaculated Otho. "It isn't so far from here as interstellar distances are measured, but how did they get here? And why did they come?"

Curt already had a suspicion of the answer to the latter question. But he concentrated now upon learning Hol Jor's language.

Captain Future was an expert with strange languages. Through long experience on strange worlds, he had perfected a method of learning an alien tongue in the shortest possible time. He now put it into effect.



Squatting down with the two Antarians, Curt began a rapid process of vocabulary building. He pointed to objects and Hol Jor gave the Antarian names for them. He performed actions in mimicry, and thus rapidly acquired a stock of verbs. Curt's phenomenal memory retained each word. By the time they had spent a few hours at this, Captain Future and the Futuremen had acquired a working knowledge of the Antarian tongue.

Haltingly, Curt asked Hol Jor the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"What are you two Antarians doing on this dead sun?"

"We were wrecked and cast away here," was Hol Jor's emphatic rejoinder, accompanied by something that sounded like an oath. "Twenty-eight *quals* ago we drifted onto this accursed dark star."

"We are amazed to learn that there is a human race on Antares and that they possess star-ships," Curt asserted.

"There are human civilizations on the planets of many stars in this part of the galaxy," Hol Jor assured him. "It is our tradition that long ago the worlds of many stars were colonized by a parent human stock that had its origin on the planets of yonder star."

Hol Jor pointed toward a faint yellow star low on the horizon, which the Futuremen recognized instantly.

"Deneb!" exclaimed Otho, excitedly. "Chief, remember what we learned on the lost world of Katain — that the original human stock of *our*

System came from Deneb!"

"Aye," rasped the Brain. "It is clear that the Denebians of long ago spread the human seed far and wide through the galaxy. What a race of adventurers they must have been!"

CURT NEWTON felt a new glow of excitement at the thought that there were on the worlds of perhaps countless stars, human races who, in many cases, might have reached an advanced stage of civilization and scientific progress. Hol Jor was asking a question. "From what star do you come?"

Curt pointed to the tiny spark of his own Sun, barely visible in the low eastern sky.

"From that star. We call it Sol."

Hol Jor's jaw sagged in astonishment. "You came from *there*? But that sun as far away across the galaxy. Why, none of us castaways came from so remote a system."

Curt seized on his reference.

"You mean that there are other castaways here beside you two Antarians?"

"Three others — survivors of different wrecks who managed to reach this cursed sphere," Hol Jor affirmed. "One is a Vegan, one is from Fomalhaut, and another is a native of one of the stars here in Sagittarius."

Hol Jor gave his own names to the stars, but by pointing them out or describing them, made it possible for Curt to identify them.

"We two Antarians have been castaway here the shortest time," he continued. "We are the sole survivors

of an expedition of ten. We managed to drift to this dark star in space-suits, but the rest of our crew perished when our ship was wrecked trying to enter that cursed cloud.

He pointed, as he spoke, toward the vast black blot of the cosmic cloud that covered the bigger part of the firmament above — the cloud from which the Futuremen had just escaped perilously.

Curt stiffened.

“Why were you trying to enter the cloud?” he asked keenly.

“To find the Birthplace of Matter, of course,” Hol Jor replied. “Isn’t that why you came to this part of the galaxy?”

“It is,” Curt admitted. “But we did not dream that men of other stars might be on the same quest.”

Skur Kal, the younger Antarian, spoke to Captain Future.

“We desired to find the Birthplace and learn how to make matter from radiation, so that we could revive our dying worlds. Antares is a fading, aging sun. Life is hard on our worlds, and the secret of matter-mastery would make it easy once more.”

“We are after the same secret for the same reason,” Curt Newton admitted.

“Of course,” commented Hol Jor unsurprisingly. “The other castaways here were on expeditions with the same purpose. The secret of the hidden Birthplace is a lure that has brought star-explorers here from distant suns for ages, or so old Ber Del says.”

The big Antarian rose to his feet.

“Speaking of Ber Del, he and our other friends will be wondering where we are. Let’s go back to our camp, and you can talk to the others yourselves.”

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** at once accepted the invitation. He led the way into the *Comet*. The two Antarians looked around the crowded ship in amazement, and Hol Jor uttered a whistle as he surveyed the great generators of the vibration drive.

“It looks like terrific motive power you’ve got here, even though I can’t fathom its design,” he declared. “Our own ship used a form of electron jets for propulsion, but we could never have got up to speeds capable of coming as far as you have.”

“Our drive ring is broken and will have to be repaired — that’s why we landed here,” Curt explained. “But we can travel on rocket drive to your camp.”

When the *Comet* rose into the dusky sky, Hol Jor tersely explained the direction of the camp. Grag, at the controls, drove the ship low across the cindery plain.

In the eternal twilight, the surface of the dark star lay infinitely desolate and deathly. As they scudded above the rolling plains and hills of dun-colored slag and cinders, they sighted a small group of gray mineral-men digging in the ground. “What are those creatures, anyway?” Otho demanded of the Antarians. “They look like men, but curse me if I ever

saw men who could eat raw rock.”

“Ber Del, my old Vegan friend here, has a theory about them,” Hol Jor replied. “He thinks that long ago they were ordinary humans who peopled the two planets of this sun. Then when the sun died, and the planets became sheathed in eternal ice, the humans must have moved to this dead star itself, given it a thin artificial atmosphere and used chemical conversion to make food from the rock elements.

“It’s Ber Del’s idea,” he went on, “that during the course of ages those people gradually evolved the power to ingest the raw rock elements directly into their bodies, and developed claws and teeth capable of digging and grinding the richer rock. Of course, their intelligence would degenerate — they’re little more than brutes, now.”

“What’s on those spears of yours that kills them so quickly?” Curt asked. Skur Kal, the younger Antarian, answered.

“We castaways discovered that a certain radioactive substance here was poisonous in an extreme degree to the mineral-men. So we made spears tipped with the radioactive poison, to repel them when they attacked us.”

Hol Jor interrupted, pointing ahead.

“There’s our camp. Won’t the others be surprised?”

The camp of the interstellar castaways was in a hollow in the rock plain. The hollow had been gouged by the crash of a large, cylindrical shaped vessel that had been shattered into a total wreck.

“That’s the ship of Ber Del — the other Vegans in his expedition were all killed in the crash,” Hol Jor explained. “Later, when we others drifted here from Wrecks, we found Ber Del living here and joined forces with him. We’ve lived ever since, using the rations in the wreck and utilizing a chemical conversion unit to make water from the rock-elements.”

The *Comet* landed nearby, and the Antarians led the Futuremen into the camp. From the shattered wreck, three men came wonderingly forward to meet them. Hol Jor hailed them.

“A ship at last, mates! Maybe it means we can finally get off this cursed globe!” He named the three men, one by one. Ber Del, the old Vegan, was a small, withered, blue-skinned man, completely hairless, with a bulging intellectual-looking skull, and colorless, faded eyes. Taunus Tar, the man from Fomalhaut’s worlds, was a pink-skinned plump, genial looking man of middle age whose small black eyes peered at them incredulously from between crinkling rolls of fat. Ki Illok, the castaway whose home was one of the suns of this Sagittarius region, was a brown man. The Sagittarian was compact, stocky, clipped of speech, brusque of manner. All three star rovers seemed astounded when Hol Jor told them how far across the galaxy the Futuremen had come.

“These friends all understand my language — we’ve learned each other’s tongue, in the time we’ve been here,” he explained to Curt.

"You came *that* far across the universe?" Ki Illok, the brown Sagittarian, repeated unbelievably to Captain Future. "It's hard to believe. Yet your companions certainly look alien."

"They came looking for the Birthplace of Matter as we did," shrugged big Hol Jor. "Only they were luckier than we, and didn't get completely wrecked when they tried to enter the cloud."

Ber Del, the withered old Vegan, shook his head. "Many men from different stars have met their deaths in this part of space, drawn by the lure of the Birthplace and the power its secret would give. And who knows — maybe all in vain. Maybe even if we could penetrate the cloud, we wouldn't be able to reach the Birthplace against the will of the Watchers."

"The Watchers?" Curt repeated sharply. "Who are they? And what do they have to do with the Birthplace of Matter?"

Big Hol Jor shrugged.

"It's just an old tradition that Ber Del mentioned — probably only a baseless legend."

"I wish I were sure it's only a legend," muttered the old Vegan nervously. "For if it should be true, the man who finally finds the Birthplace will enter a peril beyond anything ever dreamed."

## Chapter VI

### City Beneath the Ice

**D**IM in the darkness stretched the rolling ashen plains of the dark-star world. Wrapped in the somber obscurity of eternal death and night lay this once — mighty sphere. Only at one point did ruddy light beacon through the dusk. Captain Future and his friends had set up an atomic glower in the camp of the castaways. They sat around it now, the wrecked star-sailors eagerly sharing a meal of frozen Jovian beef and Earth bread and Uranian fruits that Curt had brought from the frozen-storage compartment of his ship. The bright radiance of the glower dispelled the chill and darkness. It gleamed off the hull of the *Comet*, wavered over the shattered hulk of the nearby wreck and picked out the strangely assorted group around it — Curt Newton, tanned, handsome, keen-eyed, Grag's mighty metal limbs, and Otho's lithe white figure, the brooding lens-eyes of the Brain and the faces of the old Vegan, the two Antarians and the Fomalhautian and Sagittarian.

They talked for hours, these strangely-met star-captains from far-separated parts of the galaxy. Fascinating to Captain Future were the tales these men could tell of exploration and adventure and dire peril and marvelous beauty which they had met with in intrepid voyages through this region of the starry universe.

"— and so we combed sun after sun in that part of the star-cluster." It

was Ki Llok, the brown Sagittarian, who was speaking in his clipped, curt way. "We saw wonders on some of those weird worlds! But the sight I'll never forget is the night sky of those worlds — all the suns of the cluster blazing in the heavens like a million moons."

Old Ber Del, the withered blue Vegan, nodded his hairless head.

"I was through some of those star clusters, years ago. It's crazily dangerous piloting, picking your way through those thousands of swarming suns. I remember we'd picked up a load of rare metal in there and were heading back for Vega when we got into trouble running between the two suns of a double star. We were lucky to see our own worlds again."

Otho's green eyes were sparkling with excited interest.

"If you chaps have been going and coming between stars here for so long, why is it you've never visited our own sun, Sol?" he asked them.

Hol Jor, the giant Antarian, answered.

"Your sun is too far across the galaxy! No ship of ours could make it in less than many years. In this part of the universe, where the stars are much closer together, interstellar travel has been feasible."

Taunus Tar, the fat pink star-captain from Fomalhaut, nodded agreement.

"It is so," he told Captain Future. "That is why we were so awe-stricken when we learned how far across the universe you had come."

"We had a strong motive for the voyage," Curt Newton said earnestly. "One of the worlds of our System is dying from failing

atmosphere. Only the secret of complete matter-mastery can revive it. And only at the Birthplace of Matter can that secret be learned."

Old Ber Del nodded understanding.

"I came searching for the Birthplace with the same motive. My native world at Vega is dying. And it was a similar purpose that brought Hol Jor and the others on their separate quests, which ended in disaster."

Curt's jaw hardened.

"My quest isn't ended yet. It has to go on, somehow. For the life of a world, the future of a people, depend on it.

"You were telling me something about a legend or tradition connected with the Birthplace of Matter — something about the Watchers. What is the story?" Hol Jor snorted.

"It's just a crazy yarn you hear from many star peoples. They've been telling it for ages."

"I don't know — there may be truth in it," muttered old Ber Del. "Maybe someone, long ago, did penetrate to the Birthplace and brought out this story. That's what they say, anyway."

The old Vegan bent toward Curt.

"The story was to the effect that the Birthplace does exist far inside the cosmic cloud, but that it is guarded by mysterious wardens with unhuman powers, who are called the Watchers and who allow no one to gain the secret of matter-mastery from the Birthplace.

"It is a fact," he continued thoughtfully, "that no star-rover who

went into the cloud has ever returned.”

Captain Future’s brow knitted.

“It’s a queer legend, this story of the Watchers. But we’ll worry about that when

— and if — we get inside the cloud.”

He looked at the castaways. “We’re going on, if we can find terbium to repair our ship. But what about you five?”

Hol Jor made an eager proposal to Curt.

“Why don’t you take us with you, as crew? We’re all willing to try bucking the cloud with you. We can help, maybe, with our small knowledge of the currents, and, once inside, you may need five star veterans like ourselves.

“We’re all after the same thing,” the big red Antarian went on earnestly. “We all want to secure the secret of matter-mastery from the Birthplace to help our worlds and peoples. Together, we’d have a better chance of winning that secret. And if we did get out with it, you could help us reach our own stars before you start home to yours.”

**CURT** looked at the other castaways. “Do you ll feel the same way about it?”

“I do,” replied Ki Illok curtly.

The fat, good-humored face of Taunus Tar bobbed in agreement. “Anything is better than starving on this forsaken globe.”

Old Ber Del also nodded.

“We have nothing to lose and much to gain by joining you if you’ll have us.”

“Then it’s settled!” Captain Future

said calmly.

“So now we’ve got a foreign legion of the stars!” grinned Otho.

“The first and biggest problem facing us,” Curt told his new partners, “is the finding of terbium to repair the driving ring of the *Comet*. Without the vibration drive, we can’t buck through those currents into the cloud. Is there any terbium in your wreck?”

Ber Del shook his head.

“Not a scrap of it. I never heard of terbium being used in any ordinary space- ship.”

“That makes it tougher,” Curt Newton admitted. “Simon, what do you think of our chances of finding terbium on this dead sun?”

“It’s a very slim chance, lad,” rasped the Brain. “This dark star contains only the gaseous elements of its original solar life, now solidified. Terbium would not be among them. But I’ll check with the element-resonator and make sure.”

Curt yawned, feeling the reaction of many hours of strain.

“I need sleep. Grag will help you with the job, Simon.”

Captain Future slept with the other star rovers around the cheerful flare of the atomic glower, as deeply as though he were not slumbering on a dead sphere.

**WHEN** he and the others awakened, they saw Grag and Simon hovering over a complicated instrument they had brought from the *Comet*. It was an element resonator, that could detect the presence of any element at extreme ranges. It operated by emitting narrowly-tuned vibrations

that were reflected back only by the selected element, no matter what the distance.

"Any luck?" Curt asked, rubbing his eyes as he joined them.

"None, lad," replied the Brain succinctly. "As I feared, there is no terbium on this sun."

Otho swore.

"There wouldn't be, just because we need it so badly."

"Now what, chief?" Grag asked anxiously, while Hol Jor and the other star rovers waited anxiously for Curt's decision.

Captain Future shrugged, "If there's no terbium on this dead star, we have to look elsewhere. We can't go far without the vibration drive. The only possible nearby source is one of the two planets of this ancient sun."

"But they're covered deep with ice," objected Hol Jor.

"We'll have to get down through the ice, if we locate terbium on one of them,"

Captain Future replied. "That ought to be possible — *if* the terbium is there."

An hour later, they had all entered the *Comet*, ready for the search for the vital metal. The ship blasted skyward with comparative slowness on the rocket drive. Grag steered it toward the innermost of the two planets that circled the burned-out star. The small world was a forbidding spectacle as they circled over it. It was covered to a great depth by solid ice — ice which was not only frozen water but frozen air. It presented a blank, barren white surface.

"Some place to go terbium

mining *I*" muttered Otho. "What does the resonator say, Simon?"

The Brain was intently directing the instrument to and fro across the icy surface of the frozen world. His lens-like eyes watched the floating bubble of light that was its indicator.

"The resonator indicates the presence of terbium not far northwest of here," he rasped, "Fly slowly in that direction."

The *Comet* moved at reduced speed over the icy plain. The Brain watched his instrument, calling directions to Grag. Presently, at Simon's request, the ship was brought to a halt.

"There is positive resonance from terbium directly underneath us," the Brain announced. "The terbium is under the ice."

"So now all we have to do is clear the ice away," said Otho. "Well, give Grag a shovel and let him go to it."

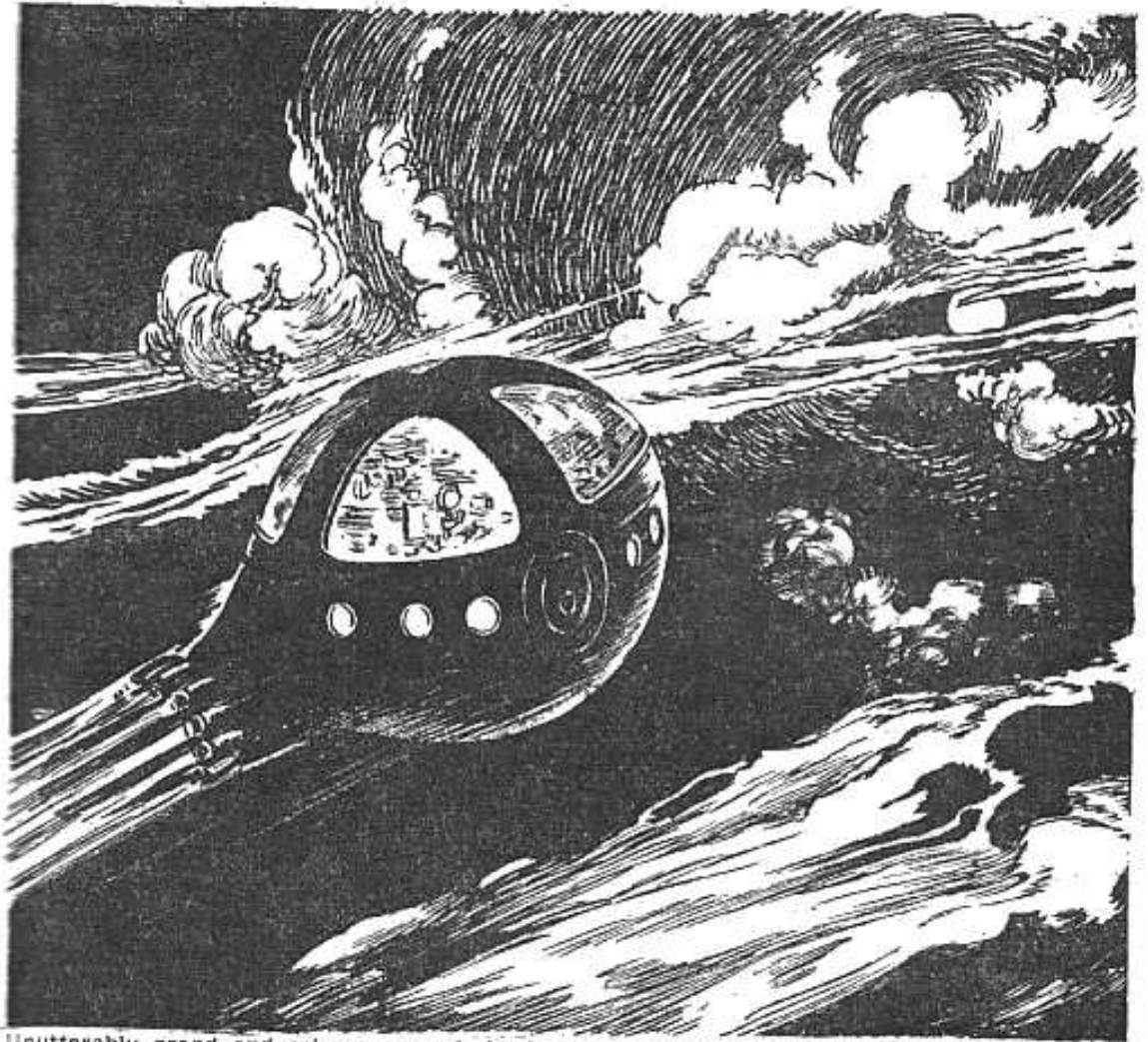
Hol Jor looked astonished.

"But it'll take years to clear away that great depth of ice by such methods!" Curt Newton smiled.

"Otho was only joking. Our proton-beams can disintegrate ice as swiftly as any other matter. We'll have to fan them out so as to cover a wide area at one time."

Adjustment was quickly made of the big proton-cannon used ordinarily as the armament of the *Comet*. Then they jetted their powerful rays, not in their ordinary highly concentrated beam, but in broad fans of force that combined to sweep a great area.





Unutterably grand and solemn seemed the heart of the universe into which the Futuremen were audaciously penetrating. (Chapter III)

The ice began to melt over an area of half a square mile. It was not melting into Water — it was melting into nothingness.

Down and down sank the level of the square area. After a half hour, they had cut down through two thousand feet of the ice.

The ship continued to sink slowly downward into this great square well in the ice, keeping its fanned beams playing. At last, brown rock appeared as they melted the last of the ice.

Grag landed the ship on the

rock, playing its searchlights about in the semi- gloom of this deep well they had cut.

“This rock doesn’t look like terbium-bearing mineral at all,” muttered the Brain. “But the resonator can’t have erred.”

They emerged in their space-suits. Curt made a quick examination of the rock beneath them. Puzzled, he and Simon extended their investigation. Finally, they stopped, baffled.

“There’s no terbium in this

rock!" the Brain exclaimed, chagrined. "I must have misread the resonator."

They went back into the ship and again consulted the element-resonator. And then their bewilderment increased.

"The resonator still shows terbium right here!" Simon cried. "Why, this is impossible."

At that moment came a cry from Hol Jor, who with the other star rovers and Otho had been roaming the surface of the rock.

"Come here!" came Hol Jor's call, heard over the audiphones that interconnected their space-suits.

Captain Future and Simon hastened to the others. They found them gathered in an excited group.

"Look at that, chief!" Otho cried.

In the brown rock at their feet was a massive circular door of corroded metal that fitted with hermetical tightness into an aperture in the rock.

"This was made by human hands," Curt muttered. "Must have been long ago, though."

Old Ber Del nodded.

"Probably it's a relic of the people of this planet who fled to the dark star when this world froze up — the ancestors of those grotesque mineral-men."

They brought tools from the ship and pried at the door. Finally they loosed the massive disk of metal, and heaved it aside.

They exposed a round shaft in the rock, in which a graceful spiral stair of metal dropped into dim

obscurity. And *air* was rising slowly from the opening in a perceptible current.

"The terbium indicated by the resonator must be down here somewhere,"

muttered the Brain.

"We're going to see," Curt declared. "You and Otho and Hol Jor come with me. The rest of you guard the ship."

Flashing the ray of a hand torch to guide his path, keeping his other upon the butt of his proton-pistol, Captain Future started down the spiral stair. The others followed closely.

They descended for several hundred feet through the vertical shaft in the solid rock. Then the rock walls disappeared, and they perceived that beneath them lay a very large, dimly illuminated cavernous space to whose floor fell the spiral stairway. They reached the floor and stared about in awe. They had penetrated a vast cavern, obviously hollowed out by artificial forces and approximately a quarter-mile square. Dim blue ceiling lights of perpetual radioactive design shed a thin illumination over the air-filled cavern. And the floor of this whole vast underground space was covered by rows of thousands of oblong stone slabs. Upon each slab lay a motionless body.

**W**ONDERINGLY, the adventurers approached the nearest slab to the stair. The man who lay upon it was young, smooth-skinned and of almost girlish prettiness. He was curiously gray in complexion, with dark hair upon

which he wore a metal coronet. His garment was a long robe of white, and his eyes were closed. Similar men and women and children occupied all the other slabs.

"A place of the dead!" murmured Hol Jor awedly. "A great mausoleum of the people who once inhabited this world."

"There's something mysterious about this," muttered Otho. "Where's the terbium that the resonator indicated was down here?"

"Listen!" exclaimed the Brain suddenly, "Do you hear a sound of bells?"

They could hear nothing. But the supersensitive microphone ears of the Brain had not deceived him.

"It's getting stronger," he whispered. "A queer, rhythmic ringing —"

The others began to hear it then — fairy bells of unutterable sweetness-echoing from a great remoteness came the sound. There was a curious tone-pattern in the ringing. It was rousing, stimulating.

"I don't like this!" Otho exclaimed uneasily. "A city of dead people, and bells beginning to ring—"

Captain Future's eyes narrowed. He too felt a growing uneasiness. That tintinnabulation was growing louder and faster by the minute. Finally it reached a crescendo of ringing sound, halted for an instant of breathless hush, and then was followed by a single tremendous bell-note of almost deafening timbre.

"It must be some automatic mechanism actuated by our entrance here that made the sound," Curt

guessed rapidly. "But what could its purpose be?"

"For the love of the space-gods, look!" yelled Otho wildly, pointing. "The dead — they're *awaking!*"

## Chapter VII

### Into the Cosmic Cloud

**W**ITH a shock of unbelieving amazement, Curt Newton saw that the people on the slabs were stirring. Those motionless figures were twitching and turning and beginning to sit upright, like ordinary sleepers roused to wakefulness.

"Those bells brought them back to life somehow!" yelled Otho. "Let's get out of here!"

"Wait, I think I'm beginning to understand this!" Curt exclaimed. "Go back and close that door of the shaft to prevent too much of the air in this cavern from escaping."

Otho raced up the stair upon the errand. Captain Future and the others stood watching the amazing transformation taking place around them. Every man, woman and child upon the slabs had awakened. At first they looked around bewilderedly at each other. And then they burst into a frantic chorus of joyful shouts, a babel of cries.

"Why, I can understand their language," Hol Jor declared. "It's much the same as our own star languages."

"Hear what they're shouting?" Curt asked. "My guess about this was right."

The newly-awakened sleepers were exclaiming in mad joy, "The Thousand have succeeded! Our sun has been rekindled, and our world has awakened to new life!"

Suddenly, as their first frantic joy quieted a little, the awakened sleepers became aware of the presence of Curt and Hol Jor and the Brain, watching them from the foot of the spiral stair. The rejoicing multitude recoiled a little, in surprise and alarm. Though a handsome, graceful race, these gray-skinned folk appeared of no great courage by the way they shrank back. From their midst finally stepped the young man who wore the coronet of authority on his dark hair. Doubtfully, he approached Curt.

"You are not of our people," he said wonderingly to Captain Future. "Whence do you come?"

"From another star," Curt answered quietly. "We found the door down into your cavern here only a few minutes ago."

"You found the door?" echoed the young ruler of the sleepers. His eyes flashed with joy. "Then it is certain that the ice is gone from above, and that our sun has been rekindled by the Thousand."

"We do not understand your reference," Curt told him. "Why have you slept here, and how? And who are the Thousand?"

The young ruler of the gray sleepers explained.

"We are an ancient race, native to this world. We were so civilized that we had no more need of scientific

progress, but could live a life of aesthetic ease and pleasure, happily pursuing the arts and served in all our needs by the machines our scientists had created. Only a thousand scientists were required to be trained each generation to keep our mechanical system in good operation.

"But after ages of this happy life, death faced us. Our sun had long been dying, and it cooled so rapidly that this whole world became frozen.

The sun became a mere giant cinder, and only by dire means did we manage to keep alive.

"Then our thousand scientists said to us, 'Means must be found of rekindling the sun. It is possible that we can do that in time by long experiment with atomic explosions. We shall go to the dead sun and set up laboratories there and begin the attempt. But it may take many generations, and long before then you would all be dead. So you must all sleep while we carry out the attempt to renew the sun.'

"So our thousand scientists," continued the young ruler, "prepared for us this place beneath the crust of our planet. They installed in it an apparatus which could cast us into a perpetual hypnotic trance through auditory stimulation of bells. They told us that a similar apparatus would automatically awake us from the hypnotic trance, when our sun was rekindled.

"Melting of the ice on our world overhead would automatically start that awakening apparatus. For the thousand scientists themselves, if they

succeeded in rekindling the sun, would surely perish in the very moment they succeeded, and so would not be able to return to awake us.”

The young ruler concluded eagerly.

“They must finally have succeeded in rekindling our dead star by atomic explosion, as they hoped! So when the new warmth of our sun melted all the ice over this place, the apparatus of bells automatically awoke us.”

**CURT NEWTON** felt his heart wrung by the unutterable pathos which lay hidden in the young ruler’s eager words — pathos of a thousand men and women who long ago had gone to their dead sun to try to awaken it to life, and who had known that they themselves would perish if they succeeded. The pathos of these frantically rejoicing people who thought that the attempt *had* succeeded — was almost as tragic.

“They don’t guess the truth!” whispered Hol Jor pityingly. “It was our proton- rays that melted the ice over this place and started the apparatus that woke them up — but they think their sun has been revived to new life.”

The young leader of the gray sleepers faced Curt anxiously.

“It is true that our sun is rekindled, that we can go back up to take up life again on the surface of our world?”

Captain Future evaded.

“The thing is not yet complete,” he said gently. “You must wait a little longer.” The faces of the gray folk fell

somewhat.

“But the Thousand are still working at the problem on our dead sun?” he pressed.

“The irony of it!” muttered the Brain in low tones. “The beastlike mineral-men on the dead sun — they must be the evolution-adapted descendants of the Thousand who went there long ago.”

“Gods of space!” murmured Hol Jor, aghast. “Great scientists, attempting that colossal, degenerating through the generations into those beasts! And these people don’t suspect —”

Curt Newton was speaking gently to the young ruler, “The descendants of the Thousand are still on the dead sun. And the problem of rekindling it will soon be solved, I feel sure.”

The gray sleepers seemed more cheerful at this.

“Then we will return into the hypnotic sleep until that happens,” their ruler declared. “I can operate the apparatus that will again cause us to enter the trance.”

“First, tell me this,” put in Curt urgently. “Have you any store of metals here? We badly need one called terbium. It is essential to the success of the great plan.”

The young ruler answered eagerly.

“We have a store of machines and metals in an adjoining cavern. The Thousand stored them there so that we would have them with which to begin life anew when we awakened.”

He led the way across the mausoleum-like cavern to a portal

that gave entrance to a much smaller adjoining cavern. Here were stored with scientific precision a great mass of instruments, tools and machines, as well as bins and cases of almost every valuable or rare element and compound. Curt Newton was first to find a case of colorless metal bars.

"This is terbium — and there's enough," he said thankfully. "We can carry it between us, Hol Jor."

They returned to the main cavern. The ruler was addressing his people.

"We must sleep again, but next time we awake, our world will surely be smiling again beneath the warm sun."

Dutifully, the gray folk lay down upon the slabs. The young ruler was last, and before he lay down he touched a lever near the foot of the spiral stair.

"You will do all in your power to help the Thousand or their descendants rekindle our sun?" he asked Curt anxiously.

"I promise you that," answered Captain Future gravely.

"Stop your ears, unless you wish to be cast into the sleep with us," warned the young ruler as he lay down upon his slab. "The bells begin."

**A**LREADY, a faint ringing pattern of bell-tones was becoming audible. They could hear it clearly, for Curt and Hol Jor had removed their space-helmets to converse with the young ruler.

Hastily, Captain Future and the Antarian and Simon closed their ears with waxite plugs from Curt's bell-

kit.

They were none too soon, for the growing strength of the bells was having an overpoweringly drowsy effect upon them before they cut it off in this manner. The long-dead scientists who had devised that cunning instrument of super-hypnosis had been masters of their art. Now, unable to hear the siren bells, the three adventurers watched as the gray folk again became motionless in sleeping trance. The powerful hypnosis that had operated on them by auditory stimulation appeared to slow down every vital function of their bodies almost to the halting point, and again they seemed lying in death. Curt signaled to Hol Jor, and they carried the heavy case of terbium up the spiral stair. When they emerged onto the rock surface, they replaced the heavy round metal lid in the opening of the stair.

"There's a tragedy of the cosmos," Curt said gravely when they had removed the ear-plugs, inside the *Comet*. "A people sleeping for all these ages, dreaming of a day when their sun would be retired."

"And now they'll sleep like that forever," muttered the Brain.

"Not forever," contradicted Curt Newton. "I made them a promise. If we gain the secret of matter-mastery from the Birthplace, we could keep that promise by reviving their frozen world. And we will."

They flew back to the dead sun, landing the *Comet* again at their camp by the wrecked ship. And at once they plunged into the task of repairing the ship. Most important was the repair of the broken drive-ring. The terbium

they had secured from the sleepers beneath the ice was melted and cast into a section of ring to replace that lost in the cloud. Also they repaired the warped stern-plates and straightened the bent girders of the stern.

"All set to go," reported Otho at the end of their third "day" of work. "When do we start, chief?"

"In the 'morning'," Curt decided. "We need a few hours real rest after all this toil.

Strange dreams came to Curt in his slumber, dreams of the Birthplace as amighty heart, ceaselessly throbbing, and of cowed figures that watched it and warned him threateningly away.

He woke to a yell ringing in his ears. Two of the gray mineral-men had ventured to approach the camp, and Hol Jor, whose watch it was, was charging the creatures with his poison-tipped spear. The gray horrors who were the remote descendants of a once dauntless band of scientists, scuttled off into the dusk.

"The cursed creatures are getting bolder," Hol Jor declared angrily as he returned.

Disturbed by his uncanny dream, Curt Newton looked around. "We've had enough rest. Let's get started at once."

An hour later, the *Comet* rose from the dusk-shrouded surface of the dead sun and arrowed skyward toward the vast black blot of the cosmic cloud.

Curt's five new allies crowded the interior of the ship cabin and

control-room. Old Ber Del had taken the space-chair next to Captain Future's pilot chair, and the veteran Vegan star-voyager peered anxiously toward the cloud as they again approached its limits.

"The currents seem strongest where that bay of clear space indents the cloud," Ber Del commented. "I suggest that we attempt to enter at some other point."

They cruised along the edge of the vast, rolling mass of cosmic dust. It was the keen lens-eyes of the Brain that finally picked a spot where the dust seemed less intense.

"Try it there, lad," proposed Simon Wright. "There where a slight back-tide of the dust seems to flow inward."

Curt assented.

"I suggest that before we try it, we all get on our space-suits. We hope the ship will take the battering of the currents, but we can't be sure."

His five new allies had brought their space-suits. They climbed into the protective garments — all except the Brain and Grag, who did not breathe and needed no such precaution.

**WITH** increasing tenseness, Captain Future sent the little space-ship flying directly toward the brooding cloud. They plunged through the millrace currents of dust into the denser dust of the cloud itself and were at once engulfed in utter darkness. As before, the fluoroscopic searchlights were almost useless. And as before, the *Comet* was tossed and

batted about by the violent currents streaming out from the mysterious center of the cloud.

Curt Newton's hands flew over the controls with miraculous speed and deftness, striving to keep the ship out of the more violent currents. He knew very well that these stronger currents could rip the ship apart, that their only hope was to creep deviously inward through less stormy areas of the cloud. It was nightmare flight and battle, this — battle against blind forces of nature that seemed malignantly intent upon crushing the puny humans who sought to attain nature's greatest secret! The hearts of ordinary men would have quailed with dread before this appalling manifestation of brute power. But Captain Future and the Futuremen and their new star-captain allies were not ordinary men. They were, all of them, men accustomed to braving the perils of outer space. And in all their minds was the urgent knowledge that if by a miracle they could achieve their goal, they would bring back to their peoples a secret that would mean life.

The *Comet* was sucked by whirling tides of dust into a dark maelstrom of currents. Curt fought desperately to break free. The hull of the ship was creaking and grinding ominously, and the new reinforcing girders were buckling slightly from the violent stresses.

"If that drive-ring snaps again, we're goners!" Otho exclaimed.

"I'm doing my best to get out of this devil's eddy," Curt answered

between his teeth.

A wrenching, cracking sound was followed by the whistling shriek of escaping air. A hull plate had been wrenched open, and the air inside the ship was rapidly hissing out into space.

"Good thing we put on the space-suits," Curt thought. "But the ship can't take this battering much longer."

He came to a desperate decision. It was better to risk destruction at once than to remain in the maelstrom, of dust-currents until they were pounded to fragments.

"Hold tight, all of you," he gritted. "We're going to break out of this whirlpool or crack up here and now."

He slammed on the full power of the vibration drive. The pressure of that too-great acceleration crushed them for a moment, and the generators back in the cabin roared as though about to break loose from their mountings. Feeling blackness assail his brain, Curt cut the power. They had broken from the maelstrom by that momentary surge.

"Don't do *that* again," begged Otho. "I think I left my stomach back there." They had escaped the deadly eddy, but currents of dust hardly less dangerous

continued to batter them. Racing tides of cosmic dust streamed ceaselessly out from far within the cloud where they had somehow been created!

**T**HEY lurched, plunged, spun, yet always Captain Future kept the *Comet* heading deeper into the cloud,



his eyes glancing each few moments at the quivering needle of the cosmic ray compass. Space had become a roaring obscurity of dust and force, and time had become a meaningless thing as they struggled deeper and deeper into dark enigma.

"Even if the Birthplace *is* somewhere in here, how can we approach it or study it under conditions like these?" muttered Grag.

"There must be some way," Curt retorted. "Someone once approached and studied it, if that legend of Ber Del is true."

The old Vegan shook his head.

"Someone tried to approach it," he corrected, "but was stopped by the Watchers. That is the legend."

The currents of outstreaming dust were becoming less violent as they penetrated deeper into the cloud. Encouraged, Captain Future drove the *Comet* steadily onward through the swirling dust.

The dust grew thinner and thinner until finally they emerged from it into a vast, hazy space. It was a space of billions of miles, filled with a strange sparkling haze through which glowed a few scattered stars. Otho exclaimed in disappointment:

"We've got turned around somehow and have come back out of the cloud." Curt's heart jumped. With a feeling of awe, his eyes travelled around the great vault of hazy space that lay ahead.

"You're wrong!" he said. "This space lies *inside the cloud*."

They were silent in stupefied

surprise as they perceived what Captain Future's keen eyes had already grasped. The vast cosmic cloud that covered so many tens of billions of miles of space was *hollow*. Here at its center was an open area many billions of miles across, containing a half-dozen scattered stars and permeated by that shooting, sparkling haze. The glittering haze appeared to stream out from the remote central region of this interior void, toward the surrounding dust-cloud. And they seemed to feel the impact of those hazy currents as a subtle, yet tangible shock of force through their bodies.

"But where does the dust that feeds the cloud come from?" cried big Hol Jor bewilderedly.

"I think I understand a little," muttered the Brain. "Away off there in the haze at the center of this hollow space is the Birthplace of Matter. In the Birthplace, radiation is somehow transformed into free electrons and protons that are radiated outward in all directions. Those ceaseless waves of electrons cause the haze we see. The electrons and protons unite, out here, to form atoms of cosmic dust which are wafted out through the whole galaxy."

"Then why doesn't the newly-formed dust out here drift back and fill up this hollow space?" Otho demanded puzzledly.

"Pressure of the radiated electrons from the Birthplace itself would keep forcing the dust always outward in currents," Curt declared.

He was feeling a thrilling

excitement at having penetrated to this unsuspected marvel of the universe. He had come far across the perils of interstellar space to reach this goal! He peered through the telescopes at the remote central region of the hazy hollow space. The source of the shooting haze of electrons was the Birthplace of Matter itself. If he could see it — But he could see nothing. Whatever lay at the center was shrouded by the sparkling haze that was very thick at that remote central region. The Birthplace still guarded its mystery.

"I feel an awful itching," plump Taunus Tar was complaining. The pink star rover looked puzzled, was scratching himself in his suit.

Curt Newton also became aware of a growing irritation of his skin that was making his space-suit very uncomfortable. He realized the dangerous nature of the phenomenon at once.

"The electron-waves radiating out through this void are penetrating our ship," he declared sharply. "We'll have to reinforce the *Comet's* hull ray-proofing or these shooting electrons will tear us to pieces before we get near the Birthplace."

His gaze swung over the void ahead.

"We'd better land at one of these stars and rayproof the hull at once. A coating of copper over the hull would proof it against those electron-waves."

**E**AGER as were the others to go on, they saw the force of Curt's reasoning and acceded. They tore their fascinated gaze away and looked

about at the few stars scattered inside the hollow cloud. Nearest them in the sparkling haze shone one small green sun which proved to possess a planet. Farther away were several dimmer stars, one of them a small red sun deep within the central haze.

"The planet of this green sun has an atmosphere that we could all breathe, and its spectra shows plenty of copper," reported Otho from the spectroscope.

"Then we'll make a landing there," Curt Newton decided.

He steered the *Comet* through the haze toward the green star, whose planet was two-thirds the size of Earth. Rushing down through the world's atmosphere, they saw its sunlight side clearly beneath them. A parklike landscape of rolling bright green plains was studded by tall, graceful trees. Ahead loomed towering cliffs of solid copper, that flashed brightly in the strange green sunshine. Curt landed the *Comet* at the foot of the copper cliffs. They were glad to discard the space-suits and step out into the deliciously warm air.

"The atmosphere here is proof against the electron-barrage," Curt commented. "Now to proof the hull. Plenty of copper in these cliffs."

With the aid of an atomic blast, the Futuremen rapidly melted sufficient copper from the solid cliffs to coat the whole hull. They were starting the work when Hol Jor pointed into the sky, exclaiming aloud. A strange conical copper ship had appeared low in the western sky. It curved overhead, then hummed

away out of sight again.

"So there's intelligent life on this world," Curt muttered. "It may not be as peaceful as it looks. Let's hurry up this job."

They redoubled their efforts. Within an hour they had almost finished spraying the molten copper on the hull. Then Otho suddenly straightened as his keen ears detected a louder humming.

"Chief, look at that!" exclaimed the android.

A dozen conical copper ships had suddenly appeared from the west, were diving down over the copper cliffs straight toward the *Comet*.

## Chapter VIII

### World of the Green Sun

**T**HE FUTUREMEN and their star rover allies had no time to formulate a plan of action with which to meet this unforeseen situation. Before they could even retreat inside their ship, the dozen copper craft had landed in a circle around the *Comet*.

From the ships, slim black tubes that appeared to be some kind of formidable weapons swung to cover the ship of the Futuremen. And at the same moment, men poured out of the strange vessels and approached Curt Newton and his band. "Don't start anything — Otho, take your hand off your proton-pistol," Captain Future ordered sharply. "We're in a bad spot."

Inwardly, Curt felt chagrined at having thus been taken by surprise. They should have known that the first

ship would report their presence, that others would come. But there was no time now for self-reproaches. He braced himself to meet these inhabitants of the green star's world, hoping that they might prove friendly.

"They're *green!*" Grag was muttering amazedly. "Melt me down if I ever saw men like these before."

"It's a natural result of the green sunlight — this pigmentation," rasped the

Brain.

Curt was keenly surveying the advancing men. His hand was ready to flash to his own belted proton-pistol, but he hoped it would not come to that, as he and his comrades were badly outnumbered.

The advancing men were tall and vigorous — their pale green skins looked quite natural in the streaming green sunshine. They were all dark-haired, except for one who seemed their leader, whose hair was gray with age.

They wore short, kilted garments of black silken fabric, and black leather sandals. Over the upper part of their garments, each man wore a silvery breastplate that Curt guessed to be a ray-shield of some kind. These alien warriors carried black metal tubes mounted on gunlike stocks, which they kept trained on the Futuremen.

"Energy-projectors of some kind," Curt Newton said under his breath to his comrades. "They look like dangerous weapons."

The gray-haired man stopped a few paces away and eyed Curt with

open curiosity.

The pale green face of this oldster bore the stamp of cunning intelligence, and there were shrewd, sly lines around his hooded black eyes. Captain Future distrusted him at once.

"Who are you, strangers, and why do you come 'to Kor?'" the green oldster demanded.

Curt felt a shock of amazement. He understood the language of the other.

It was similar in most words and phrasings to the tongue of Antares which he had recently learned from Hol Jor.

"Gods of Antares, he speaks *my* language!" ejaculated Hol Jor dumfoundedly. "I wasn't surprised to find that Ber Del and Ki Illok and the rest spoke it, for there's long been commerce between the stars in our part of the galaxy. But for these men inside the cloud to speak it —"

"They must have come from outside the cloud originally, to colonize this star's world," Curt muttered. "That doesn't matter now." Captain Future spoke out clearly to the green leader.

"We have come from outside the great dust-cloud to this world of Kor. Damage to our ship forced us to land here, but we come as friends."

**T**HE sly-eyed old leader appeared to consider this, his shrewd gaze running over Curt Newton's tall figure, the floating Brain and alert white android, the towering robot and the five star rovers.

One of the green Korian captains, eyeing Curt suspiciously,

spoke to the gray-haired commander. "They may be lying, Uzhur," he suggested. "They may be spies from Thruun." The hooded eyes of Uzhur, the old Korian commander, flashed. But his manner

was as smooth as his voice as he asked Curt a question. "Do you come here from Thruun?"

Captain Future expressed an honest puzzlement. "We don't know who or what Thruun is."

"It is the world of that small red star that lies deep within the central haze," Ushur informed him. "The men of Thruun are white-skinned like yourself. Are you sure you are not one of them?"

Curt sensed peril behind the question. "We never heard of Thruun until now," he asserted emphatically. "This world of Kor is the first place we have landed since entering the cosmic cloud."

"Why did you enter the cloud at all?" Uzhur wanted to know.

*Again, Captain Future* divined danger. He parried the question. "We are star rovers and explorers, from far-separated suns, who wish to know more of the secrets of the universe."

"Ah, yes," smiled Uzhur, his face a mask of cunning. "Well, strangers, you have come to a place where there are many secrets, and one that is the greatest of all the secrets of the cosmos. But we shall talk of all these things later."

His voice took on a note of polite urgency. "Now you must give me the honor of conducting you to visit our lord and master, Larstan,

King of Kor. Indeed, it will be such an honor to all us Korians that I cannot permit you to refuse.”

Curt Newton divined the threat behind these smooth words. During the colloquy, fully fifty of the green warriors had emerged from the conical ships to form a circle around the Futuremen. The Korians all carried the gun-like tubes, and held them ready for action.

Captain Future turned and whispered to his companions.

“I think we’d better go with them. We’re badly outnumbered. It’s evident that these Korians and the people of Thruun are hostile. These green men are doubtful about our own status. We may be able to turn the situation to our advantage by learning something about the Birthplace of Matter and how to approach it.”

“I don’t like being pushed around like this,” complained Otho. “Let them start a fight if they want one. Those tubes of theirs don’t look like much to me.”

As though divining the nature of their whispered conference, the sly old Korian commander, Uzhur, broke in upon them with a remark.

“You will be interested in many things in Kor,” he said carelessly to Curt. “Our buildings, our ships, our weapons. They are quite powerful, as you can see.”

**W**ITH the words, Uzhur made a gesture to one of his followers. The Korian at once discharged his tubular weapon toward the copper cliffs. A bolt of white fire sprang from

the tube and struck the distant cliff. “Say, I don’t want to tangle with fifty of those things,” muttered Grag.

Curt smiled at the old Korian. “Your weapons are very interesting. We shall be pleased to accept your invitation and visit your city and ruler. If your ships will lead the way, we will follow in our craft.”

Uzhur smiled slyly. “We would not put you to so much trouble. You can leave your craft here under safe guard, and come with us. I insist upon it.”

Captain Future disliked this proposal strongly, but saw no way out of it.

“That is kind of you,” he told Uzhur. “We will leave our ship here as you suggest. I will only close its door to prevent rain or wind from entering.”

As Curt stepped toward the door of the *Comet* he was aware that the Korians raised their fire-rods toward him. He knew that any attempt on his part to enter the ship would be the signal for them to fire at him. But he made no move to enter. Instead, Captain Future casually closed the air-lock door. As he finished doing so, his hand rested for a moment on a group of small numbered studs that were the key to the ingenious lock of the door. He turned back toward Uzhur.

“I have locked our ship,” he said pleasantly. “The lock is one that releases a blast of destroying force at anyone who attempts to open it. Please tell that to the guards you leave here — I would be desolated if any of them came to harm.”

Admiration showed in Uzhur's cunning face. "You are indeed a clever man, stranger — to have devised such a lock. Our ruler will be deeply interested in meeting one so intelligent."

They trooped to one of the conical ships, entering by an air-lock door. The design of the craft made it evident to Curt Newton that these conical copper vessels were space-ships. Their motive power appeared to be a modified form of electron-jets.

"Almost the same design as our ships at Antares," muttered big Hol Jor to Curt.

"These people came originally from outside the cloud, no doubt of that. Their language and ships are too similar."

The star-rovers followed Uzhur into a cabin near the prow of the conical vessel. Uzhur spoke an order. The propulsion-mechanisms somewhere in the stern broke into humming activity, and through the small windows of the cabin they saw that they were rising. Two of the Korian ships had remained with their crews to guard the *Comet*. The other ten, with Uzhur's ship leading their formation, flew rapidly westward in a steep climb.

They shot through the green sunshine over the towering copper cliffs. The cliffs were obviously a great outcrop of solid copper which had been forced up by a seismic convulsion. Many miles to the right rose a similar and parallel copper range. Between the two ranges lay a long, wide valley.

**G**REEN and blossoming was that valley, with rich pastures sloping down to flat expanses of cultivated land. Orchards of yellow fruit trees and fields of bright green grain were fed by irrigation ditches with water from a clear river that ran down the center of the valley. As they flew southward over the valley, Captain Future glimpsed men or women working in the tilled fields.

"This valley is cultivated by the worker class to provide food for the city of Kor," Uzhur informed him. "Kor, which is the name of our capital as well as our world, is the largest of our cities. From it, our august master rules all this world."

"You must visit other stars inside the cloud, do you not?" Captain Future asked. "These ships seem designed for space flights."

Uzhur's eyes narrowed. "It is true that we visit the worlds of the other stars here, at times," he answered guardedly.

"Are you at war with that world Thruun which was mentioned by one of your friends?" Curt asked him.

Uzhur smiled. "We are not exactly at war with Thruun. King Larstan will tell you about that."

"What is the origin of the strange electronic haze inside the cloud, and of the cloud itself?" Curt asked with assumed innocence.

"The king will speak with you of that also," evaded old Uzhur. "I am not privileged to talk of these things."

"Doesn't want to tell anything about the Birthplace of Matter," Curt

thought keenly. "Yet he must know a lot about it. There's something queer about it."

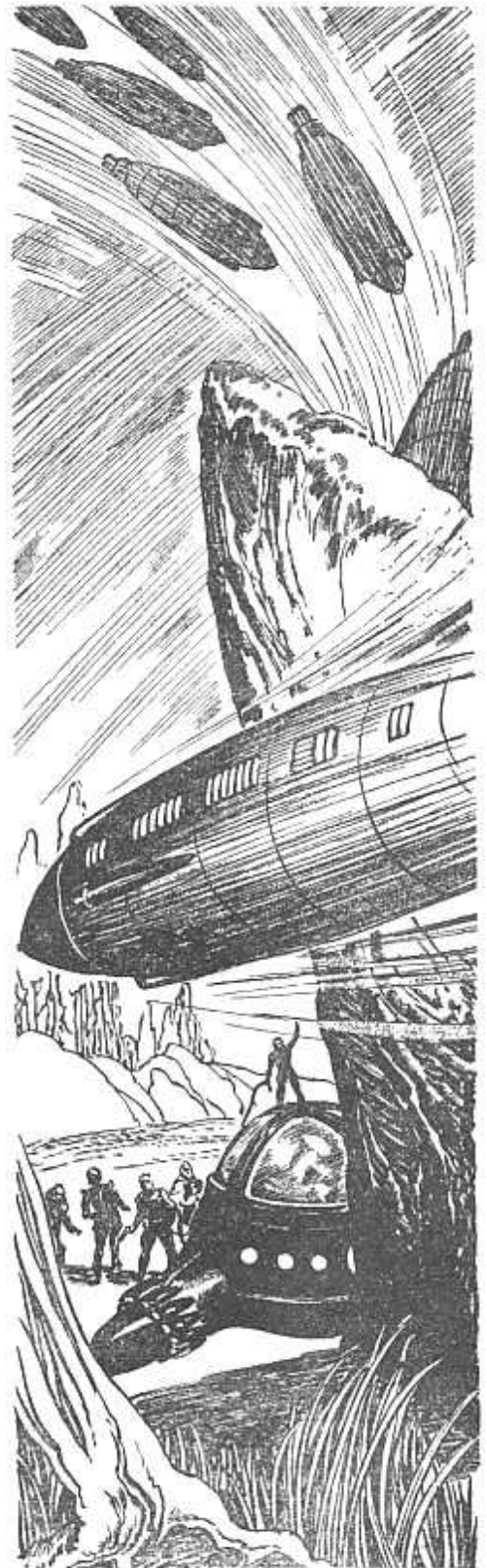
After some minutes of rapid flight down the valley, old Uzhur pointed ahead. "We approach the city of Kor," he said.

The land ended ahead, and beyond it stretched a heaving sea whose waves flashed vivid green in the brilliant rays of the sinking emerald sun. The valley between the copper ranges ran right down to the sea, and at its end along the shore was built the city of Kor.

"It is beautiful," murmured big Hol Jor, the Antarian. "Not even at my own star is there a city more lovely."

Magically beautiful indeed seemed Kor, glittering in the green sunset. It was a city of red metal, built of solid copper brought from the nearby ranges.

The city was semi-circular in plan. The baseline of the semi-circle was a massive sea wall which held back the tossing ocean. Just inside that wall rose an oblong copper palace, a big three-storied pile that dominated the whole city. The south facade of the palace fronted directly on the sea, and its other sides were belted with deep green gardens. From the oblong palace, a dozen wide streets radiated like the spokes of half a wheel through the smaller copper structures of the town. The lavish use of red metal gave the whole city a glittering, otherworldly glamor. The impression was heightened by the gleaming conical ships that cruised



A dozen conical copper ships were headed straight for the Comet. (Chap. VI)

above Kor in the green sunset.

Uzhur's smooth voice broke into the fascinated inspection of the place by Curt

Newton and his comrades.

"The large building is the palace of King Larstan. We go directly there."

Curt nodded carelessly, concealing his tense interest. "We shall be glad to meet your ruler."

They passed over landing fields on which were parked an amazing number of the conical ships — hundreds, at least. Then they slanted down over the low, domed copper roofs of Kor toward the massive oblong red metal palace. Uzhur's ship landed in a small court in the palace gardens, coming to rest among a dozen other ships. As the old Korian led Curt Newton and his comrades toward an entrance of the palace, the guard of Korian warriors followed closely. Other soldiers of Kor, similarly garbed in black kilts and silver breastplates, and armed with the same type of fire-rods, were drawn up outside the entrance. They saluted sharply to the old nobleman as he conducted Captain Future's party inside.

**T**HE star-rovers looked about them wonderingly as they passed along wide, high halls whose copper-paneled walls bore beautiful silver bas-reliefs of battle and sea-scenes. They were stared at in turn by the Korian men and women they passed. The women wore long silken gowns of brilliant hues.

"Nice looking wenches, even with those pale green skins," remarked fat

Taunus

Tar appreciatively. "Now if I had a chance —"

"Forget it — we've worries enough without you meddling with the women here," growled big Hol Jor.

Uzhur signaled the guards to halt, and turned to Captain Future. "If you will wait here while I inform King Larstan of your visit —"

The old noble hastened away. The stiff Korian guards kept an alert watch on

Curt Newton and his comrades. In a few moments, Uzhur returned.

"The king will give you audience before the feast tonight," he told Curt. "He bids me offer you the hospitality of Kor until then."

Curt did not like the delay, but he assumed an air of indifference.

"It is as well — we need rest," he answered.

Uzhur and the guards took them up a magnificent silver staircase to the topmost level of the palace. There they were conducted to a suite of large chambers in the northeast corner of the palace.

"You will be comfortable here, I hope," the old noble said politely. "I will return later to conduct you to the king. I am leaving my guards in the corridor here, to act as your escort of honor wherever you may care to go."

Captain Future thoroughly understood the veiled intimation that he and his comrades were prisoners. But he pretended not to.

"Your thoughtfulness overwhelms us," he told Uzhur ironically.

With a smile, the old Korian



noble left them. When the door was closed, Curt Newton turned to face his comrades.

They had been inspecting the chambers. They too were copper-paneled and decorated by fine silver bas-reliefs. The chairs, couches and tables were of fine, dark wood. The windows gave views of the palace gardens and copper roofs of Kor, and also of the sea southward. But outside the windows was a strong, close latticework of silvery metal.

"This cursed place is a trap," swore Otho. "And we walked right into it like Martian *pimul* birds into a snare."

"You're always complaining," Grag reproved him. "Anyway, if these green men try any tricks on us, we'll simply blast them down."

"I don't like it, Captain Future," confessed big Hol Jor. The Antarian star captain shook his head, his bluff red face uneasy.

"It was either come with them or fight at odds of ten to one," Curt reminded them. His gray eyes gleamed. "And I wanted to come here! I want to find out what these Korians know about the Birthplace. They surely know something about it. They may even have learned from it the secret of creating matter, the secret we're all after."

"They've brought us here, I'm sure, because they want to learn something from *us*. That's why they've showed this pretended friendliness. Very well, what we must do is learn everything we can from them without telling them anything until we know just how things stand."

"Sounds like a precarious situation, to me," Otho muttered. "These green men are no fools."

"I'm aware of that," Curt nodded. "We'll have to be careful. Let me do the talking when we're taken to their king."

The rasping voice of the Brain interrupted. "Lad, I think that I could get out of here if I wished. Come here and look at this."

Curt hurried across the chamber. The Brain indicated a small square aperture high in the copper wall — a ventilation opening from which came a constant flow of cool, scented air.

"My 'body' is small enough to get through that ventilation tube." Simon declared. "Do you want me to try it?"

"Not now, Simon," said Curt Newton rapidly. "You remain here in the chambers when the rest of us go down tonight. I'll make excuse for you. Then try it, and if you can do it, find a way out and return. It might be a card up our sleeve in this game."

**T**HE brilliant green sun was sinking behind the copper range. As its last rays died away, night came quickly on the palace and city of Kor. There was no moonlight, but the darkness was relieved by the shooting radiance of the electronic haze that filled the heavens.

Light came on softly in their chambers from hidden sources. They saw many other lights blossoming in the streets of the city, and heard the dim murmur of the crowds of green people in those streets. Conical ships cruised like dark fish over the city,

seemingly in watch. The door opened without warning, and old Uzhur stood on its threshold. The noble now wore brilliant jeweled belts over his dress.

“King Larstan will now grant you audience before the feast begins, strangers,” he told Curt.

Captain Future gestured toward the Brain. “My friend here does not eat, and therefore does not enjoy feasts. He wishes to remain.”

“Is he really a living being?” asked Uzhur, staring curiously at the square, transparent case of the Brain. “He looks more like an instrument or machine. But he may remain here if he wishes.”

They went back down the great silver stair with the old Korian noble, entered a hall of truly kingly dimensions. Its copper walls towered the full three levels of the palace, and it was crowded with ranks of the green Korian men and women, brilliantly garbed and jeweled. They stared with intense interest at Curt’s company.

Down the hall toward the throne-dais at its farther end strode the eight star-rovers. Upon one side of Captain Future marched Otho, insolently staring around the crowd. On his other side stalked the mighty metal form of Grag. Close behind them came the swaggering star captains — hulking Hol Jor and his Antarian companion, fat, waddling Taunus Tar, tight-faced, brown Ki Illok, and old Ber Del, the blue Vegan. Curt Newton halted before the throne-dais and looked up calmly at the man and woman who sat in silver

chairs facing him.

“The star-strangers from outside the cloud, highness!” Uzhur was announcing. “Strangers, King Larstan and Queen Liane!”

Curt felt a shock of amazement as he looked at the king. He had expected some aggressive, bullying, half-barbarian ruler. But Larstan was a handsome young man, his dark hair brushed sleekly back from his high forehead. His pale green face wore an almost sleepy expression, his lids drooping over dark eyes that studied Curt Newton and his comrades with apparent disinterest.

“Intelligent — *too* intelligent,” Captain Future thought sharply. “It won’t be easy to fool this man!”

He bowed politely to Larstan and his queen. The woman was hardly more than a girl, her perfect, pale-green face extraordinarily beautiful in its frame of dark hair, her haughty eyes showing a flicker of interest as they rested on Curt Newton’s tall form and tanned face. Larstan’s handsome face was smooth and impassive as he considered Curt’s group. His voice was velvety.

“Uzhur says that you have come here in search of secrets of the universe, strangers. Just what secret is it that you seek?”

“He thinks we’re hunting the Birthplace!” Curt thought quickly. “But he can’t be sure —”

Aloud, Captain Future spoke blandly. “We had heard vague rumors of marvelous things here inside the cloud and wished to see if they were true. So we came, from different

outside stars, into this place.”

“Was one of the tales you heard a tale of the Birthplace of Matter?” Larstan suddenly asked him.

“Yes, that was one of the tales. Can you tell me, is there any truth to it?” Larstan laughed softly. “I like you, stranger — you are not stupid. Yes, the Birthplace of Matter exists here within the cloud.”

“Have you Korians been able to learn the secret of matter-creation from it?” Captain Future asked. He hung tensely upon the answer.

Before Larstan could answer, Ber Del, the old Vegan, made a fatal interruption. He whispered loudly to Curt.

“Ask about the Watchers.”

Larstan and Uzhur and all the other nearby Korians heard. And the effect upon them of the old Vegan’s words was astounding. They were stricken into a dead silence, an unnatural hush falling on the hall. Then Larstan jumped to his feet, his dark eyes blazing in tigerish suspicion at Curt. “What do you know about the Watchers?”

## Chapter IX

### In the Palace Dungeons

**T**HE BRAIN waited for some time after Captain Future and the others had left, before moving from the table on which he rested. Then he rose smoothly into the air.

“Now to see if there’s a way out of this trap we’re in,” Simon muttered to himself.

The Brain detested action. His

icy mentality, almost completely divorced from ordinary emotions by his lack of a human body, took its chief delight in scientific speculation and experiment. He would often remain motionless, brooding for hours on end, wrapped in some intricate problem.

But one emotion still beat strongly in the mind of Simon Wright. That was his utter devotion to Captain Future. Since the long-dead day upon the Moon when he and Grag and Otho had undertaken the guardianship of the helpless infant who then was Curtis Newton, the devotion of the Brain to his brilliant pupil had never wavered. It was anxiety for Curt’s safety that now spurred Simon into action. He glided softly across the room, moving with a smooth effortlessness upon his traction beams. Those magnetic beams, which Simon could jet from apertures in his square case in any direction, not only gave him great powers of free movement, but could also be used as arms and hands. He made a weird sight as he softly approached the door, opened it by means of one of his beams and peered down the corridor outside with his lens-like eyes.

“As I expected,” he murmured to himself, closing the door. “These Korians are taking no chances.”

A dozen Korian guards were still on duty in the corridor outside. Exit by that way was impossible. So Simon turned toward the windows.

He examined the latticework of silvery metal outside the windows. Its interstices were much too small to

permit him to pass through. Investigation showed him that the metal bars of the lattices were extremely heavy, composed of an unknown alloy of great hardness and strength which would resist almost any force.

"This suite," the Brain decided, "is a disguised prison, as we thought. But there still remain the ventilation tubes."

He directed his effortless movement toward the square opening high in the copper wall of this corner chamber. Hovering outside it, he peered and listened intently for a few minutes. The aperture was obviously the mouth of a ventilating tube. A constant current of cool, fragrant air poured out of it. The aperture was not barred, for it was too small for a man to enter. But the Brain could enter it! He found by cautious test that his square case would pass through the opening into the squared tube behind it, with a few inches of room to spare.

"There must be a network of such tubes inside the walls of this palace," he thought. "And if I can find a way outside —"

Without hesitation, he glided into the darkness of the tube. It dropped vertically, inside the wall. The Brain sank cautiously down its shaft upon his traction beams, hearing the rush of air pumped upward all around him. The tube joined a larger, horizontal duct. Simon entered this, proceeding in a westerly direction somewhere within a wall that he estimated was on the ground floor of the great palace. Then he heard an

ever louder whistle of air, and detected a pumping sound from ahead.

"Just what I was afraid of," he thought annoyedly. "Perhaps I can get past, though."

He had come to two of the power-driven fans which pumped the air upward through the ducts. The whirring fans completely blocked the tube, being set side by side in the large duct.

**S**IMON cautiously glided along the duct until he was a few feet from the left fan. He peered toward it. The darkness was absolute, yet the Brain could see a little even in utter darkness, for his lens-eyes embodied an ingenious infra-red sensitivity. The whirring fan was powered by a small atomic motor sunk in the side of the duct. Simon used two of his tractor beams to take the cover off this motor. A turn of a screw was sufficient to close the injector valve of its tiny cyclotron unit. The motor gradually died and the left fan stopped its whirling.

The Brain approached and began to disassemble the left fan from its mounting. He made a strange picture, hovering in the dark duct within the palace wall, working deftly with his tractor beams. He finally got the whole left fan and housing out, leaving one half of the big duct open.

"Better leave the right fan working," he muttered to himself as he glided forward in the duct. "They'd soon notice if the pumping of air through these tubes stopped

completely.”

Twenty feet farther along the duct, the Brain emerged suddenly into the open night. At once, he darted back into the concealment of the duct.

From that point, he studied his situation. The mouth of this duct was in the northern facade of the palace, near ground level. The tube was designed to suck in fresh air at this point, by the help of the fans. Before the Brain lay the obscurity of the palace gardens. Tall, graceful trees and beautiful flowering shrubs were silhouetted against the hazy, glowing sky.

From, the palace above him came a distant sound of laughter, song, clinking glasses.

“It’s a way out, but only for me,” Simon thought. “I don’t see how this is going to help much.”

He decided to retrace his way to their chambers and report his findings to the others when they returned. The tubes along which he returned were now less noisy, due to his stopping of the fan. As he glided over the mouth of one of the branch tubes leading downward, the Brain heard an unexpected sound, A low sobbing came from one of the downward tubes, so faint as to be almost inaudible even to his keen microphone-ears. The Brain, intrigued, decided to investigate.

He dropped softly down that particular tube, found that this ventilation duct opened into the ceiling of a small, windowless cell deep in the underground levels of the palace. Faint light came from a door

loophole. He could dimly make out the interior of the cell. In one corner, a slim girl lay sobbing. But some consciousness of watching eyes made her suddenly spring to her feet and look around. She instantly glimpsed the square case of the Brain, floating above her.

“Make no sound,” warned Simon quickly in a rasping whisper.

He had divined at once, from the fact that this was a dungeon, that the girl was a prisoner. She stood now, looking up at him, wide eyes peering incredulously.

“What — who — are you?” she whispered, awed by the unhuman appearance of the floating Brain, whose lens-eyes were fixed on her.

Simon Wright was thinking swiftly as he took in her appearance. This girl was white, not green-skinned like the natives of Kor.

**H**ER bright yellow hair, cut short at her shoulders, glimmered through the semi- darkness. He could hardly more than glimpse her pale, strained face and dilated eyes. Her garment was a knee-length white kirtle and tunic that left her legs and arms and shoulders bare.

“You’re some new device of Larstan’s to torture me,” she said bitterly after a moment, in the language of Kor.

“You are Larstan’s prisoner?” the Brain asked her.

She paid him no attention. “So the Korians try now to torment me with speaking machines,” she said. “Do they think such a childish device will shatter my resistance?”

"Listen to me, girl," rasped the Brain. "I am no machine. My human brain lives and speaks to you from within this case. Nor am I a friend or tool of the king of Kor. I and my comrades are ourselves detained by the Korians, upon whose world we

"We never heard of either Kor or Thruun before today," Simon assured her, "We come from outside the great cloud, from far across the universe."

Wonder struggled with doubt in the girl's tone when she finally spoke.



Curt Newton covered the others as they scrambled into the COMET. (Chapter VII)

landed for the first time today."

The girl seemed unconvinced. "If you are strangers to Kor, where did you come from?" she demanded unbelievably. "I know that you are not from Thruun."

"It cannot be! No ship could win through the awful currents of the cloud! Yet it is true that no being like yourself has ever been known here."

"It is true, girl." The Brain's

chill, emotionless voice carried conviction. "We landed upon this world to repair our ship. The Korians surprised us, led by a noble named Uzhur,"

"That plotting old fox!" the girl spat at the name.

"We accompanied them to this city, Kor," the Brain continued, "but doubt their intentions. I was seeking a way out of the palace, through the ventilation ducts, when I heard your sobbing."

There was a long silence. Then the girl spoke abruptly, "I believe you, stranger. No such living Brain as yourself has ever been heard of inside the cloud, so you must be telling the truth.

"I am Thyria, princess of Thruun — I've been Larstan's prisoner here." "Thruun?" repeated the Brain sharply. "That is the world of the red sun we glimpsed far within the central haze, is it not?"

Thyria nodded her yellow head quickly. "That is my world. We of Thruun are deadly enemies of Larstan and his Korian nobles."

"How did they come to capture you?" Simon asked.

"A party of us Thruunians came to this world of Kor in a secret expedition to get copper. We need it badly, for only copper will proof a spaceship against the electron-barrage of the haze. That's why the Korians use copper outer walls on their spaceships. But we of Thruun have little copper, and our need for it is great now that we are building more ships. Each ship must be copper-coated.

"So I led an expedition to this world to get copper from the metal mountains of Kor. But Korian scouts saw us, and before we could escape they captured us. They killed the others, but kept me to torture from me all that they could learn of the secrets of Thruun."

Thyria's quivering voice became urgent. "You too are in dreadful danger. The fact that you strangers came from outside the clouds puts you in *the* shadow of doom while you're in Kor.

## Chapter X Feast in Kor

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** was momentarily taken aback by the profound effect upon Larstan and the other Korians of old Ber Del's question about the Watchers. All the assumed boredom and languidness left the handsome Korian king. His smooth face was a mask of suspicion as his dark eyes blazed down at Curt Newton's group. "What do you know about the?Watchers?" he repeated in a voice that was almost a hiss.

Curt saw that the whole court was hanging in tense silence upon the answer. Uzhur's eyes had narrowed, and the old noble had made a surreptitious signal to the Korian guards around the throne.

Curt answered bluntly. "We know nothing at ail about the Watchers, except the name."

"Where did you learn that name, then?" Larstan asked suspiciously.

Captain Future shrugged. "As I

told you, there were vague rumors in the outside universe of marvelous things inside the cloud. One rumor was the tale of the Birthplace of Matter. Another vague legend was of mysterious beings called the Watchers. That is all we know,”

For a long minute, Larstan’s eyes bored into Curt’s face. Captain Future faced that fiery gaze unflinchingly. Gradually, Larstan’s handsome green features smoothed into their accustomed lines. He relaxed, laughed softly.

“It seems that I have startled you, strangers. But you need not be afraid.”

“We’re not in the least afraid,” Captain Future retorted coolly, “but we *are* interested. Who or what are these Watchers?”

Larstan waved his hand carelessly. “It is only an old legend or tradition without basis. I would not bore you with such a fantastic and foolish tale.”

The tense silence of the nobles, ladies and soldiers of the court relaxed also. There was a low buzz of whispering voices across the great hall. It seemed to Captain Future that that brief interval of tension had had in it a queer, shadowy element of *fear*.

Otho had detected it also. “Looks like the way to get unpopular quick here is to talk about the Watchers,” he muttered under his breath. “For space’s sake, ask no more questions, Ber Del.”

The old Vegan star-captain nodded nervously. “I did not think. Next time I will keep silent.”

The verbal fencing between Captain Future and Larstan was going on. The Korian king leaned forward toward the red-haired Planeteer.

“Uzhur tells me that your spaceship is of very greatly different design than our own,” he said. “Indeed, it must be of far greater power and speed than ours, to be able to penetrate the cloud.”

Curt Newton sensed *a* hidden meaning behind the question. Something in Larstan’s bearing disturbed him. Nevertheless, he could see no point in trying to deny the obvious.

“Our ship uses a different method of propulsion than yours,” he conceded. “Even so, it was only by good luck that we were able to get through the currents of the cloud.”

In Larstan’s eyes appeared a momentary gleam of triumph. It was gone in a moment, but it increased Curt’s uneasiness. What was Larstan driving at with this talk about the *Comet*? Captain Future returned to the attack.

“You said that the Birthplace of Matter does exist here within the cloud. What is it like?”

**H**E ASKED the question as though only in curiosity, but he waited tensely for Larstan’s answer. “I cannot tell you much about the Birthplace, strangers,” said Larstan slowly. “For we Korians have never been able to reach it. We have always been prevented by certain — obstacles.”

“Then you don’t know the secret of matter-creation?” Curt



pressed politely.

“No, we do not have that secret — *yet!*” answered the Korian king, his voice rising sharply on the last word. He brooded, chin in hand, his eyes fixed on Captain Future’s face. When he spoke, his voice was soft and deliberate. “Strangers, I think you have not been entirely frank with me. I think that you fought your way through the cloud to this place, not from idle curiosity about the unknown, but for the purpose of finding the Birthplace of Matter and possessing its secret of creation.”

“He’s got our number,” murmured Grag uneasily. “Stand by for trouble.”

Curt Newton made as though to answer, but Larstan went quickly on before he could speak.

“You need not deny it, stranger!” the Korian ruler told Curt. “I do not blame you men of the outside universe for seeking to attain such a colossal secret. I, too, have wanted that secret for long. With it, I could do great things!” Larstan leaned forward almost eagerly. “We both want the same thing — you strangers from outside stars, and we Korians. We both seek to attain the Birthplace of Matter. The obstacles to that attainment are great and might well baffle either of us. But *together* we could win the secret of creation from it!”

Captain Future had guessed what was coming. Yet he was none the less surprised by the proposal. “You’re suggesting that we become partners in an attempt to reach the Birthplace?” he said slowly.

“I do suggest it,” Larstan declared promptly. “We could help each other very greatly. For we of Kor know much about the perils surrounding the Birthplace which you cannot know.”

“I concede that,” Curt said keenly. “But in what way would we be able to help you? You have hundreds of ships, plenty of men and resources. Why should you need us?”

“I do not really *need* you,” Larstan replied a trifle haughtily. “But I admire the bold spirit that has brought you on this odyssey into the unknown. And also, your alien Science might complement our own in many ways for this venture.”

“In just what ways could we help you?” Curt asked directly.

“The obstacles that have always prevented us Korians from winning the secret of matter mastery are *human* obstacles. It is the people of the world Thruun who stand in our way. Those Thruunians have always prevented us from reaching the Birthplace. The Thruunians believe,” the green king continued contemptuously, “that it is their duty to guard the Birthplace. They have superstitious legends about superhuman beings who watch over the Birthplace, who charged them with the sacred duty of guarding it.”

“I see,” Captain Future said slowly. “Those legendary superhuman beings are the Watchers, then?”

“Yes, that is the legend of the Watchers. It is a silly superstition. Oh, there may once have been alien beings who watched over the Birthplace, but if so, they are gone

long ago. But the Thruunians and their senile King Kwolok heed the old legend and will not allow us Korians to reach the Birthplace.”

**CURT NEWTON** began to understand the situation a little better. “Do the Thruunians themselves possess the secret of matter creation?” he asked.

“We have never been certain as to whether they do or do not possess the secret. That doubt has always held us back from a direct attack on their world, since if they actually possessed the secret, it would give them an irresistible weapon against us. But now —” Larstan’s dark eyes flashed — “now at last we feel sure that the Thruunians do *not* possess the secret. Hypnotic questioning of a certain Thruunian we took prisoner in a recent raid has convinced us of this. So now we are ready to attack Thruun, conquer that world and be free to attain the secret of the Birthplace.”

Curt Newton’s mind was racing from the impact of this revelation but he kept his face indifferent. “Where do we come in?”

“The Thruunians will be no easy conquest,” Larstan returned. “Their ships and fire-rods are as good as ours, and their number two thirds as great. But if we could make our ships as fast and powerful as *your* ship must be to have penetrated the cloud, we could conquer them easily. Doubtless, also, you could devise more powerful weapons for us.”

“And if we agree to help you in this way, what would we get out of

it?” Curt asked, masking his true emotions with assumed interest.

“We would share the secret of matter mastery with you, once we had won it from the Birthplace,” promptly rejoined the Korian king. “That is what you star-rovers came here for, and this is the only way in which you can secure it.”

Captain Future appeared to consider earnestly. “The proposal is certainly attractive,” he admitted.

“Then you agree to it?” Larstan asked quickly.

“I shall have to consult my men before I can do that,” Curt evaded. “They are my partners in this venture, not merely followers.”

Larstan frowned. “I do not like delays,” he rapped. “After all, it would be simple enough for me to seize your ship and weapons without your consent.”

Captain Future shrugged. “Certainly you could do that. But could your scientists discover the secrets of design and operation of our devices without long and possibly interminable delay?”

Again, Larstan’s green features relaxed into the smooth mask. “I was only jesting,” he smiled. “We two must not become at odds — we who can help each other so much.” He rose to his feet. “We shall talk more of this later, when you have had time to consult your comrades and make your decision. Now it is time that we forget these things, and begin this evening’s feast.”

The Korian king laid his hand on Curt’s shoulder in friendly fashion.

But Captain Future was not deceived by the winning manner. He had glimpsed the true tigerish nature of the young king and realized to the full the precarious situation of himself and his companions. The Korian nobles in the great hall had remained at a respectful distance while Larstan had conducted his low-voiced discussion with Captain Future. Now the brilliant throng turned expectantly as their king arose.

"We begin our festivity now, my friends," announced Larstan in his clear, musical voice. "And tonight our honored guests are these strangers from the outside stars who are soon to be our allies."

A buzz of excited voices greeted the announcement, and every eye turned upon Curt Newton and his strangely assorted companions. During the conference, the girl-queen Liane had sat silently watching Curt with her unfathomable eyes. Now she rose, supple in her black silken gown, and moved proudly through the bowing throng with Larstan.

**T**HE Korian king motioned Curt Newton and his comrades to follow. As the star rovers did so, Uzhur and other nobles fell in behind them, followed by the whole brilliant court.

Otho whispered worriedly to Captain Future. "Chief, we're not really going to ally ourselves with these green men. I don't trust that king."

"I don't like it, either," Grag muttered troubledly. "We don't want

to get mixed up in their wars here inside the cloud — especially when it means using our weapons to attack a people who may be innocent."

"Will you two keep quiet and let me handle this?" Captain Future demanded.

They subsided, though Otho still looked worried. But Taunus Tar, the fat Fomalhautian beside him, was exclaiming in delight.

"This is going to be some feast! Look at that — and I'm perishing from hunger!"

"I'd rather be gnawing crusts back on the dark star," muttered Ki Illok. The Sagittarian star captain's brown face was frowning with distrust.

They entered a regal banquet hall with shimmering silver walls and soft lights, whose broad windows looked out upon the flowering palace gardens. A long table laden with tall flagons and gleaming metal dishes piled high with fruits and roasts extended along the hall. Larstan assigned Captain Future the place of honor beside himself and Liane. Soft-footed servants filled their white metal goblets with a thick black wine of pungent fragrance. Larstan raised his goblet toward Curt Newton.

"To our new friends from the great outside universe!"

All along the long table, the Korian courtiers drank. Curt tasted the wine. It was sweet and heady, and he drank little of it. Above all, he must keep a clear head tonight! But no such scruples oppressed Hol Jor. The big red Antarian captain downed

his wine with a gulp and wiped his lips.

“Good stuff, though a trifle over-sweet,” he approved loudly. “This isn’t a bad world.”

Otho and Taunus Tar and Ber Del joined him, though Ki Illok curtly refused the wine. But the chief attention of the Korians along the table was centered upon Grag. They had never seen a being like the great metal robot before and watched him with intense interest. Grag had seated himself with ponderous dignity. His photo-electric eyes keenly surveyed the viands, and then he pointed his mighty metal arm toward a copper platter of fowl farther down the table. “Pass me that dish, Ber Del,” the robot boomed to the old Vegan.

Wonderingly, the Vegan did so. And the whole Korian assembly craned their necks along the table to stare puzzledly at Grag.

“Does the metal man eat food?” they murmured wonderingly.

Grag took the copper platter and emptied the fowl upon it into another dish. Then, with his powerful metal hands, he calmly tore the platter itself into fragments. While all gaped, Grag reached down and opened a small door in the front of his metal torso. Behind it was the fuel-chamber of the atomic power plant which supplied the energy of his mechanical body. Grag stuffed the copper shreds into the niche, closed the tiny door, then looked around satisfiedly.

“Well, I’ve had my dinner,” he boomed loudly. “What are we sitting around here for?”

“You bucket-headed refugee from a machine shop, do you think we’re all built like you?” Otho retorted. “That’s a terrible display of company manners — eating the dishes instead of the food.”

Even Larstan looked startled. “I thought at first this metal follower of yours was only a clever machine!”

**CURT** asked the Korian question. “This world of Kor seems a rich, fruitful planet. When that is so, why do you want the secret of matter-mastery so badly? You don’t really need it here.”

“This is not the only world inside the cloud. We Korians feel that if we had the secret of the Birthplace we could use it to bring law and order and happiness to all these worlds within the cloud.”

The green king then turned the subject. But his remark had been sufficient to give Captain Future an insight into the motives which obsessed Larstan with ambition to secure the secret of the Birthplace. Curt was beginning to feel the strain. He clearly perceived how precarious “was their position here in Kor.

Larstan, he knew, was displaying all this friendliness for a shrewd reason. The Korian king coveted the scientific secrets of their ship and weapons to strengthen his space fleet for the attack on Thruun. That was, Curt knew, his only real card. So far, he had played it skillfully. But he was well aware that a man of Larstan’s powerful intelligence could not be put off long.

The green king would demand a decision. Captain Future was resolved under no circumstances to become Larstan's ally. It was utterly against Curt's code to let his scientific powers be used for war against a possibly unoffending people. But as soon as Larstan learned this, a dangerous crisis would be precipitated.

"We've got to get out of this trap as soon as possible," Curt thought. "Even if we have to fight our way out of Kor!"

He wanted very much to confer with Simon Wright and chafed inwardly at the length of the feast. But Otho and all the star captains except Ki Illok appeared to be enjoying it thoroughly. Their goblets had been constantly refilled with the heady black wine as they ate. Now fat Taunus Tar, industriously devouring a roasted fowl, was winking invitingly at a Korian girl across the table, while Otho and Hol Jor and Ber Del argued loudly about past adventures. These hardy space-rovers already felt completely at home.

"I tell you, you've never done any real space piloting unless you've tried running the short course across Scorpio to Antares," Hol Jor was exclaiming. The big red Antarian wagged his head solemnly. "Dead suns and meteor swarms and comets thick as flies all the way — a sweet mess that is to find a way through."

Old Ber Del nodded his hairless blue head in agreement. "That Scorpio passage is bad, I know. But it's nothing beside the big Sagittarian star clusters. I'd rather take my

chance on anything than to thread my course through those crazy swarms of suns. What worlds they have are usually covered with the most devilish, menacing creatures you ever saw. If you have to make a landing, it's too bad for you. Eh, Ki Illok?"

The brown Sagittarian nodded curtly. "The clusters are bad," he said in his clipped way.

**S**KUR KAL, the younger Antarian, put in a word. "I've never seen anything worse than the worlds of that double star Inthor, over by Altair. The creatures on those planets aren't even solid, they're liquid horrors that look like something out of a nightmare."

Otho regarded them all with scorn. "And you think you chaps have been through dangers? Why, all that would be just a picnic back in my part of the galaxy."

"Is space voyaging so dangerous back there?" old Ber Del asked him.

"Is it dangerous!" Otho cried. He laughed scornfully. "How would you like to have gone through the things we Futuremen have run up against? How would you like being prisoned by fish-men down at the bottom of Neptune's sea, or flying your ship toward an invisible world in an extra-dimensional plane, or racing out straight toward a runaway dark star that was threatening to smash up a half dozen planets?"

"Have you done all that?" Ber Del asked Otho, with considerable awe.

"Have I *done* it?" Otho repeated. He smiled in superior fashion. "I don't like to talk about

myself. You tell them, Grag — tell them what I did to the winged men of Saturn when they attacked me.”

“You didn’t do anything that I remember,” Grag said flatly in his loud voice. “All you did was get yourself tied up by them, and we had to come and rescue you.”

“Why, you double-crossing hunk of old iron!” exclaimed Otho enragedly as a shout of laughter went up from the others.

Curt Newton was glad when the feast finally came to an end. Larstan smiled at him in friendly fashion as they left the banquet hall.

“Uzhur will see you back to your chambers,” Larstan said. “In the morning we will begin planning the attack on Thruun.”

“In the morning,” Captain Future replied noncommittally.

Uzhur eyed him cunningly as they climbed the silver stairs. “You are wise to cast your lot with us Korians,” commended the sly-eyed old noble. “Only thus could you ever reach the Birthplace.”

Curt made no answer. He noticed the guards still were on duty in the corridor outside their suite. When they entered the softly lit rooms, Uzhur stepped in with them and looked sharply around.

“Where is your other follower — the one you call the Brain?” the old noble asked sharply.

“Captain Future saw with dismay that Simon was nowhere in the rooms. He knew the Brain must not yet have returned from his venture. And he could see that

Uzhur’s suspicions were definitely aroused.

“This smacks of conspiracy against the king!” snapped Uzhur to Curt. “If your comrade has fled —”

## **Chapter XI**

### **The Fight in the Palace**

**C**URT NEWTON saw that Uzhur was on the point of giving an alarm. It would ruin everything. Curt resolved to overpower the noble and fight it out with the guards, here and now. But this resolution was averted. At that moment a chill, rasping voice spoke above them. “What is wrong?” They looked up. The Brain was floating near the ceiling, hovering upon his traction beams and surveying them with cold lens-eyes.

Uzhur was all apologies at once. “I did not think of looking up there for him! I thought he had fled.”

“Why should Simon flee when we are among friends?” Curt demanded coolly.

“Of course — of course,” sweated Uzhur. “It was all a mistake on my part. I beg you will not mention it to the king.”

Bowing nervously, the old noble took his leave. The moment the door closed after him, Captain Future turned toward Simon. The Brain had come gliding down toward them.

“That was close, Simon!” breathed Curt. “You weren’t up there all the time, were you?”

“No, I heard Uzhur’s voice as I was returning here through the ventilation tube, and I hastened to slip

out of the tube when he wasn't looking."

"Just what did you learn from Larstan?"

"Plenty, and none of it good," Curt answered soberly. "There's a nest of intrigue and war in this space inside the cloud, and we're right in the middle of it."

He went on to narrate to Simon Wright what Larstan had told him about the Birthplace of Matter, the proposal of the Korian king that they use their scientific powers as his allies to attack Thruun. Simon did not seem surprised.

"I guessed that Larstan would make some such proposal, from what Thyria told me."

"Thyria? Who is she?"

"A princess of Thruun, imprisoned in one of the dungeons of the palace," answered the Brain. He told how he had discovered the girl captive.

"Then *she* must be the Thruunian captive whom Larstan mentioned," Curt guessed.

"Aye, lad," corroborated the Brain. "She told me they used hypnotic questioning upon her. Thus they learned from her that the Thruunians do *not* possess the secret of matter-mastery, and ever since he learned that, Larstan has been making preparations to attack Thruun. Once Thruun is conquered, he can reach the Birthplace and win its secret. Larstan has plans of conquest in case he secures the secret." Captain Future said soberly. "He cherishes an ambition to conquer the other worlds of stars here inside the cloud."

He told of the Korian king's

significant remark on that subject.

"*But* could he hope to conquer a dozen planets?" Otho exclaimed.

"If he had the secret of the Birthplace of Matter," Curt reminded, "he'd have a terrific weapon — power to create matter instantaneously out of sheer radiation. Think of the ships, machines, instruments of war the Korians could create with that secret!"

Otho looked thoughtful, and the other star-rovers seemed uneasy.

"We ought to do anything we can to prevent Larstan from getting that power!" Hol Jor exclaimed.

"Why don't we join forces with the Thruunians?" said Ki Illok.

Otho objected. "We don't know anything about the Thruunians. They might be utterly hostile to us."

"Not if we freed their captive princess and took her to Thruun with us," Captain

Future declared.

**T**HEY looked at him sharply, surprised by the idea. Curt spoke rapidly. "We want to do two things — we want to win the secret of the Birthplace to aid our own worlds, and we want to prevent Larstan from getting it and using it for conquest here. I think we can best achieve both of those ends by joining the Thruunians, as Ki Illok suggests. The Thruunians would surely welcome us as friends if we rescued and restored their princess to them."

"A good idea, but how are we going to do it?" Otho objected gloomily. "The girl is locked in one of the palace dungeons, we're kept

under guard here and the *Comet* is many miles away.”

Captain Future looked at the Brain. “Simon, you could get out of here through the ventilation-ducts. Do you think you could reach the *Comet* and bring it back here?”

“I believe so,” replied the Brain. “It shouldn’t be too hard for me to get it away from those guards and fly it back. But where would I land?”

“On the palace roof,” Curt told him. “We’ll be waiting for you there with this girl Thyria — if we’re successful. I suggest you start at once. You should be back in about an hour if you make it.”

“Very well,” replied the Brain. He hesitated a moment then added, “Be careful, lad.”

This evidence of emotion in the ordinarily coldly unemotional Brain brought a warm smile into Curt Newton’s tanned face. “We will, Simon.”

The Brain glided upward on his traction beams toward the square opening of the ventilator duct. In a moment, he had disappeared inside the tube.

“Simon can fly at high speed when he wants to,” Otho muttered thoughtfully. “His main danger will come when he tries to steal the *Comet* from the Korians guarding it.”

“What about ourselves?” Grag retorted. “How are we going to get past those guards out in the corridor?”

“Why, we’ll rush them and blast down those who won’t surrender!” Hol Jor exclaimed. There was a battle light in the big red Antarian’s bleak eyes as his hand caressed the butt of

his atom-pistol.

“That would be fine, except for the fact that the fight would rouse the whole palace,” Captain Future commented dryly. “We’ve got to get past those guards and down to the girl’s dungeon without an alarm.”

“I’ve got it!” Otho exclaimed, his green eyes gleaming excitedly. “How about having the guards *take* us down to the dungeon?”

“How in the name of the star devils of Betelgeuse are you going to work that?” demanded Taunus Tar, the fat Fomalhautian.

“Ha, you lads don’t know my abilities,” boasted Otho. “I’m the greatest master of disguise and make-up that ever lived. I —”  
“Quit bragging and tell us your idea,” growled big Grag.

“I get your wave, Otho!” Curt exclaimed, understanding the android’s plan. “Go ahead!”

At once, while all the star rovers except Captain Future watched him mystifiedly, Otho set to work. He drew from his belt-pouch a compact make-up kit and with it commenced to disguise himself. Otho’s statement that he was a supreme master of makeup had been no idle boast. The android had many times demonstrated his mastery of the art of disguise. Now he worked with expert rapidity.

**F**ROM his little kit he took a tube of green stain that he spread smoothly over his white face and hands. A drop of harmless dye in each of his eyes made them dark. False black hair formed a close-cropped wig on his scalp. Finally, waxite pads



inserted in his cheeks at once changed the whole appearance of his features. "Do you recognize me?" he asked in a shrill-edged voice totally unlike his own.

"Gods of Fomalhaut!" gasped Taunus Tar. "It's Uzbur, the old Korian noble."

Otho had in fact made himself into an exact replica of the sly old Korian. He now tore a dark silk hanging from the wall and ripped from it a piece that he wrapped around himself like a Korian cloak.

"You'll do," Curt approved tersely. "But keep behind the guards on the way down to the dungeons. We'll make the break down there." "I still don't understand —" muttered Hol Jor bewilderedly.

"Just follow Otho's lead and be ready to turn on them," Captain Future told them. "But not until we reach the dungeons."

Otho, walking a trifle stiffly, went out into the corridor. The Korian guards on duty there, eight men in all, sprang to attention and looked astonished.

"Lord Uzbur!" their captain exclaimed incredulously. "Why, I thought we saw you leave here an hour ago!"

"That shows how faithful is the watch you keep," Otho snapped in Uzbur's voice. "I did start to leave, but then went back to examine the strangers further." He lowered his voice. "The king wishes these strangers arrested and taken down to the dungeons. It is to be done with the greatest secrecy, which is why I

waited until now to give the order." The captain stiffened. "Yes, highness, I understand," He muttered a word to his men.

Raising their fire-rods, they went back to the door of the star rovers' chambers and burst inside.

"Raise your hands, strangers!" snapped the Korian captain to Curt and his associates.

Pretending surprise and dismay, Captain Future and his comrades complied with the order.

"Disarm them," the Korian officer ordered his men. But Otho quickly intervened.

"You can do that down in the dungeons," he snapped. "Don't delay here a moment longer. March the strangers down by the most secret way, at once."

The officer looked surprised, but did not for a moment question the authority or identity of the pretended Uzbur.

"You wish me to use the secret stair inside the wall, Highness?" he asked.

"Of course, of course!" snapped Otho, who had not dreamed of the existence of a secret stair until now. "But be quick!"

Forcing Captain Future and his comrades to keep their hands high, the Korians marched them toward a section of the corridor wall.

The Korian captain touched a hidden spring. A panel in the wall swung silently open, disclosing a narrow stair leading downward. The green guards marched their prisoners down this stair, keeping each of Captain Future's group always

between two Korians. Otho followed behind them all. A sourceless dim light illuminated the narrow stairwell. They passed down some scores of steps, and then at the bottom of the stair were confronted by a blind corridor. Again the Korian officer touched a hidden stud that opened a panel-door beside them.

**T**HE Korians and their prisoners filed out into a gloomy hallway of corroded copper roof and walls. Along it were massive locked doors, each with a tiny loophole as its only opening.

“Open the door of the Thruunian girl’s cell,” Otho ordered. “The strangers are to be confined with her, by the king’s order!”

More puzzled than ever, the captain of guards went to one of the cell doors and twirled the knob on its lock in a certain combination. The lock clicked, and the Korian swung the door open.

“Now disarm the —”

Abruptly, the Korian officer stiffened. Until now, he had been too rushed by Otho to take time to inspect the prisoners. But now, as his eyes swung over them, the man had detected something wrong.

“Why, two of the strangers are not here!” he exclaimed. “The strange bodiless one they called the Brain, and the hairless white one. There is something wrong, Lord Uzhur!”

The alarmed officer was turning toward Otho. And Otho knew discovery was imminent. He shouted to the Korians in Uzhur’s voice.

“Put down your fire-rods!” he

snapped.

The Korian soldiers, bewildered by the order, but trained to obey a noble, started to lower their silver tubular weapons.

“Now!” Captain Future cried to his comrades.

Curt drew his proton-pistol with phenomenal swiftness as he uttered the exclamation. Big Hol Jor, and the other four star rovers snatched out their own atom-pistols at the same moment.

“Drop the fire-rods if you want to live!” snapped Curt, prodding the nearest Korian with his weapon.

The green man falteringly dropped his weapon. But some of the Korians did not. And one of the latter was the Korian captain, Ragingly, he aimed his weapon at the disguised Otho.

“Tricked!” he yelled. “You’re not Uzhur —”

A flash of blazing white energy like a lightning bolt crackled from the officer’s fire-rod. It grazed past Otho and struck the breast of Taunus Tar, the fat star captain of Fomalhaut. Taunus Tar collapsed. With an oath of fury, Ki Illok fired his atom-pistol across his comrade’s falling body. The green captain tumbled dead as the atomic blast tore into his breast. Two other Korians made an attempt to use their weapons. But Captain Future and Grag, triggering with blurring speed, knocked the men from their feet with needle-like proton beams. Unnerved, the other Korian soldiers dropped their weapons. In a few minutes, they had been bound and

gagged with strips torn from their own garments. They were dumped into an empty cell, and locked in.

Curt Newton turned to find Ki Illok and Hol Jor bending over the prone form of Taunus Tar. The fat Fomalhautian's side had been terribly withered by the fire-rod blast, and his plump face was now gray.

"Here's an end of star roaming for old Taunus Tar," he sighed. "I'll never again run the Scorpio passage or coast Aquila nebula."

"Why, Taunus, you're talking wildly!" Hol Jor exclaimed. "An old star captain like you can't fade out in a place like this."

"No use," muttered Ki Illok, his brown face tight and expressionless. "He's gone."

The fat star rover from Fomalhaut had reached the end of his voyaging.

His eyes were closed in death. Curt Newton turned away to hide his own strong emotion. He came face to face with a girl who had emerged hesitantly from the cell which the Korian captain had unlocked.

**S**HE was white-skinned and pale from confinement, but very lovely. The thick, bright yellow hair that fell to her shoulders framed a youthfully beautiful face whose wide blue eyes stared incredulously at Curt Newton's tall figure and at the wild-looking crew behind him.

"You're Thyria?" Curt said swiftly. "We've come to get you out of here. I'm Captain Future, and these are my friends."

The girl's blue eyes brightened.

"You are the comrades of the strange one who called himself the Brain? You are enemies of Larstan?"

"We are from here on," Curt replied grimly. He seized her bare arm. "We've got to get up to the palace roof. Our ship will be landing there at any moment, and if we can break clear we can get to Thruun."

"To Thruun?" cried Thyria. Tears glistened in her eyes. "If only we can reach my world —"

"We'll never reach it by babbling here!" Hol Jor exclaimed. "One good man has died here already, and there'll be more if we linger."

"Come on — we'll use that secret stair to get back up through the palace to the roof," rapped Curt Newton.

He led the way toward the opening in the wall. At that moment came a faint outcry from far above in the sleeping palace, a cry of rage and hate that was echoed in a moment by other voices. A gong began to clamor in brazen notes of alarm. The uproar seemed growing by the minute.

"Something's wrong — space knows what, but the whole palace is rousing!" Captain Future cried, his face taut with alarm. "We've got to reach the roof before we're cut off!"

## Chapter XII

### Into the Mystery

**T**HE BRAIN glided unhesitatingly through the dark tubes of the ventilation system when he left Curt and the others upon his urgent mission. Simon now knew his

way and was not detained by any obstacle in the ducts. He reached the point where the main intake duct opened low in the palace wall. He poised in the mouth of the duct for a moment's inspection of the scene outside, before venturing forth. The dark gardens before him were quite silent except for the occasional tramp of a Korian sentry along the paths. The great palace which loomed behind him was a black, brooding mass, wrapped in slumberous stillness.

"I hope there's no hitch in the lad's scheme," the Brain thought worriedly. "If Larstan should discover what's going on —"

He could well imagine the rage and hate of the tigerish Korian king should he discover Captain Future's party was attempting departure.

Urged by that thought, the Brain rose smoothly into the darkness upon his almost invisible traction-beams. A guard, trudging his post along one side of the palace, heard a faint stir in the darkness overhead and glimpsed a black shape flitting by.

"A night-bat," thought the Korian soldier and wished that dawn would come. Higher and higher rose the Brain. The city of Kor lay beneath him as a black mass bordering the dim sea, showing a scattered pattern of lights. Overhead glowed the strange night sky of this world, a soft, shooting radiance of eldritch bars and banners of light.

"These electron streams and the surrounding cloud and almost everything else here come from the

Birthplace of Matter," he thought. "And we still don't know the nature of the Birthplace."

He felt a deep misgiving that more than once had oppressed him during their odyssey of adventure across the universe. On and on he flew, traveling now at high speed. The cold was extreme, but neither heat nor cold meant anything to the Brain inside his perfectly insulated case. His peering lens-eyes, moving constantly on their flexible metal stalks to survey the terrain beneath, descried the gleaming bulk of the copper ranges eastward and westward. He flew on up the valley of Kor, following the shining thread of the river at its center. Finally, the Brain recognized a bend in the river. His photographic memory never deceived him. He turned eastward at once and flew over the gleaming scarps and ridges of the copper range.

On the plain beyond the range, Simon described a point of light. He sank silently and hovered above it. It was the camp of the Korian soldiers who had remained to guard the *Comet*. The glimmering shape of the ship was clear to the Brain's eyes, resting on the ground near the two conical Korian ships.

The Korians were all gathered around a small atomic "glower."

The Brain moved beyond the camp, glided soundlessly toward the three parked ships. The doors of the two Korian craft were open. It was one of these ships that Simon first approached.

None of the green soldiers, yawning in the cheerful warmth of the

glower, turned as he silently entered one of their ships.

"There mustn't be any pursuit when I leave here," Simon muttered to himself. He did not fully understand the electron-jet propulsion mechanism of the Korian craft. The ship itself was empty of occupants, and the Brain poised in its dark interior, studying the machinery. His scientifically trained mind came rapidly to the conclusion that certain heavy cables connecting various parts of the machinery were vital to its operation. At once, the Brain used his tractor beams as hands with which to disconnect those cables. He took the cables with him when he left that vessel and entered the other Korian ship. It was the work of moments to sabotage it effectively in the same way, and he dumped the vital cables some distance away in the darkness.

Then he returned cautiously to the *Comet*. Its locked door was on the side facing the Korian soldiers. Their backs were toward it, but the quivering light of their glower illuminated it strongly. The brain glided like a shadow toward the *Comet's* door. A series of quick pressures upon the numbered studs of the lock operated its ingenious mechanism. The door swung open with a low sighing sound. The sound reached the ears of one of the Korians around the glower. The green soldier saw the Brain gliding into the open door.

"The strangers are stealing their ship!" he yelled. He and his comrades scrambled to their feet, leveling their

fire-rods.

Simon had already touched the stud that slammed shut the outer air-lock door. He flashed forward through the familiar interior of the *Comet* to the control-room. He rested himself in the pilot chair and jetted the magnetic tractor beams that were his limbs, in different directions. One pressed the stud that started the cyclotrons roaring. Then it shifted to grasp the space-stick and pull it back, as the other tractor beam shoved the cyc-pedal inward. With the full force of its powerful rocket drive, the *Comet* roared steeply skyward. The Brain felt it shudder slightly as crashing streaks of energy struck it from the fire-rods of the Korians. But he knew that no weapon of such comparatively small power as those hand fire-rods could penetrate the heavy walls. An acidly humorous thought occurred to him.

"I am becoming a disciple of action, after all these years. Otho will be proud of me."

**THE BRAIN** could handle the *Comet* skillfully, though ordinarily he avoided piloting the ship as he avoided other purely physical activities. Now he turned it southward toward the city of Kor. He did not attempt to use the vibration drive. And he kept the rockets muffled to a low drone as he flew on through the night. The scattered lights of the city of Kor came into sight. The Brain glimpsed several conical ships cruising in patrol over the city. He steered at once to a lower level, and

the *Comet* glided like a dark shadow low above the rooftops toward the palace.

Simon kept the rockets throttled down to their lowest possible power as he sank toward the palace roof. He hoped fervently that the dull drone would not be noticed by the guards around the palace. His hopes were quickly shattered. As he landed the *Comet* on the flat copper roof, he heard a distant cry of alarm.

"A strange ship on the roof! Call the captain of the palace and signal the patrol!"

"Where can Curtis and the others be?" fretted the Brain.

There was no sign of Captain Future or the others on the flat roof. And now a rising clamor of shouts and alarm gongs was rising from the great pile underneath. Simon knew the guards would be emerging in a few minutes onto the roof, but he remained cool.

Down out of the hazily glowing sky swept two conical Korian cruisers. The black muzzles of their heavy fire-rod batteries jetted streams of raving energy that barely missed the ship of the Futuremen. Before the Korian attackers could dive closer, the Brain had struck back. One of the proton-cannons of the *Comet* swung skyward as he took rapid aim with it. He pressed the firing trigger and the pale proton beam lanced upward and tore through the two attackers. Both Korian ships staggered and lurched in mid-air, then whined through the darkness to crash in the palace gardens.

"There'll be more in a minute," thought the Brain. "This is going to be a hot place if Curtis and the rest do not come soon."

It never occurred to the Brain to flee. Unperturbed, he waited for the next attack. Then he glimpsed a trap door in the roof being violently flung open. Men poured out of it, dim figures in the darkness. Simon swung the proton cannon to blast them off the roof, refrained from firing when he perceived that these men were firing atom-guns and proton pistols back at other men who were following them out onto the roof. It was Captain Future and his comrades engaged in a hot battle with Korian guards who had pursued them.

"There's the *Comet*!" rang Curt's voice. "This way, quick!"

The Brain sped to open the door of the ship for them. Captain Future's group backed toward it, triggering fiercely at the Korians, who were still pouring out onto the roof. Crackling bolts of fire-rods and pale proton beams criss-crossed on the dark roof. All the city around the palace was arousing itself in a growing uproar.

The hoarse, defiant yell of big Hol Jor and the fierce battle cry of Ki Illok the Sagittarian rose into the darkness as they and the other star rovers shot shoulder to shoulder with the Futuremen. Advancing Korians stumbled and fell as beams found their mark. But Otho clapped hand to his shoulder with a cry of pain and rage as a bolt burned past him, and one of the star rovers beside him fell.

Captain Future bent to pick up

the fallen man. It was Skur Kal, the younger of the two red Antarians.

"Into the ship, for space's sake!" yelled Curt, dragging the fallen man with one arm and shooting with his other. "Where's Thyria?"

"I have her, chief!" boomed Grag.

The giant metal robot appeared out of the darkness with the white-faced Thruunian girl. Curt Newton and Otho and Hol Jor covered the others as they scrambled into the *Comet*. They heard an ominous drumming roar as Korian cruisers dived out of the night for mass attack. "Catch the strangers!" came a hissing, furious cry from beyond the charging Korians. "They must not escape!"

"That's Larstan!" exclaimed Otho. The android flung a chance beam into the darkness but without result.

He and Curt and Hol Jor jumped into the ship, and slammed shut the airlock door.

"Take her up, Grag!" Curt yelled urgently.

The robot had already reached the control room. The *Comet* jerked skyward with a bursting roar of rocket tubes.

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** and Otho leaped to the breeches of the proton cannon. The ship was now screaming out of the atmosphere of Kor into the radiance of open space. After them raced a half-dozen conical Korian cruisers, firing all their batteries of fire-rods in fierce attempt to destroy the *Comet*. Grag was avoiding the bolts of energy by a series of hair-raising spins and twists.

Otho pressed the trigger of his heavy proton cannon, then uttered an exultant exclamation.

"That's one less of them!"

The powerful proton beam from his weapon had torn through one of the Korian craft, and the crippled ship was sinking.

"Throw in the vibration drive, and we can get away from them!" Captain Future called to Grag.

As he shouted, Curt was triggering his own heavy weapon. It ripped away part of the stern of a Korian cruiser that was executing a fast space-spin to bring its main armament to bear upon them. The other Korian ships recoiled a little from this unexpectedly hot resistance. Then came the loud drone of the vibration drive generators. The *Comet* jerked violently forward as Grag threw in enough of the super-powerful drive to out-distance the Korian ships. Even though Grag used but a fraction of the power of the drive, the acceleration crushed Curt and the others against the walls. The pressure lifted as Grag quickly cut the acceleration.

"That did it — we've left them behind," Otho called.

The *Comet* had completely shaken off the Korian pursuers, and was flying at frightening speed into the glittering electronic haze.

"Head toward Thruun — that small red sun far ahead," Curt Newton directed the robot. "They can't catch us now."

He mopped perspiration from his brow as he went back into the

cabin. Curt found the others gathered around the prone body of Skur Kal. Ber Del intercepted Curt's questioning glance, and the old blue Vegan nodded solemnly.

"He is dead. I think he was already dead when you dragged him into the ship, Captain Future."

"Yes, he's blasted off on his last voyage," muttered Hol Jor. The big Antarian's massive red face was somber with grief. "And he was my own sister's son, was Skur Kal."

"It's another score to settle with Larstan when the time comes," said Ki Illok between his teeth.

They gave Skur Kal space burial befitting a star rover, wrapping and lashing his body and setting it afloat in the void. Then Curt took stock of the situation. They were flying ever deeper into the glittering auroral haze of flying electron streams which filled this vast space inside the cosmic cloud. Ahead of them, deep within the shining haze, glowed the little red sun of Thruun. The shrouding haze still concealed what lay beyond the red sun, still veiled the central region in which the Birthplace of Matter guarded its mystery. A check of instruments assured Captain Future that the copper skin with which they had coated the *Comet* was effectively preventing the streaming torrents of electrons from affecting the ship.

A soft hand touched his arm. It was the girl Thyria, her blue eyes glowing with gratitude.

"You are really taking me to Thruun?" she cried eagerly. "Larstan's men cannot overtake us?"

"Not a chance," Curt Newton reassured her. "Their ships haven't the speed of the *Comet*. You're quite safe now."

"It's not my own safety I'm thinking of!" cried the Thruunian princess. "I want to warn my father Kwolok that Larstan is preparing to attack Thruun. For it is my fault that that attack is coming."

"Your fault?" Curt's brows drew together.

**THYRIA** explained. "The Korians have always wanted to conquer Thruun, so that we could no longer prevent them from reaching the Birthplace. But they feared we possessed the secret of the Birthplace, the secret of matter mastery. It would be a terrible weapon. When I was captured," Thyria went on self-accusingly, "Larstan took me to Kor and subjected me to hypnotic questioning. I admitted to them that my people do not possess the secret. So now Larstan is not afraid to attack us."

"It's not your fault, Thyria," Curt consoled. "You wouldn't have told them if it hadn't been for hypnosis."

His gray eyes flashed. "Beside, we are on the side of Thruun now. We can lend our science to improve your ships and weapons so much that the Korian attack can easily be beaten back."

"But Larstan will know that!" Thyria exclaimed. "He will surely make his attack on Thruun now before there is time for you strangers to give effective help to my people."



"Say, the girl is talking sense," murmured Otho. "Larstan was figuring to use our help to make his conquest of Thruun a sure thing. Well, he's now lost our help, so he'll jump on Thruun before we can help the other side."

"You're right," Captain Future said slowly. "It looks as though our coming here has precipitated a final struggle."

The Brain directed a question at the Thruunian princess. "You Thruunians have always prevented the people of Kor from reaching the Birthplace, you said. Yet you have never gone there to secure its secret for yourselves. Why?"

"It was the command of the Watchers," answered Thyria solemnly. "Long ago, they decreed that none of us inside the cloud should seek to secure the secret of the Birthplace. We of Thruun have always obeyed that command, and when the Korians sought to disobey it, we prevented them."

"The command of the Watchers?" Captain Future repeated puzzledly. "Larstan said that the Watchers were only a baseless legend."

"Larstan lied," Thyria assured him with fervent conviction. "The Watchers are no legend."

At that moment came a startled cry from Grag, who was still on duty in the control room. "Chief, come here and look at this!"

With a bound, Curt Newton reached the control room. The others followed. Grag was pointing his metal arm at space ahead.

"What's that?" the big robot asked perplexedly.

The *Comet* had traversed a great distance on its swift flight into the deeper central haze. The glowing red sun of Thruun, with its single planet, was clearly visible not far ahead. But it was beyond the red sun that Grag was staring. There in the remoter central haze there vaguely loomed an awe-inspiring object none of these star roamers had ever seen before.

"Is *that* the Birthplace?" gasped Otho.

### Chapter XIII Epic of the Past

THE radiant electronic haze ahead was almost blinding in its intensity. Its shaking banners of auroral brilliance, streaming outward like great winds of force from a cosmic storm, so completely veiled the vast object at the center that only its vague outline could be glimpsed. It looked like a colossal spinning spiral of white flame, its titanic arms millions of miles across. But it could not be flame, Curt knew. It was a focus of unimaginable forces upon which they gazed, a cosmic maelstrom that ceaselessly threw off the terrific currents of streaming electrons whose glittering veils shrouded it.

"And we were going to find out the secret of *that*!" exclaimed Otho with a mirthless laugh.

"We can still do it," Captain Future replied steadily. "The thing is more terrible than I had imagined, but we can find a way to approach and

study it.”

But the other Futuremen and the star captains continued to look with doubt and awe at the monstrous, half-concealed object.

“The Birthplace of Matter!” Hol Jor muttered solemnly. “The beating heart of our universe, that pumps out new matter to all the farthest spaces! It makes me feel afraid.”

“Remember the need of your worlds for the secret of matter creation,” Curt urged. “In that spinning storm of force is the secret that will save Mercury from death, and I mean to find it if it’s humanly possible.”

Thyria looked up at Captain Future, her white face distressed. “But you dare not try to approach the Birthplace!” she protested. “It is against the ancients laws — my people will never permit it.”

“But we’re friends of your people, Thyria,” Curt pointed out. “We mean to help them against Larstan and the Korians.”

The Thruunian princess shook her yellow head forebodingly. “I fear that even so, my father and the nobles of Thruun will not permit you to transgress the ancient command of the Watchers.”

“Here’s new trouble!” Otho exclaimed angrily. “Maybe we’d better not go to Thruun at all. We could go right on to the Birthplace.”

Curt shook his head. “I promised the girl I’d take her back to her world.” He turned to her. “Thyria, will you try to see that we’re not

prevented from going on to the Birthplace?”

“I’ll use my influence, but it may avail little,” she admitted. “My people reverence the law of the Watchers.”

“Ships ahead, coming down on us fast!” Grag exclaimed loudly.

They were long, slim needle-like craft that traveled like speeding arrows. And they were coated with copper like the ships of the green men, to proof them against the electron-barrage. There were four of them.

“They are part of the patrol my people maintain in space around the Birthplace!” Thyria exclaimed. “Flash them this signal at once or they will open fire on you.” She rapidly told them the code of long and short flashes by which Thruunian ships recognized each other. Using the fluoroscopic searchlights, Curt Newton hastily flashed the signal. The Thruunian patrol craft slowed down, and approached more deliberately.

“What kind of communication do you have between your space-ships?” Curt asked her. “If electromagnetic signals, what frequency?”

Thyria gave him the frequency figure. “We can change the *Comet’s* television audio transmitter to that frequency,” he said quickly.

He and Otho rapidly altered the coils of the transmitter. Then Thyria was able to speak to the two Thruunian ships. After a short colloquy, she turned a bright face.

"They are overjoyed at my return," she told Curt, "and they are relaying my warning of a possible quick attack by Larstan, to my father in Thruun."

Less than an hour later, the *Comet* and its escort craft swept in through the thin atmosphere of the single planet that circled the red sun.

**T**HRUUN was a withered world. Dull red, arid steppes formed a monotonous landscape, varied occasionally by low, rolling hills. Only at a few places did mossy red plains and valleys show the glitter of a small watercourse. The escorting cruisers led the way toward the capital. It was a circular city of dark marble, its main avenues radiating from a central plaza which appeared to contain the main government buildings.

"Metal is much scarcer here than upon Kor," Thyria told Captain Future. "We cannot afford to use it as building material."

"I cannot understand this," rasped the Brain. "You Thruunians could secure the secret of matter creation from the Birthplace and revive your whole world."

"But that would be against the command of the Watchers," answered Thyria with a little sigh.

Curt Newton felt misgivings as to the attitude of the Thruunians toward his quest. There were two landing fields outside the city of Thruun, each bearing a number of copper-coated cruisers, parked in rows. But Thyria directed them to

land the *Comet* upon the central plaza.

"My father will be waiting if he received the news of my return," she said eagerly.

The city was one of dark marble domes, each crowned by a curved and crested roof. The public buildings were of similar design, but towered above the rest. Curt saw crowds in the streets around the plaza. White-skinned Thruunians of both sexes appeared, dressed in short white tunics such as Thyria wore. Despite their dissimilarity in complexion and in dress, the Thruunians and the Korians seemed to resemble each other in their way of living. The *Comet* had already been switched to rocket drive by Grag, and the robot brought it down skillfully upon the dark stone plaza. A group of Thruunians wearing glittering badges of honor or authority approached as they emerged from the ship. A tall, grave-eyed man with iron-gray hair and beard led the Thruunians. With a little cry, Thyria ran toward him. "It is my father, King Kwolok," she said happily.

The Thruunian ruler, when he had heard Thyria's hasty recital, clasped Curt's hand strongly.

"You are doubly welcome, strangers from the outer stars, for you bring back one we deemed lost," he said.

One of his councillors interrupted.

"Highness, if Princess Thyria is right about Larstan attacking us quickly—"

"Yes, we must prepare," muttered Kwolok. "Give orders to double the space patrol and have

every ship in Thruun ready for instant action. Send out scout craft toward Kor to reconnoiter.”

The bleak eyes of Hol Jor glistened. “We’ll soon have a chance to hit back at Larstan,” exulted the big Antarian.

The largest of the domed buildings in the plaza was the palace of the kings of Thruun. Thither Kwolok and Thyria led Curt and his comrades. The place lacked the luxury of the copper mansion of Larstan, but the austere simplicity of the shadowy stone rooms and halls

filled with an incredible aurora. Even more brilliant than the night of Kor was this glowing sky, for this world was much deeper in the electronic haze. Up from the horizon rose a stupendous object. It was the colossal spiral of spinning light, its whirling arms reaching half across the firmament. Shrouded as it was by the glowing haze, it was a tremendous spectacle.

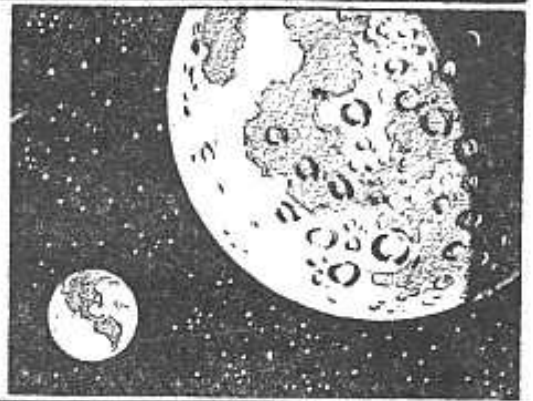
“I don’t see how the *Comet* can ever get near or in it,” Otho muttered.

“The protective coating we gave the ship should keep out the electron

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*Captain Future's Lunar Citadel of  
Science Is Stolen by Space Vandals*  
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was appealing.

“I like these people,” Otho announced, when they had been escorted to wide-windowed chambers on an upper floor. “They look you in the eye. They’re worth a dozen such of those green devils of Kor.”

“Unless I’m mistaken,” commented the Brain, “these Thruunians and the Korians came originally of the same race. They are identical in certain anthropological factors.”

Night swept over Thruun as the red sun set. But the night sky was

torrents,” Captain Future murmured doubtfully. “Anyway, we’ve got to try it.”

A mellow bell sounded from the lower level of the marble castle.

“Let me do the talking with Kwolok about the Birthplace,” Curt said hastily as they started to descend. “These people are superstitious about it, and it will take tactful handling.”

But when they entered the small, simple dining hall where the ruler of Thruun and his daughter awaited them, there was sternness in Kwolok’s greeting.

“Thyria has informed me that you strangers cherish ambition to seek

the secret of the Birthplace,” the king told Captain Future abruptly when they had seated themselves.

Curt shot a look at the girl.

“I have been trying to gain my father’s consent to aid your venture,” she said.

“It is out of the question!” Kwolok declared firmly. “The command of the Watchers was that no one, no matter whence he came, might approach the Birthplace. For ages, we have obeyed that command.”

“But we expect to help you against Larstan’s attack,” Curt Newton pointed out. “We will, if there is time enough, use our science to improve your ships and weapons. Surely you would not prevent your own allies from seeking a secret that means life

for our worlds, a secret that we have come through great dangers and hardships to secure?”

“If my own brother were to seek to approach the Birthplace, I should be forced to order his death. For upon the kings of Thruun devolves the duty of enforcing the ancient commandment of the Watchers.”

“Who or what are the Watchers?” Captain Future asked. “Are they more than legend?”

“Much more than legend, my son,” replied Kwolok, his bearded face grave.

“We know that, though we ourselves have had no contact with the Watchers since our ancestors first entered this space inside the cloud.

“**Y**ES, our ancestors came long ago from outside the cosmic dust cloud. Tradition has it that they were natives of a great planet whose people colonized the farthest regions of the universe.”

“Deneb,” muttered the Brain. “The ancestors of these folk must have come from

Deneb just as all our own ancestors did, long ago.”

“But how did your ancestors manage to get through the cloud?” Curt cried to the old king. “Even our own super-powerful ship could hardly win through those currents!”

“The cloud sometimes shows rifts or gaps, for a brief interval, when the currents tear its veil open. Our ancestors came through such a temporary rift, after long watching and waiting.

“They entered this space,” the king continued, “and found the Birthplace of Matter and recognized it for what it is.

“They sought to approach the Birthplace and attain its secret. But out of the Birthplace itself came strange superhuman beings such as my ancestors had not dreamed existed. They did not describe them except to say that they were awesomely alien, of vast mental power, and that they called themselves the Watchers of the Birthplace. The Watchers told my ancestors, ‘The secret of the Birthplace is too mighty a power to fall into the hands of those who might misuse it for evil ends. You must not again seek to secure it. We could destroy you but we prefer to warn

you. And our warning is — never again approach the Birthplace nor allow others to approach it.' That was the command of the Watchers. They then withdrew to their home within the Birthplace itself, and my ancestors did not again seek to approach it. The command of the Watchers became the law of this world.

"But after ages had passed, Thruun began to wither. Then many of our people, who had lost faith in the ancient law, desired to disregard the traditional warning, enter the Birthplace and use its secret to revive our wasting world. They were forbidden to do so. So the malcontents left Thruun and built themselves a new city upon the world of a green star which, until then, had been too hot for habitation. They called that world Kor, and they themselves came to be green of skin after some generations.

"Since then, the Korians have lusted after the secret of the Birthplace, but always we of the true blood of Thruun have abided by the ordainment of the Watchers and prevented them. But the Korians have increased more rapidly than we on our wasted world. Only their fear that we had relaxed our former severe attitude and had secured the secret of the Birthplace for our own use has kept them from attacking us to penetrate the constant patrols that we maintain around the Birthplace. But now," he concluded, "Larstan has learned that we do not possess the secret. Very soon, I fear, he will launch his forces upon us. The help of you strangers and your science would be invaluable in repelling that attack.

But I will not delude you with false promises. Even if you help us, we cannot and will not allow you to approach the Birthplace!"

## **Chapter XIV**

### **Struggle of Worlds**

CURT NEWTON had listened in growing wonder to the old king's story. He broke the ensuing silence with a question. "Do you Thruunians believe that the Watchers still exist inside the Birthplace?"

"We do," affirmed Kwolok solemnly, "Even though not for ages have they manifested themselves."

Otho was openly incredulous. "How could any beings live inside that storm of force?"

"Tradition tells us," answered the king, "that there is a world somewhere inside the Birthplace."

"A planet in there?" echoed Grag. "It sounds impossible."

"It might be possible," murmured the Brain thoughtfully. "There might be a calm area within that spinning tempest."

Kwolok looked at Captain Future. "I have been frank with you, strangers. You know now that we can never permit you to approach the Birthplace. Knowing that, do you still wish to help us against Larstan?"

Curt's decision was already made. "We're going to help you," he said quietly. "Larstan must not gain possession of the power of matter mastery, for if he did, he might carry conquest to our own outer universe. Once he has been thwarted, we can discuss our own plans."

"There will be nothing to discuss, for I repeat that we shall never allow you to enter the Birthplace," warned Kwolok. "But I gladly accept your help, for I fear that we will need it badly."

"Will Larstan's forces be so superior to your own?" Curt asked.

"I fear they will be. We can muster no more than four hundred space cruisers fit for battle, and the Korians must have nearly six hundred. To make matters worse, half our own ships are required to maintain the space patrol around the Birthplace."

Captain Future nodded understanding. "But if your ships had the speed and armament of our *Comet*, they'd be more than a match for Larstan's superior numbers. We must lose no time in beginning the refitting of your fleet."

They stood up. Kwolok thrust his hand impulsively toward Curt Newton. "Strangers, I think you were sent by providence in this hour of our need. I am only sorry that we are forced to deny your wish respecting the Birthplace."

"Time enough to argue about that later," Curt smiled. "Good night, sir. Goodnight, Thyria."

Back in their own chambers, Otho vehemently expressed his dislike of the proceedings to Captain Future.

"This is a one-way alliance!" the android declared. "The Thruunians get our help but what do we get — nothing! And if the Thruunians don't get our help, the

Birthplace will be penetrated by Larstan." Curt explained.

"Our most pressing problem is to keep the Korians from getting the power of matter creation, Otho. Think what disaster Larstan could spread in the universe with that power. We can't allow that to happen. Once Larstan's attempt has been crushed, we can get away from here and enter the Birthplace — with or without the permission of the Thruunians."

Hol Jor loudly approved. "It'll give us a chance to settle our score with those green devils of Kor. I haven't forgotten Taunus Tar and Skur Kal."

KI ILLOK'S brown face was almost eager.

"You'll find we know something about space fighting," he told Curt.

Old Ber Del looked worried. "But even if we defeat Larstan and get to the Birthplace, will it do us any good? What if the Watchers still exist?"

"Bah, we're not going to let an old legend stop us if we get that far," declared Otho.

"Old legends usually have a basis of fact," muttered the Brain. "The Watchers sound incredible, but who knows? More than one scientist believes there were prehuman races of great powers in the past."

"We'll face that possibility when it arises," yawned Curt. "Time to turn in, you space lawyers. We've got to be up early to start refitting the Thruunian ships — and a sweet job that will be."

**I**T SEEMED to Captain Future that he had only slept a few hours before he was awakened by a hard hand squeezing his shoulder. He opened his eyes, instantly alert. Grag's great metal figure towered over him in the dim light of earliest dawn that filtered through the window. The robot's booming voice had an excited tempo.

"Chief, it's come already! An audio message just received from a scout cruiser—the Korian space fleet is on its way toward Thruun," Curt sprang to his feet, his gray eyes flashing.

"I might have known it — Larstan's not going to give us time to strengthen the

Thruunian ships with new weapons." The others were rising. The whole royal castle was in an increasing uproar.

From outside the large building came the roar of space ships hastily landing or taking off. Hol Jor was exultant, his red face flaming.

"Hah, this is what I've been hoping for! If they'll give me a cruiser, I'll show Larstan how an Antarian fights."

They had buckled on their proton-pistols and atom guns. They made a formidable group as they trooped hastily down the stairs after Captain Future.

In the great marble hall of the castle, Thruunians were coming and going excitedly.

Kwolok stood amid a little knot of his officers. The old king wore an impressive crested helmet, a fire-rod at his belt. His bearded face was

blazing with excitement as he greeted Curt Newton.

"This is a day of fate for either Larstan or ourselves!" he exclaimed tensely.

"The audio message came an hour ago from one of our scout ships cruising toward Kor. They are coming full speed."

"How many ships, and in what disposition?" Curt asked rapidly.

"Their whole fleet is in battle formation, with a fringe of fast scouts ahead," replied the Thruunian king. "Their course is straight toward Thruun."

"I've already called all our patrol cruisers to rendezvous with the rest of our forces a million miles off Thruun. We'll give battle there."

Thyria caught at Curt's arm. The Thruunian girl was a slim, martial figure, wearing a short fire-rod at her belt, her eyes shining.

"I go in my father's flagship!" she exclaimed. "You will be with us?"

"We'll take our own *Comet*" Curt answered. Kwolok, Hol Jor and Ber Del and Ki Illok are veteran space fliers and fighters. If you could give them cruisers —" "They shall each command one of our best ships," Kwolok replied. "We can use their abilities, for no battle of such magnitude has ever been fought between Thruun and Kor."

An officer came running up to the king.

"Patrol cruisers all report on the way to the rendezvous, sir."

"Good — we go!" exclaimed Kwolok. He led the way out.



THE crimson sun had risen, and its brilliant rays smote their faces as they emerged from the castle. A dense crowd of Thruunians surged around the plaza and split the air with a cheer as the ruler and his daughter and officers moved toward the royal flagship. Other ships were parked on the plaza — needle-like Thruunian war cruisers with grim batteries of fire-rods along their sides. Kwolok assigned three of the cruisers to Hol Jor and Ki Illok and Ber Del, and the three star captains hastened to assume their new commands. The Thruunian king paused by the door of his ship for a last word with Captain Future. “Set your audio transmitter and receiver to this frequency,” he said, giving Curt the figure. “It is our secret wave which permits our ships to communicate with each other without the Korians being able to overhear. And remain near my flagship — I count on your experience to aid us.” Then Kwolok made a reverent gesture toward the eastern sky.

“Now pray the Watchers that fortune favor us this day.”

Up from the city of Kor into the red sunlight rose two hundred war cruisers of Thruun. In a T formation they flew steadily into space. At the head of the fleet moved Kwolok’s flagship, easily identifiable by the insignia on its bows. Close behind it trailed the *Comet*.

Curt’s tanned face was grave as he sat in the pilot-chair. “They got off well,” he murmured, looking back. “But these Thruunians have never fought a real fleet action before. This organization of theirs around one

central command is faulty. There should be sub-commanders for ease and quickness in tactical handling of units.”

Otho shrugged. “So what’s the difference? The Korians haven’t had any more experience than they in real space battle.”

“No, but Larstan and Uzhur are cunning devils who will plan well,” Curt muttered. “Also, they’ve got a heavy numerical superiority and possess the initiative.”

They were flying through the glittering haze in the general direction of the green spark that was the sun of Kor. Behind them, the red sun of Thruun was a drop of blood hanging against the appalling background of the vast, haze-shrouded spinning flame of the Birthplace. The voice of Kwolok came from the audio speaker, ordering them to halt and form up in a hollow cube. They assumed the formation, the flagship and the *Comet* lying a little in front of it. Then they waited for the patrol cruisers to reach the rendezvous. Captain Future listened intently to the messages constantly coming in from the Thruunian scout cruisers that were fleeing back before the advance of Larstan’s fleet. They reported the Korian armada still massed solidly and driving at top speed toward Thruun.

“Larstan must figure his superiority in numbers will give him a sure victory, to use such simple tactics,” Curt commented. “He must know the whole Thruunian force has had time to gather to meet him.”

Swarms of dots appeared to right and left in space. They were the patrol cruisers of Thruun, coming from their watch around the Birthplace to join the rest of the fleet. Kwolok ordered the newly arrived ships to reinforce their present cubical formation. The Thruunian fleet thus became a cube of four hundred cruisers hanging motionless in space.

"We shall await the Korians in our present formation," Kwolok's voice rang confidently. It is a rock against which their attack will shatter itself. Then we can easily rout them."

"I don't like this," murmured Otho uneasily. "You can't win a space battle by standing on the defensive." Captain Future shrugged. "Kwolok's giving the orders."

"There comes the Korians," Grag exclaimed suddenly.

**F**AR out in space, tiny racing dots were becoming visible. There were a dozen of them — speeding Thruunian scout cruisers which were blasting backward with their fire-rods as they fled. After them came the big Korian fleet. The conical ships of the green men were holding a ring formation, their own fringe of scouts hotly pursuing the fleeing Thruunians.

"Here they come!" cried Otho, his green eyes aglow as he sprang to the breech of a proton cannon.

Curt's keen eyes were taking in every detail. Space actions were fought at such high speed that only a trained eye could comprehend ship movements before it was too late. The massive ring of Korian cruisers was

deliberately advancing toward the Thruunian cubical formation. As it swept closer, the ring began to *revolve*.

"They're going to cut in!" Curt yelled, suddenly understanding. He shouted into the audio. "Kwolok, order our forces to spread into columns before it's too late!"

"It's too late already!" Grag cried.

The ring of Korian ships, spinning ever more rapidly, was at the same time sweeping on toward the motionless cube of Thruunian ships. The spinning ring cut into the cube like a buzz-saw biting into wood. A wild melee took place in the left of the cube. As the Korian cruisers penetrated their formation, the Thruunians were letting go with all fire-rods in position to bear on the enemy. Bolts of white energy criss-crossed like weaving lightning between racing ships, blasted through metal hulls.

Curt Newton sent the *Comet* racing into the thick of the battle with Kwolok's flagship. Grag and Otho were already triggering heavy proton cannon. The pale, deadly beams flashed out through the spinning ships and fire-bolts like dim fingers of death, ripping Korian cruisers into wreckage with uncanny accuracy. Captain Future's attention was divided. One part of it concentrated on maneuvering the *Comet* to avoid enemy fire-bolts, and to bring it in to position to loose its beams effectively. But the other part of Curt's mind was apprehending the general plan of battle.

"They're cutting in further!" he groaned. "They'll split us to pieces."

The Korians had a great tactical advantage. The fact that their ring of ships was constantly revolving made it possible for them to bring a continuous fire to bear on the few ships of Thruun directly ahead of them. The rest of the Thruunians, stretched out in the cubical formation, could not get into the fight.

"Kwolok, for space's sake order our ships to drop back into columns!" Curt yelled into the audio. "A fifth of our cruisers are facing the firepower of the whole Korian fleet this way." "Kwolok's ship has been hit!" Otho cried. "Look at that!"

The royal flagship of Thruun was limping through the battle confusion not far away. Its bow was badly ripped and crushed.

Thyria's frantic voice came from the audio. "Captain Future! My father is hurt, unconscious!"

Curt sensed a wavering of the Thruunian ships around him as their officers also heard this news. He divined imminent disaster to a leaderless, broken fleet.

"Then I'm taking over command for Kwolok!" he shouted into the audio. "All cruisers attention! Spread out and fall back at once! Form up into three columns!"

**T**HE formidable ring of the Korian fleet had almost split the disordered ships of Thruun asunder. But Curt's order was followed by a sudden retreat through space in the direction of Thruun. The cruisers of the Thruunians spread out as they

retreated. The green men, balked of expected victory, changed formation. Their ring compressed into a triangular formation that came hurtling in pursuit of the withdrawing Thruunians like a flying spear.

"There's Larstan's flagship!" exclaimed Otho fiercely, pointing to a heavy conical cruiser at the apex of the enemy triangle. It bore a complex insignia. "If we could just get that —"

Captain Future was barking orders into the audio. "Hol Jor, take command of our left column, Ki Illok of our right. I'll command the center column. And whatever I do, you stand firm on the wings when the Korians hit us."

"I hear!" thundered Hol Jor's excited voice. "Close up that column, you dunderheads, and swing broadside to face the enemy!"

The Thruunian fleet, sadly diminished by the damaging Korian attack, had formed three columns which now presented their broadsides to the oncoming Korian triangle. The crippled flagship that bore Thyria and her wounded father had limped away toward Thruun at Curt's order. Now Captain Future watched tensely as Larstan's revolving wedge of ships rushed on.

"If Larstan will only select our column for his point of attack —," he muttered tautly.

"Holy sun-imps, I get it now!" cried Otho, his eyes blazing. "A chance to 'box' them!"

The Korian triangle came on. Curt felt a thrill of hope as he perceived that its apex was directed

toward his own center column.

“As I thought — he plans to rip up our center first,” Curt rapped. “We’ve got to stand up to his first shock.”

The wedge of Korian ships came on. Fire-rods blazed all along the line, crackling blasts of raving energy licking out from ship to ship. Then the Korians hit. A dozen ships on either side were crumpled to wrecks by outright collision. The rest battered furiously at each other with all their fire power. To Captain Future’s eyes, space seemed choked with whirling ships and blinding fire-bolts. Ships on each side were being torn and mauled by the blasting streaks of energy. Otho and Grag were pumping the proton-cannon furiously.

“They’ve too much weight for us,” Otho gasped. “We can’t hold them—”

Almost the whole mass of the Korian fleet was pressing against them. Only a light holding force of Korians were engaging the Thruunian wings.

“Give back slowly, center column ships!” Curt shouted into the audio. “Slowly, and keep fighting —”

The Thruunian center fell back as ordered, fiercely striking back at the Korians, who now pushed exultantly harder against them. Back fell Curt’s column until it was its own length behind the two wings that still held their places. Captain Future glimpsed the opportunity for which he had planned and grasped it.

“Hol Jor! Ki Illok!” he commanded. “Bring in your wings

against the Korian flanks with all your power!”

The Korians, triumphantly pushing back the central column, were slow to perceive what followed. The two Thruunian wings, under command of Hol Jor and the Sagittarian suddenly dashed forward. They smashed aside the light enemy forces detailed to hold them and swung as on pivots toward the flanks of the Korian triangle, and around its base.

Before the Korian command comprehended, the Thruunians completely encircled its massed ships. And Curt and his two lieutenants had flung out flares of cruisers above and below to prevent any escape. “We’ve got them ‘boxed’!” Otho yelled exultantly.

Curt’s brilliant maneuver had succeeded in effecting a “box,” most difficult yet most dreaded of all space battle tactics.

“Pour it on them, men!” Hol Jor’s voice could be heard roaring. “Let go with every fire-rod you’ve got!”

The Korian ships were the target of fire poured in from every direction. Milling confusedly, their organization shattered by Curt’s audacious stratagem, they made wild attempts to break free. But the net moved with them, continuing to hold them in its meshes of fiery death. Balled in a hopeless jumble, the Korians could not use a fourth of their own weapons. More and more of their cruisers were drifting away, shattered wrecks. Captain Future switched the

audio to an all-wave band and called into the instrument.

“Larstan, will you surrender and stop further bloodshed?”

Back from the audio came a shaking voice.

“We surrender, Thruunians.”

**F**IRING ceased at Curt’s order. He commanded the Korian cruisers to maintain position while Thruunians boarded and disarmed them.

“That wasn’t Larstan who surrendered!” Otho was exclaiming.

“Then he must have been killed, thank space,” Grag declared.

Captain Future drove the *Comet* toward the Korian flagship. It was battered but not badly damaged, he noticed. In their space-suits, the Futuremen boarded the enemy craft. Sullen, scared green Korian soldiers stood with hands raised in surrender as they strode toward the bridge of the conical cruiser. Curt saw nothing of Larstan. But he recognized the gray hair and wizened, raging face of the commander of the fleet.

“Uzhur!” he muttered. “So you were in command. Where is Larstan?”

Uzhur’s rage seemed to abate a little, and the old green noble laughed.

“You’ve won this battle with your tricks, stranger, but you’ve lost everything else. Thruun is doomed, and so will your outside worlds in time fall beneath our conquest.”

Curt felt sharp alarm. He strode forward and took the sly Korian’s neck between his hands.

“Tell me what Larstan is doing or I’ll choke it out of you!” he snapped. Uzhur gasped, choked,

nodded in wild assent. The old noble panted vindictively. “Very well, I’ll tell you, and may it make you happy. Larstan did not come with our battle fleet at all. He knew the Thruunian patrol around the Birthplace would be called in to meet our fleet, and that the way there would be open. So Larstan and a small crew sailed for the Birthplace while the rest of our forces attacked here. The old noble’s eyes glared in triumph as he pointed through a window at the great spinning thing of light. “Our king is there in the Birthplace now, seeking the secret of matter mastery on the world of the Watchers. He will emerge with that power in his grasp and will sweep you Thruunians and your forces from existence!”

## Chapter XV

### World of the Watchers

**C**URT NEWTON’S heart bounded with alarm. He realized that he had made the fatal mistake of underestimating Larstan’s cunning. The Korian king had sent his space fleet out with the double object of crushing the Thruunians and of drawing away their patrol so that he himself could enter the forbidden Birthplace. “When did Larstan start there?” Captain Future demanded fiercely of Uzhur.

“At the same time our fleet started,” replied the noble. “By now, the king is inside the Birthplace and has reached the world of the Watchers.”

“I thought you Korians said that

the Watchers were only a myth!" Otho accused ragingly.

Uzhur smiled scornfully. "We said that, but we lied. We think the Watchers did once exist, and our astronomers have detected inside the Birthplace the world upon which they must have dwelt. We believe that the Watchers perished long ago, but the secrets of their power of matter mastery may still remain upon their world."

Curt Newton had swift, appalling vision of the dread possibilities of this unforeseen situation. If the crafty, ambitious Larstan already were laying hands upon the greatest secret of the universe — He turned quickly. "We're going into the Birthplace after Larstan! He mustn't succeed in what he's attempting."

"You're too late, strangers!" mocked old Uzhur. "Larstan has been in there for many hours. By now he must already have learned —?"

Curt paid the old Korian no further heed. He bounded back across the narrow gulf of space to the *Comet* with the Futuremen.

Into the audio he gave command to the Thruunians to take Uzhur and the other Korian leaders into custody and proceed with all the captive ships to Thruun. Then he called his star rover allies.

"Hol Jor! Ki Illok! Ber Del! Come aboard the *Comet*!"

"What's up?" cried Hol Jor when he and the others were aboard. He gasped when he heard. "Larstan in the Birthplace, now?"

"We're going after him," Curt rapped. "This is the showdown."

Captain Future was already in the pilot chair. He sent the *Comet* driving through space straight toward the Birthplace. As they tore through the electronic haze toward it, the mysterious heart of the universe seemed an incredible spiral nebula of blazing light. From its spinning, gigantic arms streamed the torrents of free electrons that choked space with their glittering haze. Invisible currents rocked the ship as it drove on toward the appalling thing. This place was a swirling maelstrom of unimaginable cosmic forces, sucking in radiation from far away and mysteriously transmuting it into the swarming electrons that it pumped outward to form the dust of the universe.

Curt Newton perceived that the terrific currents of force were affecting the operation of the ship. The cosmic ray compass was a wreck, the meteorometers had gone wild. But the copper coating of the hull was screening out the electronic barrage. "Look at it!" breathed old Ber Del. "We're approaching it at last — the flaming heart of the universe."

"The secret that so many star rovers have sought and never found — it's in there!" muttered Hol Jor, his eyes burning. Like the others, a trembling eagerness that was almost superhuman possessed him.

**CURT NEWTON** felt that same terrific tension as they drove toward the goal that had beckoned daring men from all the stars for ages.

But it was not only that wild hope, but the fear of what Larstan might be doing in there now, that made him drive the ship recklessly onward.

“Gods of space, we can’t go through that storm of force!” gasped Otho, staring wildly ahead. “It’ll tear the *Comet* to bits.”

“We’re going to try to slip between the whirling arms of the spiral,” gritted Curt, gripping the controls. “If Larstan could make it, we can.”

Now the *Comet* was driving fairly between two of the vast curved arms of the glowing spiral. The ship was a tiny midge in comparison with the cosmic object it was seeking to penetrate. And the wild waves of energy on which it tossed threatened to hurl it directly into one of the spinning arms. Captain Future fought to keep the lurching craft on a steady course. The tingling of their bodies was becoming an itching irritation. Desperately, he threw in more power. At almost suicidal speed the ship swept onward.

The Birthplace of Matter now lay clear before their dazzled eyes. It was a titanic sphere of flaming force from which curved the long, brilliant spirals. Both the central sphere and the spirals were rapidly rotating. Its glare was so terrific that he knew rather by sense than by sight that they were rushing closer to it.

“Here’s where we hit that sphere of force!” he called. “Stand by for anything.”

“We’ll never get through!” came Ber Del’s choking cry. “Gods of

Vega, what a place to end up in!”

Next moment, the *Comet* was flung about by roaring, awful forces that seemed to choke space with a blaze as of a thousand suns. The Futuremen were hurled violently against their chair-straps. Curt felt his head spin. Blindly, his fingers clung to the controls. Then as if by magic, the tumultuous roaring around them died. The *Comet* raced easily on an even keel. And Curt perceived that they were now moving through a void. He looked wildly around. They were surrounded by the brilliant shell of energy that constantly spun like a gigantic centrifuge —

“A centrifuge?” thought Curt. An electric thrill stabbed his mind as the comparison occurred to him. He looked up with dilated eyes at the spinning shell of energy. Could *that* be the mysterious secret of the Birthplace?

“Simon!” Curt’s voice rang with quivering excitement. “Simon, it’s beginning to dawn on me — the nature of the Birthplace secret —”

The others were petrified by the words. The metallic voice of the Brain chattered with unprecedented excitement as he answered.

“Lad, what do you mean?” he cried. “What have you learned?”

“It’s only a guess — a wild, crazy guess, but maybe a true one!” Captain Future exclaimed, the words tumbling from his lips, his gray eyes brilliant.

“Electrons of matter are simply tiny charges or droplets of electricity,” he went on excitedly. “This spinning

Birthplace is a natural whirlpool of force that sucks in electrical energy from all over the universe. I believe that its whirling currents act as a giant centrifuge to coagulate the electrical energy into tiny charges or electrons, which are thrown off in streams to combine with the cosmic dust."

"Lad, I believe you've guessed it!" whispered the Brain awedly. "I begin to see now — yes, you must be right."

Hol Jor and the others looked at Curt incredulously, numb with wonder. "I still don't understand —," muttered the Antarian bewilderedly.

"There's a planet!" cried Grag, pointing ahead. At the heart of the Birthplace hung a small world that looked like a round blue jewel.

"It must be the world of the Watchers!" Curt exclaimed. His eyes flared. "Larstan must be there now!"

**H**E DROVE the *Comet* headlong toward the blue planet. In his overpowering urge to come to grips with the Korian king before it was too late, Captain Future forced back into his mind the stupendous scientific secret which had just begun to dawn upon him. The blue planet had atmosphere. And, amazingly, it was a geometrically perfect sphere. Its glassy blue surface curved smoothly away beneath their descending ship, unbroken by even the most minute irregularity. This little planet was indeed a jewel world.

"It's some illusion!" Hol Jor gasped. "No planet was ever such a smooth, perfect globe as this."

"No naturally created planet ever was," rapped the Brain. "Don't you see — this world must have been artificially built!"

"How could a planet be created artificially?" cried Grag.

Captain Future spoke tensely. "The secret of matter mastery could create even a world, I think. The Watchers must have used it to create this planet for themselves long ago."

Old Ber Del's hands were shaking, his eyes wild. "The core of the universe, this world!" he breathed. "And somewhere on it is —"

The *Comet* was scudding over the blank, shining surface of the globe at a height of a few miles.

"Watch for Larstan's ship," ordered Curt Newton tautly. "It's here somewhere

— unless he's found what he wanted and left."

"I see something ahead but isn't a ship!" announced Ki Illok. "It looks like a city!"

He pointed. Captain Future felt heightening excitement as he discerned a distant cluster of glittering pinnacles that rose from the surface of this glassy blue world. He drove the *Comet* screaming down to lower altitude. The Futuremen and star rovers peered fascinated at the strangely beautiful city ahead.

It seemed a city of translucent glass towers. Shimmering, fairylike spires of incredible slenderness and grace were clustered around a central citadel whose flashing tip was the summit of the city. Airy, high-flung bridges joined the upper levels of the pinnacles, and a high, translucent wall



enclosed the whole metropolis. But all this was dead. There was no sign of movement in or about the magic place. Glittering as brilliantly as if created yesterday, this city of the blue jewel world was shrouded by an atmosphere of somber lifelessness.

"The city of the Watchers!" breathed Otho. "It must be that. But there is no one there."

"The Watchers must long ago have passed away, as the Korians guessed," muttered the Brain. "This artificial world and city of theirs would endure unchanged for indefinite ages."

"I see a ship!" cried old Ber Del. "A Korian ship!"

Captain Future had seen the craft at the same moment. It was parked on the glassy blue plain, just outside the wall of the city.

"That's Larstan's cruiser," Curt said rapidly. "We're going to jump them at once. Be ready to move when I land."

Curt was counting on a surprise attack. He sent the *Comet* screaming down on a dizzy slant for a speed landing that almost no other pilot would have dared attempt. The ship of the Futuremen hit the blue, glassy plain on flaming keel-rockets, skidded Wildly over the smooth surface and caromed into the side of the parked coppery cruiser with hard impact.

"Get them before they recover from that!" Curt Newton yelled, scrambling up and drawing his proton-pistol as he plunged outside.

The Futuremen followed hastily, all but the Brain slipping and

staggering on the polished blue glass surface. The door of the parked Korian cruiser had been left open to the soft warm air. The Futuremen and star rovers charged through it into the enemy ship.

**F**OUR green warriors had been left to guard the ship. But the unexpected impact of the *Comet* against their craft had hurled them about inside the main cabin, and they picked themselves up to face the nerve-shattering sight of the charging Futuremen and their allies.

"The enemy strangers!" yelled the Korian captain. "Kill them!"

He and one of the other men raised their fire-rods. But Otho and Hol Jor were already charging, the Antarian roaring his battle yell. They knocked the two resisting men from their feet before they could act.

"Don't kill them!" Curt yelled to the battle-mad red star rover and equally fierce android. "They're surrendering!"

Appalled by the overwhelming surprise, the Korians were dropping their weapons and raising their hands. In a few moments they were manacled beyond possibility of escape to stanchions of their ship.

"Where's Larstan and the rest of the crew?" Curt demanded then.

A scared green captive stammered answer. "The king and the other twelve of our crew are in that strange city. They have been in there for many hours. We were left to guard the ship."

Curt swung to his followers, his

eyes brilliant with purpose. "We're going in — all except Simon, who can't be of much help in a fight. For it's going to be a fight in there — a finish fight with Larstan."

Hol Jor brandished his atom pistol in the air.

"Good!" cried the Antarian. "A fight for the greatest prize in the whole universe!"

They hastened out of the ship and started on a run across the smooth blue plain toward the wall of the city. Futuremen and star-rovers were following Captain Future toward the citadel of cosmic power, eager for the battle that must soon climax an age-old quest. Curt Newton, as he led his variegated followers, became aware that the Brain was gliding beside him.

"Don't tell *me* to stay behind," warned Simon Wright. "I'd risk life itself to get inside this alien city,"

They hurried toward the gate of the high, translucent wall. It was a broad portal, whose tall leaves were opened inward. Inside, Captain Future and the others stopped involuntarily. Facing them on either side of the entrance towered two incredible statues. They were not statues of men or of any manlike being. They were black, shapeless masses of unidentifiable substance. In the front of each amorphous figure, two great, round yellow eyes without pupils stared solemnly at the adventurers. Curt's voice was a whisper.

"If those are statues of the Watchers, then the Watchers were indeed alien to our universe."

"They were apparently liquid of

body," muttered the Brain. "No ordinary evolution could produce intelligent creatures like that."

They started forward between the two weird statues. An unnerving thing happened. A solemn voice seemed to speak inside their minds.

*"Strangers who come at last to enter our ancient city, be warned!"*

## Chapter XVI

### Star Trails

CURT started violently, and the others recoiled. But after a moment, the explanation came to Captain Future.

"It's some mechanism that automatically projects a recorded telepathic message, when you come within its aura," he said hoarsely.

*"We, the last of the race whom you call the Watchers, are natives of a different universe. We came here to study this Birthplace of Matter of your universe. But we did not create this Birthplace! No living beings could do that, for this pulsing heart of your universe was created by the Force that created the universe itself. We merely tapped its wondrous powers and thus brought into being this world and city and devised the instruments that embody the secret. We leave one of those instruments for you to possess and utilize, believing that when you attain sufficient knowledge to reach this place, you will be too wise to misuse the power. For not lightly may the cosmic secrets*

*of creation be utilized for selfish ends. Should you attempt that, you may well destroy yourselves and all your race!"*

The solemn thought-message ceased to beat into the minds of Curt Newton and the others as they hastily moved on between the statues.

"Warning of the Watchers!" cried Ber Del shakenly, looking wildly back at the strange statues. "It's weird frightening —"

"It didn't frighten Larstan and his men," rapped Curt, looking feverishly around. "They must be somewhere here."

"The big citadel!" exclaimed Otho, pointing at the great spire that towered from the center of the city. "That might be where the Watchers left their instrument, and if so —" "Larstan would be there now!" Curt finished. "Come on!"

They started on a run through the streets, between the fairylike translucent towers that glistened beneath the flaming sky like transfixed dream palaces. They entered the street leading to the great citadel. *Flash!* The fire-streak struck like a bolt of lightning from behind a translucent building and just grazed Otho as he leaped wildly.

"Take cover!" Curt yelled, his proton-pistol leaping into his hand. "Larstan's men have set an ambush for us!"

Futuremen and star rovers dived behind corners of adjacent buildings. Criss- cross of proton beams and firebolts wove a pattern of death through

the street as the Korians and Curt's followers swiftly shot at each exposed head.

"We've got to get on!" Curt exclaimed. "They're holding us up here while Larstan searches for the secret of the Watchers."

He made a movement to charge forward, in his superhuman anxiety. But Grag held him back.

"No, chief!" boomed the robot. They'd blast you down in a second — they're only waiting now for you to show yourself."

"Devils of Antares — can't we find some way to get around them and take them from behind?" raved Hol Jor furiously.

There seemed no way. The long street that had followed was without cross- streets, was merely a straight avenue leading to the central citadel.

"Fiends of Pluto, I think I see a way!" Otho hissed. "That window! If I could get through the building —"

**T**HE window of the tower behind which they crouched was twenty feet over their heads. Yet Otho, doubling himself and then springing upward with inconceivable agility, reached it. He disappeared inside the translucent building.

"Be ready to make a frontal rush at them when Otho surprises them!" Curt warned the others, gripping his weapon.

A few moments dragged by like eternities. Then they heard a crackle of fire- rods, and Otho's high, fierce battle yell from beyond the buildings. "Now!" Curt yelled, plunging out and

up the street.

The others were only a shade less swift than he, Grag booming out a deafening shout, Hol Jor's eyes blazing, all of them triggering as they ran at the Korians ahead. The Korians were confused, some of them facing Curt's party, others firing at Otho who was turning his proton beam on them from behind the other angle of the building. It became a mad whirl of fighting men and blazing streaks of death. Three of the dozen Korians had dropped, and Ki Illok had cried out and fallen upon one wounded knee, in the first moment.

"The citadel, lad!" came the Brain's high cry to Curt. "Larstan — in there —"

"Go on, chief!" cried Grag, who had gripped one of the green men in great metal hands. "We'll hold these devils off!"

Captain Future plunged through the melee, triggering his proton at Korians who fiercely sought to bar his way, fighting toward the entrance of the towering citadel.

He burst through the entrance of the building, closely followed by the Brain. In one quick glimpse, Curt got an impression of the awesome interior of this shrine of the Watchers. A vast, cathedrallike room of circular cross section, its translucent white walls soared in lofty curves up into dim immensity. And, like the altar of a cathedral, was the massive oblong mechanism at the center of this great fane. Upon its top were banks of hundreds of small keys, and from its face protruded a hundred nozzle-like

spouts.

Larstan was crouched over this mechanism. The Korian king's handsome green face was tigerish as he looked up at Curt's entrance.

"Somehow I *knew* you would get here, devil stranger!" snarled the Korian ruler. "But you'll never —"

Curt shot! The proton beam from his pistol leaped forward like a lance of light — but was stopped by a barrier ten feet away. Larstan's fingers had pressed down certain keys of the mechanism over which he crouched in the instant before Curt fired. The oblong machine had vibrated strongly, and from its nozzles had spurted a cloud of shining particles that instantaneously crystallized into a high wall of transparent glassy substance that completely surrounded and imprisoned Captain Future and the Brain. Curt dashed forward with a cry and battered with the butt of his pistol against the glassy wall. The thin substance utterly resisted his blows. From beyond it, Larstan's triumphant laugh sounded.

"It's no use," mocked the Korian king. "That wall around you is real, solid matter, even though I just created it out of *nothing*!"

Larstan's eyes flamed with triumph. "This instrument of the Watchers embodies the long-sought secret of the Birthplace, the secret of matter-creation. I've been studying it for hours, with the aid of the directions left by the Watchers in an easily deciphered code. I've mastered its operation." The Korian king seemed intoxicated with triumph over his adversary. His whole bearing was

one of mad exaltation. "I'm going to kill you, Future! But to make your death more bitter, I'll first prove to you how I can use this wondrous instrument for conquest of all the worlds inside the cloud. Watch!"

Larstan swiftly pressed other keys of the oblong machine. From the spouts on its face, another shining cloud spurted.

**I**T CRYSTALLIZED into a block of solid gold, just outside the transparent wall that imprisoned Curt and Simon. Again the Korian touched the keys. This time the cloud formed a heavy-duty, perfect fire-rod mounted on a swivel. Again, the machine operated instantaneously brought into being a miniature space-ship.

"You see, Captain Future?" flared Larstan's triumphant voice. "With this creator I can produce weapons in limitless quantities!"

"Lad, we've lost!" came the Brain's hopeless whisper. "The secret — in Larstan's hands —"

"Get behind me, Simon," gritted Curt. "I'm going to try to break out of here."

"Now you're going to die, Future," came the Korian's snarl. "I need only —" Curt acted. He had noticed that his proton beam had faintly cracked the glassy wall around them. So he thumbed the intensity-ratchet to the highest notch and loosed the intensified beam at the slight crack. The blinding splash of the thin ray widened the crack! Curt instantly flung himself with all his force at that part of the wall.

"No, *that* won't work!" cried Larstan, his hands darting over the keys of the creator.

Captain Future's hurtling figure crashed through the cracked wall. But even as he did so, the creator-machine was spurring forth another shining cloud. This cloud crystallized instantly into a similar but much thicker wall of transparent substance that had a larger diameter. Its larger circle again held Curt and Simon prisoners. Captain Future ripped at this new barrier with his proton beam. But the beam could make no impression on this much thicker wall. Larstan's face was livid.

"You thought you'd best me at the last! You have one moment to live. I'm going to create a huge block of metal that will crush you both beneath it!" His hands hovered over the banks of keys with deadly purpose.

Simon's rasping voice came calmly to Curt. "I think this is goodbye, lad."

"No!" panted Captain Future. "Larstan made a slip! We've still got a chance —"

Near him were the gold block and miniature space-ship and heavy fire-rod that Larstan had created in boasting demonstration of his power. They were *inside* this new, larger-diameter wall. Curt Newton jumped to the fire-rod. It was apparently as perfect as though created by human hands. He swung it toward the section of the thick glassy wall facing Larstan. Larstan glimpsed his movement. The Korian's eyes flashed wildly, and his hands clawed down

toward the keys of the creator. But Curt triggered the heavy fire-rod in the same second. Blasting flare of energy exploded inside their prison, the shock hurling Captain Future violently backward. Stunned and groggy, he staggered to his feet, drawing his own proton pistol.

"You won't need it, lad," came the Brain's sharp voice. "That did it."

The bolt of energy from the heavy fire-rod had torn a gaping hole through the thick wall around them. It had blasted on, following Curt's unerring aim, to strike Larstan's head and breast. The man who had dreamed of conquest through creation lay a scorched corpse, sprawled behind the undamaged mechanism. Curt paid the machine no attention in this first moment, as he squeezed out of the hole torn in their prison wall.

"The others!" he exclaimed, running back again to the entrance.

His worries were relieved. Grag and Otho, with the three star captains, were approaching the building. Grag's metal body was seared by fire-blasts, Otho had a burn on his arm, and Ki Illok was limping on his wounded leg, supported by Hol Jor and old Ber Del.

"The Korians?" Curt cried.

"Those whom we didn't kill in that melee lost their nerve and surrendered," Otho said grimly. "Chief, what of Larstan?"

For answer, Curt pointed toward the altar-like mechanism behind which the Korian king lay dead. But it was not on the dead man, but on the wondrous mechanism that the eyes of

all of them fixed. Slowly, reverently, the Futuremen and star captains approached the thing across the awesome, soaring white cathedral of which it was the shrine.

"Its secret of creation — is it as you guessed?" asked Hol Jor in a low whisper.

**CAPTAIN FUTURE** was examining the machine. His hands trembled slightly as they touched this thing of power incalculable which had been the goal of so many star-quests for long ages. Finally, after long study, he stood back. His eyes were shining, as he turned to the others.

"This creator is built after the pattern of the Birthplace itself! My theory about the Birthplace, that it whirls electrical radiation into droplets of electricity or electrons by centrifugal action, must be correct. For this machine apparently sucks in the omnipresent radiation of the universe, coagulates it into electrons that combine into the atoms of the ninety-six elements and then spurts controlled clouds of those atoms to join in any desired combination to form any type of matter."

Ki Illok asked a breathless, quivering question. "Then with this thing limitless air and water can be created for our arid planets?"

Captain Future nodded soberly. "It will take study to learn the instructions for its operations. But once we have learned them and have studied the design, we can make as many other creators like it as we wish."

There was a hush, as the star rovers looked tremblingly at the object of all their dreams, this thing that could bring life to faraway wasted worlds, this incalculable treasure that thousands of men from far stars had died vainly seeking. And then a strange scene took place. As though in a shrine indeed, old Ber Del knelt upon his knees before the mechanism. Ki Illok and Hol Jor unconsciously followed his example. Tears were streaming down the old Vegan's face.

"I am giving thanks," choked the old star captain. "Thanks for this thing of power that means life for our dying worlds."

**U**PON the sunlit central plaza of the city of Thruun rested four ships. One was the *Comet*. The others were Thruunian cruisers which had been equipped with vibration drive in the days that had passed and manned by volunteer crews of Thruun. The Futuremen and their three star-roving friends were preparing to depart for their home stars. Curt Newton stood with Grag and Simon and Otho and the three star captains, facing Kwolok and Thyria and a great host of the people of Thruun.

"You will come back through the cloud some day?" Thyria cried eagerly to Curt.

"Who knows?" said Captain Future. "You'll no longer be isolated here at any rate. The cruisers and crews you are lending my friends will be the beginning of new trade and travel between your worlds here and the universe outside the cloud."

Old Kwolok showed strong emotion as he bade Curt farewell. Curt had presented to the Thruunian ruler the creator machine they had brought from the world of the Watchers, after studying and copying its design so that he and his friends could build others.

"I know not what to say," stammered the old king. "The machine will enable us to bring new life, new air and water to Thruun. Yet the commandment of the Watchers—"

Captain Future reassured him. "The Watchers left their secret to be used for the benefit of men, as I told you. It was only evil and ignorant races whom they sought to bar from that power. We are going to build other such creators for the benefit of our own withering planets. But rest assured that we will never allow the power to be misused." He had told Kwolok of the world of the sleepers beneath the ice, at the dark star outside the cloud. "We are going to stop at that world on our way homeward," Curt explained. "We shall wake those sleepers once more, and build for them a creator-machine. It won't rekindle their sun, but it will enable them to build a great fleet in which they can migrate to another star."

Now Captain Future and his three comrades turned toward Hol Jor and Ki Illok and old Ber Del. All the others were silent as these men from far separated stars, who had adventured and struggled side by side for so long, now faced each other in farewell.

"I hate goodbyes," rumbled big Hol Jor. The Antarian's red face was uncomfortable. "And I hate trying to thank people. But I'll say this — you've given us new life for our own planets, and you'll be conquering heroes if you ever come to Antares." "Or to my own star deep in the greatest cluster of Sagittarius!" cried Ki Illok.

They gripped hands, there in the brilliant red sunshine.

"You'll surely return to this part of the universe in time?" pressed old Ber Del, eagerly facing Curt. "You'll always find friends here."

"Sure they'll come back," predicted Hol Jor confidently. "Once they're back in their little System, they'll get to thinking about the great star trails of outer space, and they'll have to return."

"Say, you've got something there," exclaimed Otho. "It's going to be pretty dull in the System after all

this, in a way."

"I doubt it," boomed Grag. "You can make a cosmos full of trouble on one little moon, just by yourself."

They moved toward their waiting ships. Together, the ships rose from Thruun and arrowed through the glittering haze toward the inner surface of the cloud.

Together, they fought their way out through the currents of roaring dust, flung on by the power of the vibration drive.

They burst together out of the cloud, into the blazing beauty of the nebulae and stars and sun-clusters of the outside universe. And then the four racing ships moved away from each other on diverging courses — four captains of the great deep spaces, roaring down the star trails to their homes.