

The Star of Dread

A Complete Book-Length Scientifiction Novel
by Edmond Hamilton writing as Brett Sterling

The world's greatest space-farers battle to expose a dangerous secret menacing mankind and face desperate risks as they pursue two scheming miscreants across the void!

Chapter 1: Stellar Secret

LOW and ominous as distant thunder, the deep sound throbbed across the jungle moon. Through the green gloom of dense fern-forests into which the pale sunlight hardly penetrated, it pulsed like a whisper of menace. That quivering pulsation reached a big, raw clearing, recently hacked from the dense jungle. Here was a compact encampment, with light metal huts set up near the torpedo-like hulls of two small space-ships.

The score of men moving about the camp stopped and listened intently, as that throbbing whisper reached them.

"The danged Titanians have their Talkin' Trees goin' again, Joan," drawled an old, gray-haired Earthman with the grizzled face of a veteran. His faded blue eyes narrowed. "They're gettin' more and more upset."

The girl whom he addressed, a dark, pretty Earthgirl slim in brown jacket and slacks, listened alertly. She looked at the surrounding jungle.

"I suppose they're still watching us, even though you can never quite see them," she murmured.

This incident was taking place on Titania, wild moon of the planet Uranus. The flood of interplanetary trade and travel seldom touched this small world. Little of it had ever been explored. It remained an unfathomed wilderness, inhabited only by the primitive, human moon-tribes called the Titanians.

An observer might have wondered why this expedition had come to the moon. The men of it did not look like either traders, prospectors or space-pirates. The observer's perplexity would have increased when he recognized one of those two small parked space-ships as the *Comet*, the famous ship of

the Futuremen.

The reason for this expedition lay in the jungle just west of the encampment. Huge, crumbling stone walls and columns, carved with fantastic hieroglyphs, protruded from the ground beneath the great ferns there. It was those massive, age-old ruins of a perished civilization which had brought this archaeological and scientific expedition to wild Titania.

DOCTOR PHILIP WINTERS, biologist of the expedition, and Cole Norton, its chief physicist, came across the camp to Ezra Gurney and Joan Randall.

"I've never heard those natives make such a clamor," declared the elderly biologist in worried tones. "Do you suppose it means trouble?"

Winters was a thin, bald little man with a pinched, spectacled face and a great dome of forehead. He looked definitely alarmed.

Cole Norton, the physicist, scoffed at his suggestion. Norton was a big, blond young man with keen blue eyes and an intelligent, forceful face that had a touch of hardness in it.

"I shouldn't worry about the Titanians," he told Winters. "They'll make a lot of racket and keep spying on us, but that's all."

"It might not be all," drawled old Ezra Gurney dryly. "Them Titanians are plenty superstitious about these ruins. They call 'em the Sacred Stones, and they don't like our pokin' around them one little bit."

Norton shrugged. "Captain Future and his aides don't seem uneasy about it."

"How do the Titanians make those outlandish throbbing sounds?" Winters asked querulously of Ezra.

"It's their Talkin' Trees," explained the old Planet Patrol veteran. "They take big fern-trees, trim 'em to upright trunks, hollow 'em out inside and use 'em like big organ-pipes, by forcin' air up through 'em. All the tribes here on Titania talk to each other that way, and —"

Ezra's explanation was interrupted at this point by a weird new sound that came from the jungle west of the camp. It was a shout, a booming cry that could have come from no human throat.

"That's Grag yellin'!" exclaimed Ezra, "Somethin's happened to the Futuremen."

Alarm flashed into Joan Randall's brown eyes. "Maybe the Titanians are

attacking them. Come on.”

She was already running across the camp, drawing the small atom-pistol from her belt-holster.

“Wait a minute, Joan — oh, dang all fool reckless women!” swore Ezra Gurney, as he followed at top speed.

His own weapon was cradled in his hand as he and Winters and Cole Norton plunged after her into the green gloom of the jungle.

The fern-trunks rose about them like thick pillars, supporting flat fronds of foliage whose canopy excluded the pale light of the distant Sun. Bat-winged birds and giant insects flashed away from them in fright.

They quickly reached the place in the jungle from which that weird cry had come. It was an awesome spot. Giant and mysterious ruins of black artificial stone rose on every side. Massive walls and broken columns were almost covered by trailing vines and the drifted dust of ages.

These were the oldest and most baffling ruins on any of the nine planets of the Solar System. None of the System’s own human races had built these mighty edifices of the long ago. They had been the handiwork of a people from the stars, a people whose history furnished the scientists of the nine planets with their most colossal riddle.

A newly-dug excavation gaped near a lichen-covered wall. Standing beside it towered a huge and incredible figure — a massive, manlike metal robot seven feet high. His photoelectric eyes were gleaming at them as they approached, and his mechanical voice uttered again that booming cry.

“We’ve struck it,” he was shouting. “Ezra — Joan — the chief has found something big.”

“What are you talkin’ about, Grag?” Ezra demanded testily of the big robot. “Did you set up that tarnation bellowin’ just because you Futuremen found another crumblin’ old stone?”

“This one is different,” Grag boomed excitedly. “Wait till the chief explains it.”

Two men were clambering carefully out of the excavation, bearing between them a heavy stone tablet closely inscribed with weird hieroglyphs.

Captain Future’s gray eyes were snapping with excitement as he and Otho set the heavy tablet down. The tall, red-haired young Earthman who was the most famous planeteer and spacefarer in the System was openly exultant as he turned to the newcomers.

“This tablet we’ve unearthed is likely to be the most important Denebian inscription ever yet found,” he declared.

“It’s certainly the heaviest,” grumbled Otho, as he straightened.

OTHO, one of the three famous companions of Captain Future, was a striking, lithe, white figure. The synthetic man, or android, had a look of exasperation in his slant green eyes as he turned to Grag:

“Why didn’t you give us a hand with that tablet instead of standing there bellowing like a Jovian bull-buffalo?” he demanded.

“It was your turn to do a little work,” retorted Grag. “I did all the digging, didn’t I? I’m tired.”

“Bah, whoever heard of a robot getting tired?” jeered Otho.

Simon Wright, the Brain, had followed them up out of the excavation and was hovering intently over the mysterious stone tablet.

He was the strangest figure of them all, this third member of the Futuremen. A living human brain, a brain that had once lived in the body of a great scientist, dwelt now in a square, transparent serum-case. His stalk-borne lens-like artificial eyes were studying the hieroglyphs with unusual eagerness.

“What’s so important about this particular tablet, Curt?” Joan asked Captain Future in a puzzled voice.

Curt Newton explained. “It’s undoubtedly of the latest date of any Denebian inscription ever found. That means that it may hold the answer to the riddle of why the Denebians’ cosmic empire fell.”

The faces of Philip Winters and Cole Norton expressed comprehension, but old Ezra Gurney looked perplexed.

“I’m a space-man, not a scientist,” he complained. “What’s this big riddle you’re talkin’ about?”

“It’s the greatest mystery of history, Ezra,” said Captain Future. “You know, don’t you, that our Solar System was colonized ages ago by the people of the distant star Deneb? Those Denebians were a super-civilized race who colonized nearly every habitable star-system in the galaxy, by somehow breeding people who would fit the different conditions.

“Then, millions of years ago, that Denebian cosmic empire was suddenly wrecked. Their far-separated colonists sank into isolation and barbarism. They were our own ancestors, the ones in this System. But why did their

galactic empire meet disaster? It's always been a baffling riddle."

"And you think this inscription holds the answer?" Joan asked eagerly.

"I'm hoping that it does, because of its comparatively late date," Curt said with a nod. "That's why I organized this expedition to investigate these ruins, when I discovered them here last month. They looked so much later in date than any other Denebian ruins ever found."

He continued eagerly. "We'll take this tablet back to camp, and Simon and I will decipher it. You carry it, Grag."

Grumbling a little, the big robot reached down and picked up the massive stone tablet as though it were a feather. They started back through the fern-jungle toward the encampment.

Ezra Gurney suddenly flashed his gun. "Look there!"

In front of them two shadowy green figures were darting away. Two green-skinned men, clad in tunica of woven fern-fibers and carrying long, slim blow-gun.

"They're Titanians — don't shoot!" Captain Future warned sharply.

The two moon-natives had already disappeared into the dense jungle. A shrill, discordant cry floated through the green gloom.

"They been spyin' on us — and they don't like us movin' this tablet from the other Sacred Stones," Ezra Gurney muttered uneasily.

"They're a superstitious lot," Curt Newton conceded. "But we'll have no trouble with them if we don't start a fight."

When they reached camp, the stone tablet was carried into the metal shelter-hut used by the Futuremen. Curt Newton and the Brain began their study of the Denebian hieroglyphs at once, while the other two Futuremen and Joan and Ezra Gurney watched with keen interest.

The Sun, a very small one at this great distance, was sinking toward the horizon. Darkness swept swiftly across the jungle moon. But the gloom was soon relieved. Up into the starry heavens rose the vast green shield of Uranus, a monstrous disc that cast an effulgent green glow upon the surrounding jungle, the metal huts, and the two gleaming spaceships.

Philip Winters stood at the fire that had been kindled at the center of the camp, looking uneasily toward the jungle. He started violently as someone came up beside him.

"Oh, it's you, Norton," he said with a sigh of relief. "I'm afraid I'm a little jumpy. That incessant clamor is getting on my nerves."

THE low, muttering thunder of the Talking Trees was rumbling unceasingly through the night, as the Titanians talked across many leagues.

“This isn’t exactly a pleasure-resort,” Cole Norton agreed brusquely. In the firelight, his blond, virile face had a frown on it. “I wish now I hadn’t come along on this party. I was hoping I’d be able to learn some of the secrets of the ancient Denebian science, that would be worth something. But the ruins have yielded little except fragments of historical data.”

The other members of the expedition were gathering around the fire, for the night air was chili. These technicians, all Earthmen with the exception of two Martians and a single Venusian, had spent the day in photographing, measuring, excavating and other tasks amid the great ruins.

“Plenty of Titanians around camp tonight,” growled one big X-Ray photographer. “They’re flitting around in the jungle like shadows.”

At that moment, Captain Future emerged from the metal hut in which he and the Brain had spent long hours of study. The men turned to him with quick interest.

“Have you succeeded in deciphering the tablet?”

Curt nodded. His tanned, handsome face had an unusual gleam of excitement in it. “We did, and we found something terrific.”

Cole Norton asked a quick question, “What did you learn from it?”

Grag was bringing the stone tablet back out of the hut. He put it down by the fire. Otho and the Brain, with Joan and Ezra, followed him.

Curt’s brilliant eyes swept the expectantly waiting members of the expedition. “The inscription on that tablet is the clue to a tremendous secret of the past,” he told them. “The greatest secret of Denebian science — their secret of artificial evolution.”

“Artificial evolution?” echoed a Martian technician without comprehension.

“The Denebians,” Curt reminded him, “colonized hosts of star-systems and worlds throughout the galaxy, each world differing in natural conditions. They had to have colonists who could live in such alien conditions. So they used processes of artificial evolution to breed humans who would fit those alien conditions. We’ve never known how they were able to do that.”

“And this inscription tells the secret of their power of artificial evolution?” cried Philip Winters.

The little biologist's thin face was transfigured with emotion, his eyes blazing behind their spectacles, his whole body trembling with excitement.

"This inscription doesn't tell the secret, but tells where the secret could be found," Curt corrected the scientist. "It refers to a place called the Chamber of Life, located on a planet called Aar of the Star Deneb. It gives the location of that so-called Chamber of Life, which undoubtedly was the laboratory where the ancient Denebians manipulated their powers of artificial evolution to breed new species of humans for colonizing alien worlds."

Winters' whisper was charged with awe. "They bred new species of humans? They knew how to do that?"

His voice rose, shrill with excitement. "If we could find that secret, we could accelerate evolution artificially. We could transform our whole race into supermen, could make men like gods!"

Cole Norton's eyes narrowed slightly as he added slowly, "Why, a secret like that would be worth billions — trillions."

Philip Winters' eager emotion took him to Curt's side. The little biologist clutched at Captain Future's arm in his excitement.

"Captain Future, we could find that secret, if you'll help!" he cried. "Your ship, the *Comet*, is the only ship in existence with speed enough to make the traverse to a star as distant as Deneb. You'll do it?"

"No, I will not do it," Curt Newton replied firmly.

The excited biologist seemed thunderstruck. "But without your help and your ship, that secret will never be found."

Captain Future's face was stern. "I do not intend that that secret shall ever be found. I am against using science to tamper with the evolution of the human race. You might breed gods — or you might breed devils, It's better for man to evolve slowly and naturally."

Philip Winters' fanatic passion found shrill utterance. "That's a stupidly reactionary attitude to take. Do you realize what giant strides our race could make overnight, with that power of artificial evolution?"

"Doctor Winters is right," supported Cole Norton quickly. "It would be a crime to suppress a scientific secret of such tremendous value."

"It would be a worse crime to turn that secret loose in our System," Curt Newton retorted.

His searching gray eyes swept their faces in the firelight, and he spoke with earnest deliberation.

“I’ve seen a good bit of the universe,” he emphasized. “And I’ve seen enough of what misdirected science can do, that I’ll never give anyone a chance to unleash a power like that of artificial evolution upon our human race.”

He drew his proton-pistol as he spoke. “I’m so convinced on the subject, that I am going to make sure that the clue to that secret which this inscription holds will never fall into wrong hands.”

Winters uttered an anguished cry and sprang forward. He was too late. Curt’s pistol had jetted a brilliant white beam that splashed over the ancient inscribed tablet. It disintegrated it to nothingness!

Chapter 2: Treachery in Camp

AFTER Captain Future’s weapon had wiped out the last traces of writing on the tablet, Dr. Winters stood for a moment as if transfixed. Cole Norton’s face was a picture of frustrated fury.

“You blind fool, you’ve destroyed it,” shrilled the agonized Winters. “You’ve destroyed the only clue to the greatest secret of the ages.”

“No, I’ve not destroyed it,” Captain Future said. “I know the location of the Chamber of Life at Deneb. I memorized it. I also had the Futuremen, Joan and Ezra memorize it, too, in case something happened to me.

“So the clue to the secret of artificial evolution won’t be completely lost. But it will never now fall into evil hands, as it might have done.”

Raging, Winters was about to loose a torrent of accusation. But before it left his lips there came alarming interruption.

A discordant, screeching cry had gone up from the dark jungle a moment after Captain Future destroyed the ancient tablet. Now it was echoed by a wild tumult of cries from all around the camp — a heart-checking chorus of savage fury.

“Chief, that’s the Titanians!” cried Otho. “They saw you destroy one of the Sacred Stones, and now —”

“And now the green devils are goin’ to attack,” yelled Ezra Gurney.

Captain Future realized the imminence of their peril. The green-lit jungle was alive with the shadowy forms of moon-tribesmen. Their angry uproar

filled the night.

Curt Newton took command of the situation. He called a sharp order to those of the expedition who had hastily secured their atom-guns.

“No shooting — that would only precipitate things. Wait here, all of you. I’m going out and talk with the Titanians.”

“Curt, don’t do that.” Joan Randall’s pretty face showed alarm and she clung to his sleeve. “They won’t listen.”

“I think I can soothe down their superstitions,” Curt told her. “I’ll explain that the tablet we destroyed was not one of the Sacred Stones, but an evil thing. Let me handle them.”

Grag flexed his huge metal arms. “Let me handle ‘em, Chief.”

“All of you stay here,” Curt Newton ordered. “Remember, no shooting. We’re not going to kill any of those poor devils just because their superstitions have misled them.”

Captain Future strode boldly toward the jungle, his hand upraised in the immemorial gesture of friendship. The others watched tensely.

They heard Curt Newton’s clear voice, speaking to the shadowy Titanians as he reached the jungle. They tried to make out what he was saying.

One of the expedition was not watching or listening. Doctor Philip Winters, totally ignoring their sudden peril, had stooped beside the scorched remnants of the inscribed tablet that Curt had destroyed.

The little biologist was still beside himself with emotion. His thin face was raging as he looked up at Cole Norton, who had followed him.

“The criminal folly of destroying this tablet,” Winters exclaimed bitterly. “Why did it have to be a stupid reactionary like Future who found this clue? Why couldn’t it have been found by someone who would appreciate the value of that secret to our race?”

“You’re right, Winters,” Cole Norton agreed. “I can’t understand why Future is so blind. Why, that secret of artificial evolution would be of inestimable value.”

“I’m not thinking of the value of the secret in money,” declared the fanatic biologist. “It’s what it could accomplish for our race that I have in mind. Just think, with that power we could accelerate and direct the course of evolution. We could make the System peoples superhuman.”

His eyes were glowing behind his spectacles. Norton saw and

understood. This aging little man was a true fanatic of science. The younger man cunningly played upon that fanaticism.

"I feel the same way about it," he told Winters forcefully. "We shouldn't let that great secret be lost to our peoples. We ought to go to Deneb after it, ourselves."

Philip Winters stared up at him. "How could we? No ship except Future's *Comet* has sufficient speed to cross the hundreds of light-years that separate us from Deneb."

"Then we ought to take the *Comet*, and go in it," Cole Norton declared boldly.

WINTERS' jaw dropped. "But that would be piracy."

"Not really piracy — we'd return the ship to him when we came back," the big young physicist said. He added hastily, "Besides, what do a few legal formalities amount to beside the potentialities for the advance of humanity which lie in that Denebian secret?"

"You're right," muttered Philip Winters, frowning. The fanatic light was strong in his eyes, "If Future is too blindly reactionary to see it, we'd be justified in making use of his ship."

"I could pilot and navigate the *Comet*," Norton said in eager tones. "I'm a licensed space-pilot, and during the time we've been camped here, I've used every opportunity to study the unique features of the Futuremen's ship. I thought I might learn something valuable — valuable to my work, I mean."

He added the last phrase hastily, but Winters had not noticed. The little biologist seemed lost in thought.

The two were not being noticed by the others in the camp, since all those others were tensely listening to Curt talking with the Titanians.

"I don't see how we could do it," Winters said gloomily. "Go to Deneb for the ancient secret, I mean. For even if we got there in the *Comet*, we wouldn't know where to look for that Chamber of Life in which the secret of artificial evolution lies. We don't know the clue that was in this inscription."

"That Randall girl knows it," Cole Norton pointed out coolly. "We'll take her along. She'll tell us the clue to the Chamber of Life when she wants badly enough to get back home. We won't need to harm her."

Philip Winters hesitated. Norton perceived that his bold plan of action had given pause to the biologist despite his rage against Future.

Norton pressed home his final argument. "Of course, if you agree with Future that that secret ought to be suppressed —"

Winters uttered an exclamation of anger. "I'll never agree to that. I'm a biologist, and I'll never consent to seeing the supreme discovery of biological science smothered by stupid scruples."

His bald head jerked with sudden decision. "I'm with you on this, Norton. We two are scientists, and we're not going to let the greatest scientific achievement of the ages be kept hidden. We're going to Deneb after it."

A brief gleam of triumph shone in Cole Norton's hard blue eyes, but he wrung Winters' hand with every appearance of earnest sincerity.

"Good! Now we'll have to plan fast, if we're to get away in the *Comet*. We'll need a few men for crew, men we can depend on."

"The technicians —" Winters began doubtfully.

"We couldn't count on them — they're hypnotized by Future's fame like everybody else," Norton said quickly. "But I know a couple of men over on Uranus whom we can bank on to follow us anywhere. I'll go over on some excuse and get them. In the meantime, I'll want you to fix things here to insure our getaway. Here's what I want you to do —"

While Norton talked rapidly in low tones to the biologist, Curt Newton was speaking slowly and clearly to the Titanians in the fern-jungle.

The anxious watchers perceived that the shadowy green tribesmen had gathered to hear Captain Future, and had ceased their angry outcries.

"He seems to be winning them over," Joan Randall said hopefully, the worry on her face lessening.

"Never was anybody like Cap'n Future for handlin' strange planetary peoples," remarked Ezra Gurney admiringly.

Curt's colloquy with the moon-tribesmen ended. The Titanians melted back into the jungle, and Captain Future came striding back through the green planet-glow to his friends.

"I think I convinced them that we mean no harm to the Sacred Stones," he said. "But it was touch and go there for a moment."

He added musingly, "It's queer, their superstitious reverence for these old Denebian ruins. Undoubtedly, it's a racial tradition from the long-dead time when the men of Deneb colonized these worlds."

Cole Norton had unobtrusively joined their group, and now the blond

physicist advanced an earnest proposition.

“Those Titanians may get ugly again when they see us continuing our study of the ruins, Captain Future. Why don’t we set up a protective electrified barrier around our whole camp? Then if they did attack, we could repel them without needing to kill them.”

THE proposal appealed to Curt Newton. He wished to continue their study of the ruins. Yet he did not want under any circumstances to be forced to take the lives of any of the superstitious Titanians.

“We haven’t the material and equipment here to set up a barrier,” he pointed out. “I suppose we could get it over at Uranus.”

“I can go over there in the *Lightning* and have the stuff back by tomorrow night,” Norton offered quickly. He was referring to the small space-cruiser in which the scientists and technicians had come to Titania.

Curt’s face cleared. “That’s good of you, Norton. I’ll send Otho along with you to help you.”

“I won’t need him,” Norton said hastily. “And you have plenty of use for every pair of hands here.”

Otho looked disappointed. “Hang it, I wouldn’t mind the trip. I like that city Lulanee over there.”

“You ought to like it,” the Brain said acidly. “As I remember it, the last time we were in Lulanee you staged an historic brawl in the space-men’s quarter after you were crazy enough to drink ‘radiura highballs.’ ”

Cole Norton, with a final meaning glance at the nervous-looking Winters, took off less than an hour later in the *Lightning*. The small cruiser rose into the green planet-glow, circled once, and then darted away with a blast of fire from its rocket-tubes toward vast green Uranus.

Most of the members of the expedition were retiring to their huts for the night. Grag, who never slept, was standing guard around the edge of the camp.

Curt Newton stood in the greenlit silence, looking up at the starry heavens. His shadowed face was thoughtful as he contemplated a bright white star that shone in solitary splendor amid a host of lesser suns.

It was Deneb, the mystery star of the galaxy, six hundred and fifty light-years across the universe. His thoughts leaped out across that mighty abyss, as they had done many times before.

“You’re not regretting your decision?”

It was Joan Randall who spoke at his side, half chaffingly but half in earnest.

He slipped his arm around her, and shook his head. “No, Joan. That old Denebian secret must remain secret.”

His voice was brooding. “I’ve seen things out in the nearer star-systems which have convinced me for all time that there are limits beyond which science should not transgress. Using biological powers to tamper with the human race oversteps those limits.”

“I wondered, because you were looking at Deneb so wistfully,” said the girl.

Captain Future smiled. “Deneb has always held a fascination for me, I admit. I’ve always wanted to go there, distant as it is, and learn the answer to that great riddle of why its ancient empire fell.”

His gray eyes kindled. “Just think of what a man might find at Deneb. It was the well-spring of the human race and of human civilization. Its science may have been far beyond anything we know. One might find there a super-civilization ripened by ages of culture, a people wonderful beyond our dreams.”

Joan Randall saw the leaping eagerness in his eyes, and knew that the ancient pull of galactic mystery was tugging again at this wild, star-roving spirit.

“But Deneb and its riddle will have to wait,” Curt Newton added in a sober voice. “Our System is in too great a ferment these days, from its first interstellar expansion, to take time now for such a long voyage across the galaxy.”

Chapter 3: Abducted into Space

MEMBERS of the archaeological party had retired to their huts, and the green-lit encampment was soon wrapped in slumbering silence. Only the Brain, brooding in the Futuremen’s hut in an unfathomable reverie of scientific speculation, and Grag, strolling watchfully around the circle of the camp, remained wakeful.

Neither Simon Wright, the Brain, nor Grag saw or heard Philip Winters when he crept forth from his shelter an hour later. His face a sickly white in the viridescent glow of great Uranus, the little biologist soundlessly entered the metal shack that contained the expedition's equipment and supplies.

He came out, hugging something to his breast. Waiting until Grag's circle had taken the robot to the opposite side of the camp, Winters darted silently through the looming fern-trees toward the ancient Denebian ruins.

He returned some minutes later, stealthily slipping back across the camp without being observed by Grag, and regaining his own metal cabin.

"Everything quiet," Grag reported to Captain Future next morning. "I don't think the Titanians will give us any more trouble."

Curt Newton nodded. "Just the same, I'll be glad when Norton gets back with the stuff for a protective barrier."

Throughout the day, the Futuremen and the other members of the expedition continued their intent investigation of the extensive ruins.

Captain Future had discovered this ruined Denebian city. He had reported the discovery to the Planetary Institute on Earth, and had acceded to the Institute's eager request that some of its scientist-members might accompany the Futuremen in an investigation of the ruins.

They labored throughout the day, clearing away the dirt and debris from around the great stones. Philip Winters was nervous and distraught while he worked. As they returned to camp at sunset, the little biologist continually consulted his watch.

Captain Future noticed and misinterpreted the biologist's anxiety. "Norton should be back with the *Lightning* any minute now," Curt Newton told him. "Then it won't take long for us to put up a protective electric barrier."

Winters started, and then nodded hastily. "I'll be glad when he gets back," he muttered.

The little, sinking Sun cast level rays across the vast fern wilderness of the jungle moon. All was serenely tranquil as they prepared the evening meal, except for the interminable arguing of Otho and Grag. Then the low drone of distant rocket-tubes became audible.

"Here comes Norton with the *Lightnin'*," drawled Ezra Gurney, pointing toward a gleaming little speck now gliding down toward the camp.

Boom! A thunderous detonation rocked the ground beneath them with

startling suddenness. A cloud of dirt fountained upward west of the camp.

"Imps of space, what was that?" Otho gasped. "It sounded like an atomic bomb letting go."

Curt Newton's tanned face flashed alarm. "Something's wrong! That blast came from the ruins. Grag — Otho — come on!"

He started plunging back toward the ruins, with the Futuremen and most of the other members of the expedition behind him. But Philip Winters hung back, and laid a delaying hand on Joan Randall's arm as she started to follow.

"Don't go, Miss Randall," warned the little biologist shrilly. "There may be danger there."

"He's right, Joan — stay here," Captain Future ordered peremptorily as he ran.

His proton-pistol was in his hand as he dived through the dusky jungle with the Futuremen and Ezra and the technicians close behind.

They could hear the roar of the rocket-tubes as the *Lightning* landed in the camp behind them, but they paid Norton's return scant attention at this moment.

When they reached the ruins, Curt Newton stopped. He and the others surveyed the scene in appalled silence.

The great carven stones that had stood here for ages had been shattered and wrecked by an explosion of such power that it had gouged a big, raw crater from the ground.

"Holy Space-fiends," yelled Otho. "Somebody has planted a charge of atomite here and blown up the ruins."

AT THIS moment, two new sounds claimed attention. One was a shrill screech of rage from a Titanian throat, a little away in the jungle.

The other cry was a muffled scream that came from back in camp. And Curt Newton recognized that voice.

"That's Joan!" he shouted. "Back to camp — this blast was a ruse to get us out here!"

They whirled and started back to the encampment. Before they reached it, they heard again a deep drone of powerful rocket-tubes.

But this was a louder, stronger drone than that of a few moments before. Every one of the Futuremen instantly recognized the sound.

"That's the *Comet*!" Grag bellowed, running. "Who in the devil is —"

Captain Future sprinted. But he emerged from the fern-jungle into the encampment, too late.

The *Comet* was soaring steeply up into the dying light. Its take-off was ragged but so swift that, almost in a split-second, the ship was out of sight in the sky.

"Somebody's stolen our ship," roared Grag, beside himself with rage.

"Joan!" Curt Newton cried, plunging across the camp.

There was no answer. He dived into one after another of the metal huts, and then into the *Lightning*. But the huts and the cruiser were empty.

"Norton ain't here and neither is Philip Winters," shrilled Ezra Gurney, running up to him. "What does it mean?"

"They took the *Comet* and they took Joan," cried Captain Future swiftly.

His brown face was a stiff mask, but there was a raging flame in his gray eyes and his hand gripped the butt of his proton-pistol convulsively.

The Talking Trees of the Titanians began their thunderous throbbing suddenly, but none of the appalled group paid it attention in this moment.

"I was a fool not to see it," Curt Newton cried. "Winters was crazy to go to Deneb for that secret of artificial evolution, to search for the Chamber of Life. Only the *Comet* could take them to that far star. So he and Norton plotted to grab our ship, and they've taken Joan with them because she knows the clue of the inscription."

"Why in Space are we standing here talking about it?" snarled Otho furiously. He darted toward the *Lightning*, "We may be able to head 'em off in this cruiser, before they can get clear."

"Not a chance," Captain Future said bitterly. "Norton has taken the injectors of the cruiser's eyes. I saw it when I searched the ship."

"Then we're stymied till we fix new injectors?" gasped Grag. "Holy Space-fiends, this is a mess."

The Brain was speaking in his cold, rapid way. "The plot was a clever one. Winters must have planted an atomite charge in the ruins last night, and used one of our own radio-detonators to touch it off this evening, just as Norton returned. They knew we'd run to the ruins, and Winters detained Joan here so they could seize both her and the *Comet*."

"And they're on their way to Deneb now, hang it, raged Otho. "But we'll follow them, and when we run them down we'll pay off the score."

"How are we going to follow?" cried Grag. "No ship but our *Comet* has a

high-speed drive capable of taking it to Deneb in a reasonable time. We haven't got a chance of ever overtaking them."

"Nevertheless, we're going to pursue them, across the galaxy and clean out of it, if necessary," gritted Curt Newton. "It's not only our ship and Joan, it's that fiendish scientific secret that Winters wants to find and turn loose on our System. We must get it away from him."

"Listen," cried Ezra Gurney sharply. The old veteran's faded blue eyes were bulging.

THEY became aware that the tumultuous throbbing of the Talking Trees had risen in these last few moments to tremendous volume. It had become a rolling thunder that was reverberating louder and louder through the deepening dusk.

"The Titanians know their Sacred Stones have been destroyed, an' they must be clear out of their heads with rage," gasped Ezra. "Every one of the moon-tribes will be pouring down on us in a few minutes."

"And we can't get away in that crippled cruiser," cried Grag. "Norton and Winters certainly made sure we couldn't follow them."

That the Titanians were gathering for a mass attack, could not be doubted. The rolling thunder of the Talking Trees had risen to a feverish tumult that throbbed deafeningly through the gathering darkness.

"Them green tribesmen will be bursting out on us any minute," Ezra warned Captain Future. "An' no talkin' will stop 'em this time."

"We'll have to mow down the poor lunatics with our atom-guns," growled Grag. "We can't get away, and we can't let them murder us without resistance."

"No, wait," Curt Newton said sharply. "I have a better idea than that. It may work."

Curt was still determined not to massacre the superstitious Titanians. Searching his mind for an alternative, he had hit upon a possible expedient on which he resolved to risk their fate.

"Get out that big field-generator we used for the X-ray photography," he ordered Grag. "Otho, you help me with the power unit."

"What in space good is that outfit going to be to us?" Grag wondered.

But he did not disobey Captain Future's command. Between them, the Futuremen hauled out from their equipment-cabin the two heavy pieces of

apparatus.

The field-generator was a mechanism which emitted a broad zone of radiation of X-ray type, which had enabled the scientists of the expedition to study the inmost structure of the Denebian ruins. Its power-unit was a small cyclotron mounted with electric dynamotors and transformers.

Uranus had lifted its monstrous green disk above the horizon, drenching the encampment with viridescent light. By that weird glow, Curt Newton labored hastily to alter the circuit of the X-ray generator.

"Here they come, Cap'n Future," yelled Ezra Gurney a few minutes later. The old veteran, who had been watching the jungle, raised his atom-gun.

"Hold fire, everybody," rang Curt Newton's order. "Let them come right out into the camp."

"It's crazy," Ezra Gurney protested.

Yet he did not fire. Nor did the nervous, fearful technicians and scientists behind them use their weapons when the Titanians appeared.

That was a bare moment later. With a hoarse cry of rage and hatred that broke from hundreds of throats, a great horde of the green moon-tribesmen burst from the fern-jungle. Their blow-guns and primitive spears were raised as they rushed forward to slay these men whom they believed to have destroyed their Sacred Stones.

"No firing," cautioned Curt Newton loudly again, as the yelling horde rolled forward. "One more second —"

His hand was on the switch of the X-ray generator. The power-unit was already throbbing.

Curt Newton waited until the Titanian attackers were only a hundred yards away and were about to loose a shower of blow-gun missiles. Then he suddenly closed the circuit of the altered generator.

An incredible phenomenon followed. Captain Future and every one of the men around him suddenly became — skeletons!

Chapter 4: Race Against Time

TRANSFORMED in a flash, the entire scientific party stood there, a group of hideous skeletons with ghastly skull-faces. It was breath-taking.

Even the Futuremen felt amazed.

“Devils of Mars,” Ezra Gurney’s bony jaws seemed to open horribly as that stupefied cry came from him. The superstitious Titanians uttered cries of horror at the sudden awful transfiguration of Curt and his party.

They stopped their mad forward charge. A few of the Titanians who did not stop in time suddenly became skeletons also in appearance. That was too much for the moon-tribesmen.

With wild panic, they recoiled to the fern-jungle. In a few moments, they were gone. Cries of terror came back from them as they fled.

Captain Future hastily shut off the big field generator. “We only had a few seconds of the radiation,” he said breathlessly. “Not enough to harm us, considering that our spaceman’s clothes are radiation-resistant.”

“Wha — what did that?” Ezra Gurney gasped, looking down unbelievably at himself. They had lost their skeleton guise, were all normal once more.

“I simply amplified the generator to blanket the whole camp with X-ray radiation for a few seconds,” Captain Future told them. “It scared them, plenty. They won’t bother us again.”

His lips compressed, he looked up at the starry sky toward the brilliant white star Deneb.

And his voice was rapid and hard. “We’ve no time to waste now if we’re to overtake Norton and Winters. We must make new injectors for this cruiser, and get away from here.”

“Chief, what good’ll it do?” Otho protested hopelessly. “This tub, the *Lightning*, can never overtake the *Comet*. There isn’t a ship in the System that has a vibration-drive powerful enough to match the *Comet*’s speed.”

“I know that,” Curt Newton rapped impatiently. “But remember, we have spare generators and projectors for the *Comet*’s vibration-drive, stored away in the Moon-laboratory. We’ll install them in this cruiser, and they’ll give it a speed equal to that of our own ship.”

The Brain spoke coolly. “You realize, of course, the great risk we’ll be taking in doing that? No cruiser like this — no ordinary ship — is built to endure the thrust of such a super-powerful drive. The whole ship will be liable to crack under the thrust, as we build up acceleration.”

“We can nurse the craft along if we’re lucky,” Captain Future retorted. His voice flared. “Blast it, we have to take any risk.”

That outburst, breaking the usual self-control of the red-haired planeteer, told them the strain under which Curt Newton was laboring.

Not only was Joan Randall's safety at stake, not only their beloved ship, but also an age-old scientific secret that could unchain disaster on the System if ever it was used.

By two hours later, they had hastily contrived makeshift injectors for the *Lightning*. At once, Curt Newton and the Futuremen and Ezra Gurney took off in it.

"I'll leave word at Uranus to send a relief ship here to you," he told the other members of the scientific expedition in parting. "You'll be able to finish investigating the ruins without fear of Titanian interference."

From Uranus, the *Lightning* flashed Sunward at the highest speed of which it was capable. Curt chafed at the slowness of the craft by comparison with his own superswift *Comet*. Every hour that passed saw Norton and Winters — and Joan Randall — plunging farther into the vast cosmic abyss toward distant Deneb.

"Norton is the man behind this plot," remarked the Brain. "I observed both men during our stay at Titania. Winters is an impractical visionary, a fanatic of science. But Norton is intelligent, unscrupulous and self-seeking. He was always trying to pry out valuable knowledge from us."

Captain Future nodded somberly. "He thinks that that ancient secret of artificial evolution would bring him riches and power. And it probably would — but at the cost of ruining our System's civilization."

They swept finally past the green old world of Earth and rapidly approached its Moon. That barren, lifeless, airless sphere was home to the Futuremen.

THEIR famed Moon-laboratory lay beneath the surface of Tycho crater. No more than a few minutes after landing the *Lightning* in the underground hangar designed for their own ship, they and old Ezra Gurney were entering the wonderful citadel of science that connected with it.

"Here's Eek and Oog, and at least they're fat and happy," said Otho as two small, dissimilar animals came gamboling comically toward them.

The two little creatures were the mascots or pets of Grag and Otho, respectively. Eek was a gray, bearlike little moon-pup, while fat, solemn-eyed Oog was that queer species of animal known as a "meteor-mimic."

“Did you get lonesome, Eek, while you were penned up here with that nasty little pet of Otho’s?” Grag fondly inquired of his joyously-wriggling moon-pup.

“What do you mean — my nasty little pet?” demanded Otho indignantly. “If that moon-pup just had a tenth of my Oog’s intelligence you’d feel fine.”

“Cut your rockets and drop those mutts before I throw them both off the Moon,” exploded Captain Future. “There’s work to be done.”

He led the way toward the big subterranean chamber that was the storeroom of the Moon-laboratory. Here were all kinds of spare equipment that the Futuremen had prepared against emergency need.

Included in the stores, was a full set of the massive generators which powered the vibration-drive of the *Comet*. Curt Newton began at once the toilsome task of installing them in the *Lightning*.

His taut voice rapidly sketched plans. “We’ll tear out all the *Lightning*’s cyclotrons except the four rear ones. That’ll give us space in the cyc-room for the generators. We’ll have to dismount the rocket-tubes and rearrange them to fit a drive-ring over the stern.”

The driving intensity of Captain Future goaded them all to the work. Mighty Grag hauled the massive, cylindrical generators into the cruiser, after room had been made for them. Curt Newton and Otho labored to prepare strong platforms and bolt the mechanisms into place. The Brain, deftly using his tractor-beams as hands, unerringly connected the complicated electric cables.

Ezra Gurney watched the feverish toil. He had offered to help, but had been bluntly told that he would only be in the way.

“Sure, I know,” drawled the old veteran, unoffended. “Give me a plain old-fashioned rocket-ship and I can tear her down or build her up again. But this newfangled vibration-drive of yours is out of my depth.”

Captain Future and the Brain had invented the vibration-drive. It generated and projected from the stern of a ship, a flood of high-frequency electromagnetic vibrations so uniquely spaced that they hurled a craft through the ether at incredible speed.

Velocities many times the velocity of light could be built up. This fact made possible voyages into the vastness of interstellar space outside our System. The Futuremen had made several such voyages, and other bold System navigators were lately venturing to the nearer stars.

Only super-powerful generators such as the ones designed for the *Comet* could build up a space-eating speed great enough to permit a voyage to Deneb, six hundred and fifty light-years across the galaxy. But the *Comet* had been designed and specially strengthened to take the tremendous back-thrust of such a drive, and their present ship had not.

"Shell crumple, I tell you," Otho muttered pessimistically as they worked. "Her frame just won't take the thrust. Shell fold up like a tin can when we try to use full velocity."

"Not if we put in extra thrust-girders to take the strain," Captain Future said tensely. "She's *got* to hold, do you hear?"

His voice was raw, his face colorless from strain. It was not these two days and nights of incessant toil that had taken toll of Curt so much as his constant, gnawing fear for the girl he loved.

Otho looked at him startled, and then with quick contrition: "Sure, she'll hold all right, Chief. I was only kidding."

"No, you meant it, and we both know you were right," Curt rasped. "There's about one chance in two that the *Lightning* will hold up under the strain. But we have to take it."

The feverish toil drove swiftly to its conclusion. The drive-ring had been fitted over the stern of the cruiser, the new thrust-girders had been welded into place to brace the hull inside that ring, and the projector for the "cushion-stasis" had been installed in the cabin.

CURT NEWTON wearily brushed back errant locks of red hair from his haggard face.

"All set," he told Ezra Gurney in tired tones. "Grag has checked the oxygenators, rations and copper fuel. We'd better get aboard."

There had never been, even for a moment, any question about whether or not Ezra Gurney was going with them in this grim pursuit. The grizzled old veteran comrade of the Futuremen would have drawn his gun if they had attempted to leave him behind.

Otho met them at the door of the cruiser. He was holding his fat, solemn-eyed little pet, and Grag's mascot peered from behind him.

"Chief, we can't leave Oog and Eek behind," Otho said anxiously. "We may be gone too long."

"All right, all right, take them if you must but don't stop to talk about it

now,” Curt snapped. “You checked the space-suits and spare tools and parts?”

“Yes, they’re all ready,” retorted the android.

“Then in with you. Come on, Ezra — we’re wasting time.”

Captain Future’s feverish intensity hurried them all aboard. The lock of the cruiser was bolted and sealed. The oxygenerators started.

Curt Newton hastily shouldered forward to the narrow control-room of the *Lightning*. He started the eyes droning, pulled back the space-stick as far as it would go, and pressed the cyc-pedal lightly.

The *Lightning* rose from the floor of the underground hangar, riding the flaming blasts of its keel rocket-tubes. Photoelectric apparatus automatically swung open the great ceiling-doors of the hangar. The cruiser shot up vertically into the glare of the Moon’s surface.

Curt Newton sent the cruiser darting away from the barren satellite with the full power of its rocket-tubes leaving a plume of fire behind it. They climbed steeply in space until they were well clear of the plane of the Solar System. Earth and Moon were now a large green ball and a small white one far underneath them.

Captain Future swung the cruiser until its prow pointed toward the brilliant white star that shone out amid the great drifts of the galactic sky.

“Stasis on!” he ordered sharply.

Grag shut the switches of the projector in the cabin. A dim, almost invisible glow of force pervaded the whole ship.

“Stasis on!” the huge robot reported.

That dim glow of force was a “stasis”-producing field of energy which would cradle every atom of their bodies against the terrific pressure of acceleration that was soon to come.

Curt Newton had cut the rocket-tubes completely. He touched a button. The massive generators of the vibration-drive began their deep drone. He waited until a dial showed them running at peak, and then partially opened the throttle that released the powerful vibrations from the drive-ring around the stem of the ship.

The *Lightning* leaped forward in space with a velocity that would have made its namesake seem stationary. Cradled as they were in the “stasis” they could not feel the acceleration, but they could see through the heavy windows that the cruiser was flashing headlong from over the Solar System.

“Half light-speed — three-quarters — one and a half,” read the Brain in his metallic voice from the instrument dial. His lens-like eyes turned questioningly to Curt. “You’re building her up fast, lad.”

“She’ll take it,” Captain Future said between his teeth. “She may take it, but she’s doing plenty of groanin’ about it,” muttered the uneasy Ezra Gurney.

The whole fabric of the cruiser was creaking and shuddering beneath the terrific reaction of the drive. The *screak* of grating metal came loudest from the heavy thrust-girders that braced the stern.

“Two and a half — three — four,” the Brain calmly read on.

A sickening vertigo rapidly invaded Curt Newton. He shook his head to clear it, and stubbornly opened the throttle a trifle further.

“Five — six —”

“Six light-speeds already,” gasped Ezra Gurney. “I’ll say we ain’t wastin’ any time now.”

The *Lightning* was vibrating in every plate now, as the cruiser raced away from the Solar System at a velocity six times that of light.

AHEAD of them, the vault of space was awesome. A vast blackness spangled with the burning hosts of millions on millions of swarming suns that are the galaxy’s glory. Pulsing in supernal splendor, those hiving stars were densest along that main axis of the lenticular galaxy which had once been called the Milky Way.

And there in the glorious fire-streams of the Milky Way burned that white and lonely star toward which the shuddering cruiser was hurtling. Far, far away and strangely solitary looked the ancient mystery star of Deneb.

“Seven — seven and a half —”

The creaking of protesting girders became abruptly a terrifying booming sound.

“Check the thrust-struts, Grag,” Curt called over his shoulder, his brow damp as he hunched over the controls.

Grag’s bellowing voice reached him a moment later over the creak and boom. “Cut acceleration a little, Chief, for space’s sake! These thrust-struts are beginning to crumple.”

Unwillingly, even in the face of that imminent peril, Curt Newton eased back the throttle a little. The din of protesting beams dwindled.

“In the name of all that’s holy, take it a little easier, chief,” exclaimed Otho. “We can’t build up to full speed in just a couple of hours.”

Curt Newton looked up with a haggard smile. “Sorry, I guess I’m a little too anxious.”

“Who’s blamin’ you?” Ezra Gurney demanded. “Space knows we all got plenty to be anxious about, and you the most of us all.”

For hour upon hour, the *Lightning* steadily accelerated its enormous speed. Travelling already at dozens of times the velocity of light, it was still only crawling by comparison with the huge extent of space they must traverse.

They must thread across almost the whole galaxy — a distance that light itself took six hundred and fifty years to cross!

“The *Comet* must be halfway to Deneb by now,” Curt Newton muttered. “Or maybe they’ve met disaster. Norton, bold as he is, knows little about navigating interstellar space, about ether-currents and space-drift and so on.”

“Cap’n Future, you’d be better off to quit torturin’ yourself imaginin’ things and get some sleep,” advised Ezra. “You been workin’ like a madman these last few days and you must be about out on your feet.”

Yet before Curt Newton would relinquish command of the ship to Otho, he inspected the big thrust-struts that had been strained by their first rush.

“They’ll hold if we don’t put any undue strain on them,” he declared. “Use a velvet touch on that throttle, Otho.”

Curt Newton slept through two watches, before the Futuremen would awake him. He rose to find that the vista outside had greatly changed.

The *Lightning* was deep in the galaxy’s swarm of suns! All around them stretched a stupefying vista of red, white, green and blue stars — of ponderous star-clusters that contained thousands of bright suns, of distant nebulae glowing like great burning clouds.

Chapter 5: Caught in a Trap

NOW the cruiser’s velocity was far above one hundred light speeds. They moved perceptibly through the vast swarm of stars. Curt Newton’s eyes eagerly sought Deneb’s white beacon as he replaced Grag at the controls.

“We’re getting near some bad currents if those etherometers are right,” the robot boomed as he yielded his place. “I wish to space we had the *Comet*’s instruments to guide us.”

Curt Newton’s eyes swept the dials. They had installed makeshift navigational instruments in the *Lightning*, but they were not nearly so accurate and reliable as those of their own ship.

“I’ll watch it, Grag,” he nodded. He peered forward. “We’ll swing wide of those two star-clusters ahead. You always run into devils’ currents if you try to go between two close clusters.”

Deneb was still a magnet to his eyes, as the cruiser flashed on with still steadily-mounting speed. Curt Newton felt a bitter irony in the sight. He had long dreamed of voyaging to far, mysterious Deneb, but he had not thought to do it like this — in a weakened, makeshift ship and with disaster hanging upon the success or failure of his voyage.

The prow of the speeding cruiser began to turn erratically away from Deneb. Captain Future did not need the etherometers to tell him that they were running into ether-currents, those great flowing tides of the luminiferous ether which were the bane and dread of interstellar travel.

He brought the *Lightning* sharply back to its course, veering it by releasing the propulsive vibrations from only half the drive-ring. But the pointers of the etherometers were still bobbing crazily. And a moment later, the cruiser wobbled badly, gyrated dizzily, and then started tumbling through space toward the left.

“Jumping devils of Jupiter,” yelled Otho, scrambling into the control-room with the others behind him. “What’s going on?”

“Ether-currents, and bad ones,” Curt Newton flung over his shoulder without turning his head. His hands were gripping the twin controls of the vibration-drive, waiting for a chance to fling the ship free with a burst of power. “Hold tight, everybody.”

In its gyrations, the prow of the *Lightning* had pointed again toward Deneb. Instantly, Captain Future had opened the throttle wide.

Crack — crash! The cruiser shook and staggered like a wounded bird, and for a moment Curt thought that the whole hull had collapsed.

“Cut the power,” came Ezra’s wild yell from aft. “The thrust-struts have crumpled!”

Curt Newton slammed the throttle shut. With its propulsive power now

cut off, the *Lightning* was carried helplessly as a chip in a millrace by the sweeping, vast ether-currents that had gripped it.

Captain Future plunged back to the cabin and eye-room. The sight that met his eyes was one to bring utter dismay. The thrust-struts, despite their reinforcements, had collapsed like flimsy tin under the tremendous kick-back of that sudden surge of power.

“Blast it, I knew this would happen,” bellowed Grag. “This ship wasn’t built to take the power we’ve been using.”

“It’s my fault,” Curt said quietly. “I used too much power in my effort to escape the currents.”

They were clutching stanchions as they conferred, for the *Lightning* was rolling over and over as the ether-currents carried it on through empty space toward unguessable destination. The hull of the crippled cruiser rattled and drummed as small bits of matter bombarded it from outside.

The Brain, peering from a window, called sharply. “It’s worse than I thought. We’re being carried into a big maelstrom of ether-currents. Meteoric and other debris are hitting the hull.”

The Futuremen looked at each other grimly. All realized the peril of those great space-maelstroms which are rarely met with but which are the terror of interstellar space. Currents that flowed into those whirlpools brought debris from all over the galaxy, to churn and grind together.

“We won’t last long if we’re swept into the heart of the ether-maelstrom,” Curt Newton declared. “Yet if we try to use power to get out of these currents, we’ll tear open the hull itself from the thrust.”

“Couldn’t we rebuild and reinforce those thrust-struts somehow?” Otho asked anxiously.

“How?” Captain Future demanded. “We’d need massive girders to build new struts that would hold, and where are we going to get them?”

THEY were silent, helpless. And with each passing moment, the disabled *Lightning* was being carried faster and faster into the depths of the mighty whirl of ether-currents from which it would never escape.

Meanwhile, in the racing *Comet*, far ahead, Joan Randall awoke slowly. She had a splitting headache, and felt dizziness and weakness such as she had seldom experienced. Her senses seemed hopelessly fogged, and it was some time before she was able to discern anything of her surroundings. She could,

however, dimly hear a low, powerful droning sound that was vaguely familiar.

The girl forced herself to open her eyes. As they painfully focused, she became aware she was lying upon a pad in a small, cramped metal compartment lighted by a single tiny, loophole window. The floor beneath here was vibrating faintly to the rhythmic, droning sound that had been her first sensation.

Joan Randall suddenly recognized those familiar sounds. They were the droning of the *Comet's* great drive-generators. And this tiny cubicle in which she was one of the aft supply-compartments of the ship of the Futuremen. She had been too often in Captain Future's craft to mistake it. But how had she come here? The last she remembered was on the jungle moon of Uranus, the explosion that had occurred suddenly in the ruins just as Cole Norton was returning with the *Lightning*.

"Cole Norton!" Joan Randall gasped in comprehension. "He and Doctor Winters, and those three men Norton brought back, must be responsible for my plight."

She remembered everything now. The angry shock of that remembrance served to clear her mind further.

As Captain Future and all the others had hastened toward the mysterious explosion at the ruins, she had remained behind in camp. Curt Newton had ordered her to do so, at Philip Winters' hasty suggestion of danger.

A moment later, the *Lightning* had landed. Cole Norton had emerged from it, and with him had come three men whom he had brought with him from Uranus — a hulking, brutal-looking Earthman, a cadaverous red Martian, and a fat, beady-eyed yellow Uranian.

Joan Randall had been turning to tell Norton the startling news, when something in the blond physicist's hard, ruthless face stopped her.

"Quick, now's our chance," Norton was shouting to Philip Winters. "Into the *Comet* with you. Voories, you and Chah Har grab the girl. Kul Kan, get the injectors out of the *Lightning's* eyes. Hurry!"

The stunning shock of the sudden treachery had so dazed Joan Randall that a fatal second passed before she attempted to draw her atom-gun.

Then it was too late. Voories, the hulking Earthman, and Chah Har, the fat Uranian, had seized her, snatched her pistol, and begun dragging her toward the *Comet*.

She uttered a furious cry, and a hand was immediately clapped over her mouth. Philip Winters, his thin face deadly pale, was already darting into the *Comet*, and Norton and the Martian were running after them.

Joan Randall fought like a lithe wildcat inside the ship. A hand crushed a bulbous white blossom against her nostrils. She recognized it as the famed Venusian "sleep-flower," and tried to turn her head but she had already inhaled the cloying fragrance of the drug-bearing bloom.

Then, as she had lapsed into unconsciousness, she had dimly heard the door of the *Comet* slam and the roar of power as it basted off into space. Yes, she understood everything now.

"They stole the *Comet*, and kidnaped me with it," she exclaimed wrathfully as full remembrance flooded her mind. "Norton and Philip Winters."

The girl got to her feet and was dismayed to find she could hardly stand. It made her realize that she must have been kept drugged for days.

The door of the little supply-compartment was locked on the outside when when she tried it. She looked helplessly around the tiny cubicle.

There were usually cabinets of tools and apparatus here, kept in this compartment by the Futuremen. But they had all been moved out.

Joan Randall went to the tiny window and peered out. She had already realized from the vibration that they were in space. But she was totally unprepared for the staggering vista that met her eyes.

NOW the *Comet* was flying at tremendous speed through the depths of the galaxy. One glance told the stunned girl that they were unguessable light-years away from her own Solar System.

Numerous suns surrounded the ship. The vast black gloom of the interstellar abyss was swarming with blazing stars, whose hues ranged from brilliant, pure white through pale blue, ethereal violet, emerald green, golden yellow, and somber, smoky red.

As the rushing ship swayed slightly in crossing ether-currents, the dismayed girl had a momentary glimpse of a bright white star that lay far ahead. She instantly recognized the distorted constellation of which the white star was part.

"Deneb," she exclaimed in amazement. "Then Norton and Winters are bound for Deneb."

The reason for the unexpected treachery of the two men flashed upon her. She remembered now how frantically Philip Winters had besought Captain Future to seek the ancient Denebian secret of artificial evolution at that distant star which the *Comet* alone could reach —

“And Curt wouldn’t do it, and so they plotted to steal the *Comet* and go themselves,” thought Joan Randall. Then came further realization. “And they took *me* because I know the clue of the inscription.”

Her brown eyes flashed, and her small chin set with angry stubbornness. “The unspeakable traitors! They’ll find out how much good it has done them to kidnap me.”

Joan Randall was little frightened by her peril and strangeness of her position. She had spent too many years as a secret agent of the far-ranging Planet Patrol to be unacquainted with the face of danger.

It was true no predicament of her past experience had been so potentially appalling as this abduction into the uncharted galactic spaces. But countering that was her firmly unshakable conviction Curt Newton and the Futuremen would find and free her if her own efforts failed to do so.

At this moment she heard the door of her prison being unlocked. It was Philip Winters who entered.

Despite her wrath, the girl felt a strong inclination to laugh at the little biologist’s appearance. Winters had belted a heavy atom-pistol around his waist, and the weapon contrasted incongruously with his thin, slight figure and anxious, spectacled face.

“I’m glad to see you’re awake, Miss Randall,” he said nervously. “I regret that we had to keep you drugged for so long.”

Joan Kendall eyed him levelly, keeping the hot indignation she felt out of her eyes. She had hopes of prevailing on Winters’ fundamental decency.

“I suppose I don’t need to ask what all this means?” she said quietly, “You’re going to Deneb for the evolution-secret?”

“That’s it,” Winters replied uncomfortably. “I’m sorry we had to bring you along. But you know the clue to the Chamber of Life — the secret. We must have that clue when we reach Deneb.”

“Surely you understand that this mad enterprise of yours can’t succeed, Doctor Winters,” Joan Randall said coolly. “By stealing the *Comet*, you’ve made implacable enemies of the Futuremen. They will track you down no matter where in the galaxy you go.”

She saw a glimmer of haunting apprehension in Winters' nervous eyes, and pressed her argument. "Your only chance is to call off this crazy attempt, and return to the System at once. It means death if you don't."

To her surprise, Philip Winters raised his head in defiance. "If it meant my death a thousand times over, I'd still go on," exclaimed the little biologist. "What would my death matter, compared to the tremendous scientific power which we are going to give the System peoples?"

Winters was a fanatic — Joan began to understand that now. And his next words confirmed it.

"Can't you understand what a wonderful thing that ancient secret of artificial evolution would mean for our peoples?" he said earnestly. "The Denebians of long ago attained superhuman civilization with its aid. They conquered the whole galaxy. Our people could do the same. Controlled, directed evolution could accelerate our slow progress by a thousand times."

"Doctor, I believe you're sincere," the girl told him. "But I also am sure that you're wrong, and that it would be disastrous for our race to tamper with natural evolution."

"Bah, you are just quoting Captain Future," exclaimed Winters angrily. "That fellow is a brilliant adventurer and technician but he doesn't have the soul of a real scientist or he wouldn't try to suppress a secret of such wonderful potentialities as this one."

"He has seen more of the universe than any other living man, and knows more of the disasters that can overtake peoples," was Joan Randall's defense.

Winters sputtered. "You're so much in love with Future that you believe anything he says. I see it's no use arguing with you. The point is that we'll soon be approaching Deneb, so you *must* soon tell us the clue to the Chamber of Life. If you don't Cole Norton has threatened to take harsh measures and I warn you he will stop at nothing."

Joan Randall's chin came up in defiance.

"I'm not afraid of Cole Norton and his thugs," she cried. "I'll tell you nothing — you hear me — nothing! And that is final!"

Chapter 6: A Derelict in Space

CHECKED and dismayed by the girl's ringing refusal, Dr. Philip Winters stood for a moment, staring at her in helpless confusion. Then he departed. She heard him close and fasten the door. A few minutes later it was unfastened again and Cole Norton came in. Norton's big, stalwart figure filled the doorway as he entered. His virile face had hard self-confidence in it as his chill blue eyes were fixed sardonically upon the girl.

"Winters tells me you've decided to be obstinate about the inscription-clue," he began crisply. "Now, Joan, that's silly."

"Miss Randall, to traitors like you," she flared.

He bowed mockingly. "My error. Now, Miss Randall, you're an intelligent girl. Because you are, I'm going to put my cards on the table so you'll know just where you stand.

"I'm not one of these dreamers who go into science for the love of it," the physicist continued. "I went into it because I have a first-class brain and meant to use it to amass sufficient wealth to gratify my every desire for the rest of my life. I have no interest in fame or heroics or empty power. My sole purpose is to make this universe an exceedingly pleasant place for Cole Norton."

"Is it necessary for you to explain your sordid motives to me?" Joan Randall asked scathingly.

"Yes, I think it is," Norton replied coolly. "I want you to understand that I am on the point of realizing an ambition of years. This secret of artificial evolution could be used in a thousand ways to bring in money from the people of our System. I intend to find it and so use it.

"I do not intend to allow my life's ambition to be balked by sentimentalism. To put the matter brutally, you are going to tell us that inscription-clue or it is going to be tortured out of you. I would dislike intensely to use such methods, but if necessary, I'll use them, and don't you believe for one moment that I won't."

Norton's cold voice carried a conviction that brought a chill to Joan Randall. For the first time, she realized the remorseless quality of this man.

"I shall give you just an hour to make up your mind," Norton concluded. "At the end of that time, you'll tell us the clue or you'll be turned over to Voories and the other two until you do."

When he had gone, Joan Randall considered her situation with sober consternation. She knew now Norton would carry out his threat. Winters

might protest, but his, protests would avail nothing.

What was she to do? It never occurred to Joan that she might surrender her secret knowledge as they demanded. Curt Newton had trusted her with that secret and she would die before she told it.

Could she escape? That seemed hopeless. The door was locked and they had left nothing in the compartment that might be used as a tool. And to where could she escape, when the *Comet* was flashing through a totally unexplored and distant region, of the galaxy?

Joan Randall narrowed the possibilities down to a single one. That was the possibility of so disabling the ship that it would be unable to continued toward Deneb. She had thought of a way in which that might be done.

Captain Future and the Futuremen would be on the trail sooner or later — in that she had utter faith. If she could disable the *Comet* until the Futuremen overtook it, she would have prevented the traitors from reaching that secret which Curt had said must never be turned loose.

Joan Randall went to a corner of the compartment and stooped to the floor. She touched an almost invisible stud there. A foot-square section of the metal floor instantly slid back. It exposed numerous heavy insulated cables.

“Now which are the cyc-control cables?” she murmured to herself.

This panel in the floor was an inspection-hatch used by the Futuremen for inspection and repair of the control-cables under the floor. Joan Randall, who knew the *Comet* thoroughly, had remembered it. Norton and the others had been wholly ignorant of the panel’s existence.

“If I remember right, the red cables are the ones that run back from the cyc-pedal rheostat to the cyclotrons,” she thought. “And if I can short-circuit, those two cables it might do the trick.”

SHE knew what would happen. The droning cyclotrons that furnished power to the vibration-drive would blow out from too-sudden release of fuel. The resultant explosion would wreck the whole cyc-room at the *Comet*’s stern.

Also wrecking this little compartment in which she was confined, might breach the hull and bring swift death to everyone in the ship. But Joan Randall ignored those menacing possibilities. It was worth taking any chance to thwart Norton’s sinister scheme.

Quickly, she started to rub the two red cables together. When her rubbing

had worn through their insulation, the short-circuit and resultant explosion would come instantly.

While Joan Randall was engaged in trying to wreck the *Comet* Curt Newton and the Futureman had remained calm in the face of imminent deadly peril. Their crippled cruiser now was being drawn at frightful speed by the great ether-current that was bearing it toward the heart of a space-maelstrom. Yet Curt Newton and his comrades considered their precarious situation with cool detachment.

Their predicament was made more immediately dangerous by the fact the helplessly-drifting *Lightning* was being increasingly bombarded by flotsam of space which the current also carried. Big, jagged meteors, chunks of rock cast out by some planet's volcanic eruptions, masses of black cosmic dust, rasped and rattled against the cruiser's sides as it surged onward in the grip of the swirling current.

"These currents pick up and carry interstellar debris from all over space," Curt Newton muttered. "There'll be a mass of such flotsam inside the maelstrom, and it'll grind us to pulp in time."

"Can't we take a chance by usin' the vibration-drive just enough to get us out of the current?" Ezra Gurney asked anxiously.

Curt Newton shook his head. "That would be our finish right here. With no thrust-struts to take the back-kick of the drive, the reaction would crumple the whole back part of the hull. We've got to have new girders to use for struts, and we've got to have them soon."

The irrepressible Otho made a suggestion. "Chief, if it's metal for girders we need, how about using Grag? There must be a ton of steelite in that carcass of his, and we could melt him down."

"There he goes again — always threatening to cut me up for metal," bellowed Grag angrily. "I'll melt him down the next time he makes that crack."

Curt Newton ignored the wrangle. He was conferring with the Brain. The helpless ship continued to rush on.

"Can you see any way out of this pickle, Simon?"

"Not without new girders for the struts," the Brain answered in his metallic voice. "And we can't get those. Well, I've always wanted to make a scientific study of the interior of an ether-maelstrom."

Captain Future made an impatient gesture. "To the devil with abstract

science now. We've got to pull out of this mess somehow and get on after the *Comet*. If we don't Joan will be lost."

Ezra Gurney suddenly uttered a shrill exclamation from the window through which he had been peering.

"Holy space-imps, there's a ship out there!"

Curt Newton leaped to the window. "Is it the *Comet*? If it is, it means they've been caught too."

"No, it ain't the *Comet*. It ain't like any ship I ever saw before," said Ezra Gurney in tones of awe.

THEY crowded around the window. Out there against the background of stars, a few thousand yards away from them, they saw the black outline of a long, unlighted space-ship.

It was, indeed, like no craft familiar to the Futuremen. It was long and spindle-shaped with a flat-topped conning-tower projecting amidships from the hull.

It's caught in the current, the same as our own craft," exclaimed Curt. His gray eyes snapped. He saw sudden hope. But where'd it come from, and why doesn't it show a light?" Grag demanded with a puzzled gesture.

"It looks like one of those ghost-ships of space you hear them tell about," muttered Otho.

In truth there was something uncanny about the somber black vessel that swept steadily on and kept pace with them in the unseen current.

"Don't get superstitious — that ship shows no lights because it's a derelict," Captain Future declared, "Can't you see that big hole in its stern? It's been riddled by a meteor some time, and has been drifting till the current caught it. As for where it came from — well, we know several interstellar races in the past developed space travel."

He continued rapidly. "The point is that we can get the girders we need out of that derelict. Then we'll be able to put on enough power to escape this current."

"Say, that's an idea," Grag exclaimed hopefully. "But how will we get the *Lightning* into contact with the derelict?"

"I'll go over in a space-suit with an impeller, and take a line to hook us to the derelict," Curt Newton told them. "You can winch the line in when I've made fast, and that'll pull the two ships together."

“It’ll be dangerous bucking that ether-current and its flotsam in a space-suit, Chief,” protested Otho. “You’d better letter me try it.”

“As the huskiest individual here, I propose that I —” Grag began, but Curt Newton cut him short.

“Get that line for me and stop jawing.”

He was already scrambling into his space-suit. He picked up one of the tubular impellers, fastened the strong, flexible metal line around his waist, and in a minute had passed through the *Lightning’s* airlock and plunged into space.

Streaming, terrific currents of invisible force caught Captain Future as he leaped into the starry abyss. Grinding, swirling meteors and rock-masses that were rushing on like everything else in the current, ground dangerously around him.

He used the rocket-flash kick of his impeller to dodge them. Slowly and toilsomely, he worked nearer the derelict. He touched its side and clambered along it to the hole that gaped in its stern. Entering this, he made his line fast to the first strong stanchion he made out.

“Okay, reel in the line,” he called through the space-phone built into his helmet.

The *Lightning* slowly breasted the current toward the derelict, as the line was wound in. Soon the crippled cruiser and the mysterious derelict were tightly hooked together.

Otho in his space-suit, and Grag and Simon Wright, now joined Curt Newton inside the derelict. They found him flashing his fluoric hand-lamp about the interior.

“A ship of dead men,” murmured Otho in awe.

For stiff, frozen bodies of men lay, here and there, about the interior of the wreck. They were handsome, golden-skinned men in strange attire of flashing metal, wearing circular golden helmets.

The structure and design of the ship itself was almost totally unfamiliar to Captain Future, yet he realized it had apparently been powered by some form of etheric-wave propulsion.

“Whoever these people were, they knew plenty about science,” he murmured.

The Brain uttered a sharp exclamation.

“Curtis, this is a ship of ancient Deneb itself.”

INCREDULOUSLY, Curt Newton turned. The Brain was excitedly scanning a legend of strange hieroglyphs imprinted on one of the towering machines.

“It’s true, those are Denebian hieroglyphs,” breathed Captain Future unbelievably. “Then this derelict and its dead crew must have been drifting through the galaxy for ages.”

“What a chance to learn more about the Denebians,” exulted the Brain. “There may be things here that would solve that age-old mystery —”

“No time to investigate now, Simon,” warned Captain Future. “Besides, we’ll soon reach Deneb itself if we can get out of this jam. We must cut out girders and take them back to the *Lightning* as quickly as possible. You brought the atomic torches?”

Grag and Otho had brought the heavy tools which utilized a concentrated blast of atomic energy for cutting or welding purposes.

Curt Newton rapidly selected several of the massive metal stanchions which braced the hull of the ancient craft. They set to work cutting these out and transporting them to their own cruiser, as the two ships drifted on together in the rush of the terrific current.

The work was hard, and Captain Future made it harder by the pace he set. As he and Grag and Otho labored, the Brain was eagerly searching the interior of the derelict and gathering up a multitude of articles to take back with them.

Grag’s mighty strength was of paramount importance in transferring the heavy girders into the *Lightning* through its space-hatch. By the time they had the last girder aboard, Simon Wright had managed to convey all his precious specimens to the cruiser also.

“Cast off those lines and let the wreck float away, Ezra,” called Curt Newton. “It’s dangerous keeping them hooked together now.”

The current was of such force and speed that it was banging the two ships perilously against each other. As Ezra Gurney released the cables, the derelict floated slowly away from the *Lightning*.

“Now to get these girders into place — and quickly,” panted Curt Newton. “Clear away the old ones, Grag, while Otho and I cut these to fit.”

Nearly an hour of grinding toil elapsed before the salvaged girders had been installed to replace the crumpled thrust-struts.

“I *think* they’ll hold,” Curt Newton said breathlessly. “Anyway, we must try it. If we’re carried any deeper into this whirl of currents, nothing will get us out.”

He took the pilot-seat and started the eyes and the generators of the vibration-drive. His hand tensed for a moment on the throttle.

Then he opened it steadily. The *Lightning* bounded wildly from the inconceivably powerful thrust of the drive. At the same moment came a groaning of tortured metal from aft.

“The struts are straining but they’ve held so far,” came Otho’s call.

Curt Newton eased the throttle further open. The groaning of straining metal became louder above the drone of power.

But now the *Lightning* was bucking the ether-current, was pulling abreast of it through the swirl of interstellar flotsam. His heart in his mouth, Captain Future kept his prow headed out of the current.

The makeshift struts back there wouldn’t stand much more of the power he was using, he knew. If they didn’t pull out of the current in a few seconds the beams might buckle again.

They were out of it! The *Lightning* bounded suddenly forward with tremendous velocity as it escaped from the mill-race current into calm space!

Chapter 7: Collapse in the Heavens

UPON finding out the ship was out of the current, Captain Future eased the throttle. And not a moment too soon for Otho hurried forward to inform him the new struts also had begun to bend.

“We’ll have to keep the acceleration inside their stress-limit, then,” Captain Future said with a troubled frown. “Take over, Otho, and I’ll go back and figure out just how much they’ll stand.”

The *Lightning* was now flashing on at renewed high velocity in the direction of distant Deneb. Travelling at scores of times the speed of light, the weakened cruiser already was visibly drawing away from the two nearby star-clusters whose gigantic gravitational effects were partly responsible for the ether-whirl that had so nearly trapped them.

Deneb was still many light-years away in the hive of swarming suns they

were threading. The bright white star of ancient mystery could hardly be picked out amid the blazing star-hosts and the vast, far-flung glowing nebulae that lay before them.

“Lay your course to skirt that nearest nebula, and keep an eye on the meteorometers every second,” Curt Newton warned the android. “There are plenty of dark stars and ‘rogue planets’ to be expected in this region.”

He went back and carefully inspected the massive girders which had been slightly buckled by the tremendous reaction of the power used.

“They won’t stand any high degree of acceleration-pressure,” Curt Newton muttered. He clenched his fists. “Everything conspires to delay us when it’s so vital that we make speed after the *Comet*.”

Ezra Gurney shook his head pessimistically. “Don’t see how we can overtake the *Comet* now till we reach Deneb. But we’ll catch ‘em then.”

The Brain was intently examining the mass of objects which he had brought back from the Denebian derelict for examination.

He showed Captain Future two of the golden helmets. “See these helmets? They’re of an absolutely new kind of metal — a metal as resilient as rubber. Those men of ancient Deneb were certainly great scientists.”

Curt Newton fingered one of the helmets. “These were designed as crash-helmets. Probably the Denebians in that wreck had put the helmets on when they perceived that a meteor-crash was inevitable.”

Simon Wright next showed him a sheaf of thin metal leaves, covered with the Denebian writing and encased in a curious vertical file.

“This looks like the logbook of that derelict, Curtis. I’ve already deciphered much of it. It seems that that ship left Deneb at a time when the Denebians’ galactic empire was just beginning to collapse.”

“Like the Denebians who built the structure whose ruins we found on Uranus’ moon,” Captain Future remarked.

“Yes, there appears to have been a great exodus from Deneb about that time, by people seeking refuge from some terrible disaster that occurred at the home star,” said the Brain.

“What was that disaster, Simon?” asked Curt Newton quickly. “Have you found the answer to that riddle?”

“Not yet,” the Brain admitted. “These records refer vaguely to a terrible series of events at Deneb. What the catastrophe was, we shan’t know until we reach the star.”

He added puzzledly, "There's another reference in this that I can't understand — a despairing invocation to 'our fathers of the Darkness'. What do you suppose that means?"

But Captain Future had no idea, and he found it impossible to share Simon's intellectual excitement over these newly-revealed mysteries of man's ancient history. His own mind was too oppressed by the thought of Joan Randall in traitorous hands, somewhere far ahead.

The *Lightning* seemed, to Curt Newton, to creep with maddening slowness through the galaxy, during the following hours. Their velocity topped two hundred light-speeds and continued steadily to mount, but the acceleration seemed slow and dragging to him.

Coasting past the flaming shores of vast nebulae, veering to avoid the dangerous gravitational fields and meteoric webs of great star-clusters, running through the fierce radiation of monster double-suns and dodging to avoid unseen dark-stars or "rogue planets," the cruiser threaded the galaxy. And as hours passed into days, and Curt Newton slept and watched and slept and watched again, Deneb grew brighter.

DAYS later he was sitting at the controls, watching the mystery-star which had enlarged to a tiny, brilliant white disk in the spangled heavens ahead. And Ezra Gurney, looking at Deneb and then at their instruments, had become anxious.

"It's time we started deceleratin' this tremendous speed of ours," Ezra declared. "It's goin' to take a long time to slow down."

Curt Newton shook his head, his somber gaze fixed upon their goal. "We'll lose too much time if we start decelerating this soon. There's time enough to do that."

"There would be if this craft was in good shape, but it's weakened an' strained, and it's likely to fold up on us if you slam on the brakes too suddenly, Cap'n Future," protested the old veteran.

But Captain Future shook his head again, unconvinced. Defeated, Ezra Gurney went back uneasily into the main cabin.

Otho was sleeping on his bunk in a corner of the cabin. The Brain was deep in his interminable studies of the Denebian records. To Simon Wright, therefore, Ezra voiced his misgivings.

"He's waitin' too long to decelerate," the old veteran finished. "I've

never seen Cap'n Future so reckless."

The Brain turned his lens-eyes thoughtfully at the speaker, "He's worried about Joan, Ezra. It will do no good to expostulate with him."

Some twenty-four hours later, Ezra Gurney's anxiety about their speed became such that he induced the Brain to expostulate with Captain Future who was at the controls again.

"We're already dangerously near to Deneb, considering the length of time it will take to slow down," the Brain told Curt Newton. "If you delay any longer in decelerating, you risk disaster to our whole purpose."

That argument prevailed. Reluctantly, Newton began the slow process of decelerating their speed by turning the invisible propulsion-waves of the drive-ring forward instead of backward.

"All right, though I hate to slow down even yet," he murmured. "Norton and Winters must already have reached Deneb in the *Comet*."

He eyed the growing white disk of the star hungrily, as though longing to leap on to it with the swiftness of thought.

"They are, unless they cracked up the *Comet* on the way," conditioned Ezra. "They might have wrecked themselves, not knowin' interstellar space like you do — and we could have passed 'em without bein' aware of it."

A spasm of pain crossed Curt Newton's drawn face. "I won't believe that," he muttered. "They have to be at Deneb, with Joan."

"How're we goin' to find them there, when we get there?" the old veteran asked dubiously.

"They're searching for the Chamber of Life, the place of the artificial evolution secret," Captain Future reminded. "If they've extorted the clue to its location from Joan, we'll find them there — if we're in time."

"So what we do, is go straight to hunt out that there Chamber of Life ourselves?" said Ezra Gurney thoughtfully. "Let's see — how did that inscription run that gave its location? I've half-forgotten."

Curt Newton repeated that ancient Denebian inscription which they had found on the stone tablet they had unearthed on Uranus' moon.

Beneath the Prism Peak, in the Crystal Mountains that lie beyond the black sea of the north, lies the Chamber of Life in which were bred new human races. Seek it not lightly, for it is guarded by the undying ones, and it holds within it the seeds of doom.

“Pretty cryptic kind of a direction for anybody to leave,” grunted Ezra. “Crystal Mountains — Prism Peak — it must be a danged queer kind of a world.”

“The great, ancient race of Deneb must still exist upon that world,” mused the Brain. “The race who were the parent stock of our own human race. The science of their mighty civilization should give us at last the answers to the greatest riddles of the galaxy’s history.”

A TENSION that grew gradually to fever-pitch strung the nerves of the Futuremen as they swept on at steadily lessening speed toward the great white star. This was journey’s end for the greatest quest they had ever made, the longest and most perilous of all their expeditions.

Not even Curt Newton himself, whose paramount anxiety was for the safety of the girl he loved and the secret whose discovery he dreaded, was wholly immune to that feverish feeling of expectation.

What wonders of superhuman civilization were they to find at this ancient sun where the human race had long ago originated? What strange answers to the riddles of cosmic history would greet them at this, the galaxy’s mystery-star?

Eight watches later, they were so close to Deneb that its blazing white sphere seemed to fill half of space ahead. Even through the ray-proof windows, its light was almost blinding to the tense group that had gathered in the little control-room.

Curt Newton had refused to be relieved at the controls for the last two watches. He had steadily slowed their speed, using the utmost deceleration possible under the limits imposed by the weakened structure of their ship. But his haggard, worn face bore deepening anxiety as he glanced constantly at the instruments which recorded their velocity.

“We’re still going too fast,” he muttered. “Too fast.”

Grag was peering ahead through the eyepiece of one of the solar telescopes built into the window of the control-room.

“Deneb only has one planet that I can find, chief,” the robot reported.

“I expected that,” commented the Brain. “All the Denebian records I’ve examined refer only to the one world, called Aar.”

“Well, the world Aar, as you call it, has an orbit about two hundred

million miles from the star,” Grag continued. “It’s a medium large planet with two small moons.”

The dazzling sphere of the stupendous white sun continued to grow in apparent size. Ezra Gurney glanced uneasily at the space-speed dial.

“Can’t we decelerate faster than this?” he asked Captain Future.

“I don’t want to try it,” Curt Newton answered in taut tones. “Those makeshift girders are taking nearly all the thrust they’ll stand.”

Two more hours passed, and their suspense gradually heightened as all of them perceived that they were approaching Deneb at a speed which would make landing suicidal.

“It seems that I’ll have to throw more power into deceleration, risky as it is,” Curt Newton finally admitted. “I should have started slowing down before I did.”

They were so near Deneb that its planet was visible to the unaided eye as a tiny greenish ball almost obscured by the brilliance of the sun it circled.

CAPTAIN FUTURE’S hand pushed the throttle a notch farther, and then another. The great generator back in the cyc-room droned instantly louder. Even in the cushioning stasis, they felt the increased pressure of deceleration.

The old, ominous screeking of strained metal reached their ears, as the already-weakened thrust-struts protested at the extra load. Curt Newton anxiously watched the pointer swing across the negative side of the accelerometer.

“Still not enough,” he murmured. Sweat was standing out on his forehead. He gritted his teeth. “Another notch would be enough. She may stand it.”

He opened the power-throttle one more notch. They felt the instantaneous responding pressure of the increased deceleration for a moment.

A crashing shock made the *Lightning* quiver through all its beams. They heard the scream of rending metal, and were flung forward as there came a thunderous clatter and banging from stern. It was followed by a dead silence broken only by the hiss of escaping air.

“She wouldn’t take it — she’s cracked up!” Otho yelled, leaping to his feet like a cat and plunging aft.

Curt Newton felt an ice-cold hand around his heart, but he jumped to follow the android. The controls were useless, for the power was dead now.

HIS dismay became crushing when he burst back into the main cabin. It was a scene of wreckage. The heavy thrust-struts had snapped in two, the whole stern hull had accorded from the pressure, and cracks in the hull were allowing air to escape.

“Space-suits on!” cried Captain Future. “Grag, get the patching-kit.”

As he and Otho and Ezra Gurney scrambled into their suits, Grag was hastily bringing the outfit used for emergency repairs. It consisted of self-fusing metal patches, which they rapidly applied to the cracks.

When the last crack was closed and the oxygenerators had replenished the air, they were able to take off the space-suits. Curt Newton’s heart sank as he took further stock of the damage.

The snapping of the thrust-struts had wrecked completely the generators of the vibration-drive, and had smashed up all but two of the cyclotrons. The crumpled hull was sagging and creaking as though it would give to the slightest strain.

And the *Lightning*, though slowed down to much lesser speed by that final disastrous deceleration, was still rushing on toward Deneb’s world!

Chapter 8: Crack-up on Aar

GLOOMILY Captain Future looked heavily at the others. “This catastrophe is my fault,” he said. “I was too much in a hurry, and wouldn’t start decelerating back there when you wanted me to. And this is the result.”

“Devils of Space, what are you talking about?” cried Otho with instant loyalty. “We knew when we installed those super-powered generators in this cruiser that we ran a risk of them tearing it apart.”

Ezra Gurney added warm words:

“You’ve brought a crippled, weakened ship on the longest voyage in history, clear across the galaxy,” he said. “Nobody but Cap’n Future could have done that.”

Their quick, whole-hearted rebuttal of his self-accusation, the legendary loyalty of the Futuremen to their leader, lifted some of the bitterness from Curt Newton’s heart.

“Thanks, all of you,” he said quietly. “I still know that this was due to my impatience and worry about Joan, but we won’t argue it now. We must land on Deneb’s world, somehow.”

He led the way rapidly back to the control-room and made a quick estimate of their speed and the closeness of the planet ahead. The *Lightning* had been steering toward that world of Deneb before the catastrophe, and was still heading directly toward the greenish planet.

“That last attempt did cut our speed a lot,” Curt reported. “If we had a few rocket-tubes to use for braking, we could maybe manage a crash-landing.”

Ezra Gurney shook his head dolefully. “I doubt if a single tube’s in workin’ order now, Cap’n Future.”

So it proved, when they made inspection. The crumbling of the hull had twisted and jammed the bow, keel and stern-rocket tubes hopelessly.

“We’ll have to jury-rig a few new tubes,” Captain Future declared. “That’s our only chance, and we’ve little enough time in which to do it.”

“About an hour and a half, I estimate,” the Brain coolly added.

The indomitable spirit of the Futuremen showed itself now. In a situation where lesser adventurers would have despaired, they fell to work to play out the last, doubtful card left them.

The lower bow-compartment of the cruiser, beneath the control-room, was the scene of their hasty labors. In that cramped space, crowded with the big oxygen, water and fuel tanks, they sweated to drill a half-dozen round holes through the hull just at the front up-curve of the keel.

Into those apertures they fitted the spare rocket-tubes which the *Lightning*, like all space-ships, carried for emergencies. As well as they could, Curt Newton and Grag welded the tubes into place and connected to them the power-pipes that led back to the two cyclotrons still in working order.

“Time’s nearly up,” came Otho’s yell from the control-room overhead. “We’re about to enter the planet’s atmosphere.”

“That’s all we can do, Grag,” panted Captain Future as he turned hastily. “It’s a flimsy mounting for those tubes, but it’ll hold long enough for a few seconds of firing.”

“And that’s all it will hold, before they blow loose,” Grag predicted as they hurried up to the control-room.

Curt Newton slipped into the pilot-chair and looked grimly at the planet toward which the *Lightning* was falling.

The sunlit face of the world Aar lay beneath them, a green convexity that seemed featureless except for a curious shimmer of brilliant light near its northern arc. The cruiser, rushing on and downward to the world, was picking up a little more speed from the pull of the planet.

Death was in their speed, they knew — instant and obliterating destruction unless they managed a successful crash-landing. Already, the thin outer atmosphere of Aar was whistling loudly outside the falling ship.

“See if you can spot the *Comet* anywhere as we come down,” said Captain Future, his paramount purpose not leaving his mind even in this tense moment.

The Brain, who had been eagerly scanning the surface of the sunlit world toward which they rushed, spoke with puzzled slowness.

“I can’t understand this — the whole surface of this world seems to be just forest, a wilderness.”

They were low enough that the convex surface of Aar had flattened out into a rolling expanse of green verdure which glistened in the sunlight. A giant forest, toward whose roof of foliage they were rapidly sinking.

“There should be cities here, massive engineering works of the Denebian super-civilization,” Simon Wright, the Brain, murmured dazedly. “But there’s nothing else to be seen.”

OTHO burst into the control-room, with three of the golden helmets of resilient metal which they had taken from the Denebian derelict of space.

“Chief, these crash-helmets may save our necks when we hit,” he suggested. “That’s what the Denebians used them for, remember.”

Without turning, Captain Future buckled the strap of the helmet beneath his chin as Ezra Gurney and Otho did likewise.

“Where’s a helmet for me?” demanded Grag, who had picked up the whimpering Eek and was holding him protectively.

“An iron bucket-head like yours doesn’t need any protection,” retorted Otho, as he clambered hastily into his recoil-chair and took Oog upon his lap.

The whistling of air had become an unnerving roar, as the *Lightning* rushed down at appalling speed toward the roof of the green forest. Captain Future’s foot poised above the cyc-pedal which would release the energy of

the two operating eyes into their improvised rocket-tubes.

Down — down — the sunlit green foliage came up toward them, and nowhere could they see any opening in it. The roar of parting air was a deafening bellow. Curt Newton's foot touched the pedal.

"I see something there, to the northwest," cried the Brain suddenly.

His words were drowned out by the bursting thunder of the rocket-tubes as Curt Newton pressed the pedal.

The *Lightning* lurched and hesitated just above the tree-tops. The thunder of the rocket-tubes ended almost instantly in a shattering explosion as the tubes blew out of their mountings.

A cracking and crashing, a wild whipping of great green branches around them and the flash of dappled sunlight in their eyes as the cruiser turned over and over, a violent shock and screaming screech of metal and then a mighty crash.

Captain Future shook his head groggily. He had been flung up out of his chair, bursting its straps, his helmeted head hitting the ceiling.

Everything was dead silent. The slant of the control-room showed that the *Comet* lay on its side. His companions were stirring dazedly.

"We've landed," Curt Newton exclaimed. Bursting relief seemed to sing in his veins. "We're here on Deneb's world, and now we can find Joan and the *Comet*."

"Hold on — I'm still dizzy from that shock," begged Ezra Gurney, rising painfully from his chair. "This here gold helmet is all that saved my poor old skull from crackin'."

They were all bruised and shaken, except the Brain and the indestructible Grag. But their bruises were forgotten in their excitement as they clambered backed to the space-door of the cruiser.

The *Lightning* was nearly a complete wreck from that final explosion of the rocket-tubes and the impact of its crash. But they gave little thought to it as they eagerly pried open the door of the strained hull.

"Wear your proton-pistols," Captain Future warned sharply. "We don't know how soon we'll run into Norton and his crew."

They emerged into soft, warm air, laden with pungent, mysterious forest-scents that drifted to them upon a little breeze.

In wonder, the Futuremen stood gazing about them. About them towered a mighty forest. Its giant trees soared for hundreds of feet above their heads,

and their massive brown boles were of such dimensions that the wrecked *Lightning* looked like a gleaming toy beneath them.

High overhead, great branches soared out into green masses of unfamiliar foliage that interlaced together and allowed only stray bars and beams of white sunlight to reach the ground. There was a whole green world up there over their heads, an airy world of twining branches and looping vines and brilliant, blood-red flowers.

Curt Newton and his comrades lowered their gaze to look away through the forest's majestic aisles of brown trunks. Here and there, low shrubs and underbrush grew from the mossy turf. Birds and insects darted to and fro. But there was no other sign of life. And this whole mighty wilderness was hushedly silent.

"So this is Deneb's ancient world!" burst Otho, incredulously. "This is the world of super-civilization we expected."

"I can hardly believe it, myself," murmured Captain Future. "I never expected this."

"A wilderness, without a sign of intelligent life!" Ezra Gurney muttered.

THEY stiffened to alertness as, from far away through the mysterious green twilight of the forest, came a weird, distant call.

"*Hai—ooo! Hai—ooo!*"

"What was that?" asked Otho in low tones, his slant green eyes wide. "It didn't sound exactly like an animal."

"It certainly wasn't any human shout," Ezra said. "Listen!"

From a different quarter of the forest, the uncanny cry was floating again. This time several voices seemed to chorus it.

"*Hai—ooo!*"

They waited, but there was no further sound to break the hushed silence. The wind whispered through the green foliage high above them.

"I don't like this world much," muttered Grag uneasily. "There's something spooky about it."

Captain Future had remembered what Simon Wright had called out and he turned eagerly to the Brain. "Simon, just as we were landing you called out that you saw something to the northwest. Was it the *Comet* you saw?"

"No, lad. I think that what I saw was a city."

"A city — in this, wilderness?" Otho said skeptically.

“It looked like one, in the momentary glimpse I had,” affirmed the Brain. “It had the appearance of a cluster of lofty-pylons or towers, far away across the forest.”

“More likely, you just saw a bunch of these giant tree-trunks in the distance and were fooled by it,” suggested Ezra Gurney.

“We can soon find out,” Captain Future said. “Otho, you ought to be able to climb one of these great trees. Get up to the top of one and see if you can spot, anything northwest of here.”

Otho looked ruefully at the huge trunks around them. “It won’t be any cinch to get up one of those giants. I guess I can, though.”

He approached the nearest of the great trees. Instantly, from behind the concealment of its massive trunk, a big quadrupedal animal darted away with an oddly human cry.

The creature was a large black horse, or horse-like animal. But, in the flashing glimpse they had of it, it appeared to have the head of a man.

With a sharp ringing of hoofs, it disappeared into the underbrush nearby.

Stricken with incredulous horror, the Futuremen and Ezra looked at each other. Then they stared together at the green covert into which that half-glimpsed creature had vanished.

“Did you others see it or was I dreaming?” burst from Otho. “A horse with the head of a man!”

Ezra Gurney sighed shakily. “I’m danged glad somebody else saw the critter. I was beginnin’ to think I was space-struck.”

Captain Future marshaled stunned faculties. Like the others, he was shaken as he had seldom been. The glimpse of that human head and face, those startled human eyes, coupled with the powerful body of a horse, had for a moment persuaded him that he was dreaming.

“If we all saw it, it was real,” he declared. “The creature was hiding behind that tree, spying on us, until Otho startled it into flight.”

“Gods of Space, what kind of a planet is this?” exclaimed Ezra Gurney huskily. “Horses that have the heads of men.”

Curt Newton raised his hand in a sharp gesture, commanding silence. A cry was echoing from the green thickets into which the man-horse had disappeared.

“Hai—oooo!”

It was semi-human in articulation, that weird call. But in depth and

timbre, it was not human.

It floated away through the forest. Faintly, they heard twice an answering cry. Then silence reigned again in the green depths of the mighty wilderness.

Eek whimpered softly, and clambered up to Grag's broad metal shoulder, to nestle in fright. Grag himself spoke in low tones.

"Chief, what does it mean?"

"I don't know — that creature was partly human and partly animal," Curt Newton answered, his own voice instinctively hushed.

"It was a hybrid such as I have never before seen or heard of on any planet," rasped the Brain. "There's more than one mystery on this world of Deneb, it seems."

ALL had drawn their proton-pistols defensively. The two little mascots were clinging to their respective masters in thorough fright. Eek, the moon-pup, began to wriggle in panic on Grag's shoulder.

"Eek senses something close to us," Grag muttered.

"Listen!" Curt commanded. "Do you hear that rustling around us?"

A stealthy stir of movement was going on in the thick green brush around them. The thump of a hoof, the soft movement of padded feet.

"Stand close together around this tree," Captain Future ordered sharply. "Grag, what does it sound like to you?"

Grag's mechanical microphone-ears were the most sensitive of all. The great metal robot stood rigidly, listening.

"We're being surrounded by creatures of some kind," he muttered in a moment. "They're gathering fast. By the sound, some of them are larger and different from the others."

"Shall we fire into the brush to scatter them?" Otho asked, raising his proton-pistol.

"No, wait," Curt Newton commanded. "If the creatures here, whatever they are, are partly human they must be at least partly intelligent. They might understand a gesture of peace."

He boldly bolstered his pistol and stepped forward into a patch of white sunlight. There, facing the concealing thickets, Captain Future stood with his hand upraised. It was an appeal for a truce.

Chapter 9: Beast-men of Aar

WHILE Captain Future waited, he sensed a low stir of excited, murmuring sound through the green thickets which hid those around them.

Then, directly opposite Curt Newton, the green shrubs parted and a big creature came slowly out into the open toward him.

“We *are* seeing things,” came Otho’s strangled whisper from behind him. “This one can’t be real!”

“steady,” spoke Curt Newton through dry lips, without turning.

Yet he felt as if he, himself, had plunged into a weird nightmare as he stared at the advancing creature.

It was a big, tawny tiger, large as any tiger of Curt’s native Earth. But it had a human head.

His brain denied what his eyes saw, as they roved in stunned surprise, over the creature.

The man-tiger’s feline body was all of tawny tan, not striped. Beneath its smooth hide rippled the tremendous muscles of the crouching legs whose paws ended in cruel, enormous talons. Yet the head was unmistakably human. The pricked, catlike ears, the short, bristling hair that grew back along the neck in a short mane, could not disguise the essential humanity of the yellow-tan face with its straight mouth, flattened nostrils and blazing green eyes.

The man-tiger crouched upon his belly, eyeing Captain Future with those hypnotic orbs as though ready to charge at a moment’s warning.

Curt Newton rallied his dazed wits and spoke, without hope of being understood except through the placating quality of his voice.

“We are not enemies,” Curt Newton said quietly in the interplanetary *lingua franca*. “We come in peace.”

The man-tiger answered him. The creature’s lips parted to disclose fanglike teeth as he spoke in a voice that was a hissing snarl.

And to Captain Future’s amazement, he could understand most of the creature’s words. Some of them were words common to almost every planetary race, the basis of the *lingua franca* of space. The others were words familiar to him from the Denebian writing he had learned to read.

“I am Shih, leader of the Clan of the Tiger,” the creature said in that voice that was so like the hissing of a cat. “Tell me,” are you men really of the Ancients?”

“The Ancients?” repeated Curt, puzzled.

Suspicion flared instantly in the blazing green eyes of the man-tiger. “If you are not of the Ancients, how comes it that you wear helmets such as tradition says they wore?”

Captain Future began to understand. He and Otho and Ezra were still wearing the golden crash-helmets they had taken from the long-dead Denebians in the derelict.

It was upon his helmet that the gaze of Shih, the man-tiger, had fixed. That helmet held, apparently, a tremendous significance for these weird creatures. It had led them to believe that he and his comrades were members of the ancient race of Deneb.

“Answer — are you of the Ancients?” hissed Shih, his tiger-body tensely crouching.

Captain Future swiftly debated his reply. A lot hung upon it, he guessed. He decided to gamble boldly.

“Yes, we are of the race of the Ancients,” he affirmed. “But we are not of this world. We come from faraway stars to which the Ancients who were our ancestors went long ago.”

At least, it was the truth he was telling, Curt Newton believed. He and his comrades were descendants of those ancient Denebians who had colonized Earth and its neighboring planets, ages ago.

The reaction of his affirmation upon Shih was tremendous. The green eyes of the man-tiger blazed with exultant emotion. He wheeled with catlike swiftness and raised his head to utter a weird, snarling roar that reverberated through the sunlit forest.

“*Hai—ooo!*” he roared in uncanny call. “Children of the Clans, come forth.”

“*Hai—ooo!*”

FROM many different throats, in varying timbre, that cry had answered Shih’s call from all around them in the forest.

The Futuremen gazed, incapable of speech, at the creatures — who appeared in reply to the man-tiger’s summons.

First to emerge was the big, human-headed horse they had already glimpsed. A great black stallion, in body, his head was that of a man. His black hair merged back into the horse mane.

He looked like a centaur of ancient legend come to life, carrying his head proudly high, his deep, intelligent dark eyes flashing with excitement. Wholly human were the features of his massive face, except that the broad mouth and flat teeth were those of an herbivorous creature.

"This is Golo, wise leader of the Clan of the Hoofed Ones," said Shih. "And yonder beside him is Zur, who leads the Clan of the Hunting Pack."

"A totally different species," exclaimed the Brain, startled. "A man-dog."

The creature beside Golo could be described by no other name. Wolf-like, doglike, was his big, powerful body. But head and face were as human as those of the others.

Zur, the man-dog, surveyed the Futuremen eagerly with his brown eyes. When he opened his mouth to speak, Curt glimpsed the sharp canine teeth in those powerful human jaws. And his voice had a high, yelping timbre.

"Are they too of the Ancients?" the man-dog asked, looking at Grag's great metal figure and the weirdly poised Brain.

"They do not look like you others, and they do not wear helmets such as the Ancients wore," hissed Shih doubtfully.

Captain Future hastened to assuage the man-tiger's doubt. "They too are of the Ancients, but are different in form than us."

Other man-beasts had slowly emerged from the thickets after their leaders. There were four others of the great, shaggy man-dogs, two centaur-like creatures identical with Golo, all watching intently.

The deep voice of Golo, the towering — man-horse, broke the strained silence. He was addressing himself to Shih.

"We must be careful," warned the man-horse. "These strangers look like the Ancients of tradition, but it may be only a trick of the Manlings."

"The Manlings?" That name broke from Shih in a hissing snarl, and his green eyes blazed up instantly. "If I thought they were —"

"They do not look like Manlings," yelped Zur, the man-dog, quickly.

"Who are the Manlings?" Captain Future asked, in genuine bewilderment.

"You see — they do not even know of them," pointed out Zur eagerly.

Curt Newton thought it time to speak further. "We know little of this

world,” he told the creatures. “We came here from far away in the stars, in our ship that crashed as we landed.”

He pointed through the trees to the; nearby wreck of the *Lightning*, crumpled up at the base of one of the giant trunks.

The man-beasts appeared to notice the wreck for the first time. An awe seemed to fall upon the creatures as they gazed at the crumpled cruiser.

“That is one of the legendary sky-ships of the Ancients,” said Golo, the man-horse, slowly in his deep voice. “The ships in which long ago the great Ancients went out into the stars.”

He turned to look at the Futuremen, almost with reverence. “And now they have come back from the stars, in such a ship. These are the Ancients — no further doubt of it.”

A tremendous excitement quivered through the weird creatures. Shih, the man-tiger, turned to Curt Newton. “Then you have returned as was always prophesied you would, to destroy the evil Manlings and lift the ancient curse from us children of the Clans?”

CAPTAIN FUTURE struggled to comprehend the staggering mysteries which crowded him. He must not commit himself too deeply until he understood more of the situation.

“We have come here to prevent evil being done, that is true,” he answered diplomatically.

He was thinking of Norton and Winters and their dangerous plan, as he spoke. And Otho interjected a swift suggestion.

“Maybe some of these creatures have seen the *Comet* if it has already arrived here, chief.”

Captain Future seized upon the possibility. He asked the man-beasts, “Have you seen another sky-ship like ours, landing upon this world?”

“I have not, nor have I heard of one,” answered Shih. And the two other Clan-leaders replied similarly in the negative.

Curt felt a rebound of disappointment. But the man-tiger was continuing. “It might be that someone in our Clans has seen such,” he said.

Zur, the man-dog, proffered a suggestion in his eager way. “The Clan of the Winged Ones would have seen, if anyone has. Skeen would know.”

“We can go to the valley and send out the Clan-call tonight,” said Golo in his deep, semi-equine voice. “All will gather when it is known that the

Ancients have returned.”

Curt Newton hesitated. “Where is this valley?”

“It is not far from here in the forest,” Golo reassured him. “We can reach it by night, and by moonrise the Clans will be gathered.”

Captain Future looked at his companions. He spoke to them rapidly.

“I’m for going with them. These creatures are intelligent enough to have a loose form of tribal organization, and when all of them gather, we may be able to learn from some of them the whereabouts of the *Comet*.”

Otho nodded understanding. “It may save us a long, vain search for Norton and the others.”

“We start for the valley now,” said the man-horse. “Shih will scout the way. There is always danger, this near the Manlings.”

They started through the forest in a southeastward direction, the great man-tiger going ahead of them.

Captain Future had never made a stranger journey, he thought, than this trip through the giant forests of mysterious Aar with their weird escort. The sun was sinking toward the horizon, and it shot level bars and beams of brilliance through the green glades and aisles of majestic forest giants.

He could barely glimpse the tawny shape of the man-tiger who led them. Shih chose the trail with unerring instinct, padding noiselessly as a ghost through the thickets, his pricked ears alert for every sound, his baleful green eyes searching every clump of brush.

The Futuremen followed, with Golo and the two other man-horses pacing easily beside them like centaurs out of legend. And close behind them trotted Zur and the man-dogs, their shaggy bodies brushing ever and again against Captain Future’s legs.

“I still don’t understand how they can talk so that we can understand,” Grag muttered bewilderedly as he stalked with Curt Newton and the others, carrying the scared Eek.

Otho, whose own pet was riding on his shoulder, added his own whisper of mystification. “They use the words of the basic interplanetary language of our own part of the universe. How could they know it?”

Captain Future v thought he knew the answer to that riddle, at least. “The words of the interplanetary *lingua, franca* are Denebian words — inherited from the Denebians who once colonized all the galaxy. That’s why the peoples of all planets know them. These man-beasts talk the ancient

Denebian tongue.”

“But how can they talk at all?” pressed Ezra Gurney. “They got human heads, but they’re animals, ain’t they?”

CAPTAIN FUTURE hesitated before answering.

“I don’t think they are, really,” muttered Curt Newton. “Do you notice that even their animal bodies have a faint suggestion of the human in the relation of the limbs, their skeleton structure, their taillessness. I have an idea that these man-beasts were once men.”

“You mean that they’re men who were somehow changed into animals?” Otho asked.

“No, I don’t mean that. I believe they were all born in these hybrid forms for many generations,” Curt Newton told him. “It is the only theory which can satisfactorily explain these creatures.”

The Futuremen and their strange escort marched on through the forest for a half-hour more. The sun had disappeared beneath the horizon, and dusk was thickening as they came to a rocky gorge. Into this place the man-beasts hurried with Curt’s party.

“This is the Valley of the Council, in which all the free clans meet when the summons goes forth,” Golo told Captain Future. The man-horse spoke to Shih, “Sound the call.”

At once the man-tiger leaped toward the rock cliff that formed one of the sides of the gorge and climbed to a tiny ledge. Curt Newton saw him throw back his human head.

“Hai—ooo!”

The screech of the man-tiger floated far out over the silent forest.

Curt Newton understood now why the man-beasts used this gorge for their gatherings. A freak of natural acoustics made the narrow canyon a sounding-box which could project any cry for many miles around.

Unfamiliar constellations of bright stars were winking forth in the darkening sky. Again Shih’s roaring summons went out over the solemn, silent forest, to all the clans.

“Hai-ooo! Hai—ooo!”

Chapter 10: Captain Future's Promise

FAR away in the gathering darkness, the weird call was repeated. Again and again it echoed from many directions.

Shih came bounding back down to the floor of the gorge, where Captain Future and the others waited.

"The call has gone forth," said the man-tiger. "The Winged Ones will carry it. All the clans will soon be here."

His luminous green eyes were fixed on Curt Newton. "They must first accept you as clan-brothers, before we can help you find that other sky-ship you seek. But they will accept, when they know that you are of the Ancients."

Otho spoke uneasily to Curt in low tones. "Suppose they don't accept us?"

"I have an idea our lives won't be worth much if the critters decide we're impostors," muttered Ezra Gurney.

Captain Future silenced them with a warning gesture. He realized as well as they did, the precariousness of the situation.

They sat down in the dusk to wait and the Brain seized the opportunity to ask questions that had been fermenting in their minds.

"Tell me, who are the Manlings whom you speak of as enemies?" Simon asked the man-beasts.

They looked questioningly at the big man-horse who towered over their group like a deeper shadow in the darkness.

"Many ages have passed, but we of the Clans have never forgotten the traditions that have given us our only hope," said the man-horse. "You who are Ancients surely know the first men reared cities here upon Aar. They did not spring from this world, but came here from the Darkness."

"What?" exclaimed the Brain, startled. "Then where did the human race originate, if not from this world of Deneb?"

"That we know not," admitted Golo. "Tradition says only that the first men came from the Darkness."

"Curtis, do you hear?" exclaimed Simon.

"I hear," Captain Future murmured, his own mind racing with startling new speculations. "Let Golo tell it."

"Those men of old grew to glory here upon Aar," the man-horse was

continuing, his deep voice somber in the darkness. “They reared towering cities whose stark and empty towers still stand. They searched out the inmost secret forces of nature. They built skyships that flew to the farthest stars. Those great men of old, whose memory we revere, were the Ancients.

“But two of the Ancients went too far in the quest for power and knowledge. They sought the secret of life itself. They succeeded in finding a power by which they could tamper with the inmost seeds of life, so that from human men and women were born children who were not like other humans — children whose bodies were molded in new, strange forms.”

“The secret of artificial evolution,” murmured the Brain, and Captain Future nodded silently.

“They meant to use that power for good, to mold new races that could people far, strange stars,” continued Golo, “But there were evil ones among the Ancients. These evil ones twisted that power to wicked uses. They used it to mold new human races with beastlike bodies who could be their servants.

“Thus they created man-horses like myself, to be their intelligent beasts of burden; man-dogs and man-tigers, for hunting and for guards; and many other semi-human races. Such races had the heads and minds of men, but the bodies of beasts.”

THE horse-man stamped his hoofs with rage.

“The wicked creation of these semi-human servants caused bitter dispute between the Ancients and the evil ones who had done it,” he went on. “That dispute broke into civil war which was fought with terrible weapons. Before that war was done, it had devastated this world and had destroyed the Ancients and almost all their works here. Their cities became dead and empty. Their sky-ships went no more to the stars.

“The descendants of the evil ones who loosed that catastrophe, still dwell upon this world in the dead cities of the Ancients. They are human people, and we call them the Manlings. They have not the power or wisdom of the great ones of old, but they have certain awful weapons with which they can slay.

“We of the Clans have also dwelt here on ruined Aar for ages, for we are the descendants of the semi-human races who were created long ago. The Manlings seek ever to trap and enslave us, and failing that, to kill us. But we have remained free in the forests, always hoping that some day some of the

good Ancients would come back from the stars and would make us true men once more.”

Upon that note of infinite pathos, the man-horse concluded his recital. And in the darkness, the Futuremen sat dazed by horror and pity.

“Gods of Space,” whispered Otho, horrified. “These creatures were men once, men who were twisted into semi-human races by that devil secret.”

“I suspected that these man-beasts were the result of artificial evolution, when I first saw them,” was Curt Newton’s somber comment. “Now you know why I dread to see such a secret turned loose upon our own System.”

Ezra Gurney recoiled. “An’ Cole Norton would do it — would make a hell like this out of our nine worlds, for money and power!”

“Curtis, we know at last why the Denebian empire fell,” the Brain was saying in his eager voice. “A terrible civil war here at the parent star, over the misuse of artificial evolution. That war shattered the ancient Denebian civilization.”

Grag stirred uneasily. “We’ve come to a world with a nightmare history.”

Nightmare history it seemed to Curt Newton, indeed. His mind quailed beneath the appalling vision of the past conjured up by Golo’s story.

A world whose mighty civilization had swiftly sunk through bitter civil strife to ruin. Once Aar had been the wellspring of galactic civilization, declining into a haunted planet whose savage wilderness was peopled only by the barbaric Manlings and the wild clans of the man-beasts.

Zur, the shaggy man-dog, asked an anxious question of Curt. “Now that you of the true Ancients have returned, you will fulfill our age-old hope and make our races truly human again?”

The other man-beasts hung upon Captain Future’s answer. He realized now the tremendous hope inspired in them by his own party’s appearance. He felt an aching pity, but chose his answer carefully.

“It may well be that your races can be made wholly human again, in time.” said Curt Newton. “But first, it is necessary that we find here the other sky-ship we are seeking.”

“The Clans will know if it has landed anywhere upon Aar,” Shih assured him. The man-tiger raised his head sharply to listen. “They will all be here soon. The Winged Ones are already arriving.”

Captain Future heard a strange rustling sound from the darkness overhead. He and his comrades rose to their feet.

At that moment, a silver, shining disk rose rapidly into the sky at the eastern horizon. It was one of the two moons, and was followed almost immediately by the other, larger satellite.

They were to learn later that the two moons were never far from each other in the sky, since they circled the planet in a curiously complex system of orbits in which the smaller satellite revolved about the larger. The effect of their sudden appearance was startling.

The brilliant silver rays disclosed a flock of big, dark flying-creatures who were gliding down toward the Valley of the Council upon fixed, silent wings.

Curt Newton stared as the first of the creatures swooped down and alighted in the midst of their group.

"This is Skeen, leader of the Clan of the Winged Ones," Golo was saying.

"A man-condor," exclaimed Otho.

IN THE silver moonlight, Skeen stood like a figure of dream. His body was essentially human in outline, but was significantly slimmer and lighter and had taloned hands and feet. His breastbone jutted far forward, and to it were attached the muscles of the enormous, dark, featherless wings that grew from the shoulders.

Skeen's aquiline face was the dark, keen face of a young man, with piercing eyes. He stood now, his clawlike feet gripping the rock, his folded wings towering behind him, eyeing Shih.

"*Hal — ooo, Shih,*" he gave the clan-greeting in a high, shrill, whistling voice. "Why sent you forth the call tonight?"

Then his gaze fell upon Curt Newton and the Futuremen, and he made a movement of amazement. "Who are these? Manlings?"

His great wings had half-unfolded, and his terrible talons ready for instant action. But Golo's deep voice reassured him.

"They are Ancients, Skeen, come back from the stars to redeem us."

"Ancients?" gasped the man-condor. "Can our hopes have come true at last?"

"*Hai—ooo! Hai—ooo!*"

Down from the moonlit sky, other man-condors came gliding to perch on the rocky ledges of the valley wall.

Captain Future heard the whistling babble of their excited voices as the creatures glimpsed him and his companions. And the uproar of excitement grew as more and more creatures entered the moonlit gorge.

“There’s hundreds of the things — thousands of them,” muttered Otho.

“Show no surprise,” Curt warned his comrades. “Let me do the talking. All depends on our getting the help of these creatures.”

Trampling of hundreds of hoofs reverberated in the gorge as the Clan of the Hoofed Ones arrived. The herds of man-horses came in a rapid trot, their human heads and faces weird in the silver moonlight.

As they ranked themselves silently behind Golo at the side of the valley, there floated out of the nearby forest the long, yelping chorus of the Clan of the Hunting Pack.

“Hai—ooo!”

The packs of the man-dogs came from three directions, trotting into the valley and squatting down on their haunches in the moonlight.

“As always, your followers must come noisily,” hissed Shih contemptuously to Zur.

The man-dog answered angrily. “And as always, your Clan is late for the council,” he yelped.

Captain Future dimly perceived the vague shapes of other strange creatures now trooping into the gorge. These were new and different Clans — grotesque, furry man-moles, and intelligent-eyed man-beavers, and others he could only half-glimpse in the crowded valley’s distance.

Last of all, as though by royal right, there stalked through the weird throngs the tawny creatures of the Tiger Clan. Shih’s followers crouched down on the lower ledges, looking down with glimmering green eyes.

“The Clans have gathered,” said Golo in his rumbling voice. “Speak, Shih.”

The great man-tiger looked around the crowded, moonlit gorge. A hush had fallen upon the weird throng as they wonderingly eyed Curt Newton’s group.

“Clan brothers, this night we have called you for great news,” rang Shih’s hissing voice. “That which we have hoped for for many generations has occurred. The Ancients have returned to Aar.”

A low chorus of intense excitement swelled through the man-beasts. Every eye was turned eagerly upon Captain Future’s group as Shih

continued.

“These are the Ancients who have come back to Aar,” said the man-tiger. “They say that if we of the Clans will help them, they can aid us in our great dream of becoming a human race once more.”

From among the man-dogs, a high, shrill voice asked a doubtful question.

“If they are truly of the great Ancients, why should they need our help? The true Ancients wielded such powers that they would need no aid of ours.”

SUCH an expressed doubt was logical enough, and Curt Newton sensed that it had made an impression upon the tense, excited Clans. He knew it was time to speak for himself, and he strode forward in front of Shih.

Captain Future would never forget that scene. The two silver moons pouring down their light into the rocky gorge; the silent herd of the big manhorses, their human faces all turned toward him; the shaggy hordes of the Clan of the Hunting Pack, and the vaguer, stranger shapes beyond them; the luminous green eyes of the man-tigers crouched on the lower ledges, and the rustle of dark pinions from the Winged Ones perched above.

“You of the Clans,” Curt Newton said slowly and clearly, “all know that long ago when this world was falling to ruin, many of the Ancients here departed from it to the stars they had already colonized. Those Ancients were our own forebears, and we are of their blood. We inherited from them the clue to a secret hidden upon this world of Aar.

“It is the secret of a place called the Chamber of Life, in which lies the key to that fatal power which long ago changed your human race into the semi-human peoples you now are. Evil men did that to you, in the far past. And evil men of my own people are now seeking the Chamber of Life here so that they can use its hidden power for similar wickedness.”

Captain Future paused for a moment, but not a whisper broke the hush in which the Clans listened intently.

“I and my comrades came here to prevent that hidden secret from being found and used to unloose evil in our own far worlds,” Curt Newton went on. “We need your help to prevent the wicked ones we have pursued here from finding and using that Chamber of Life.

“If we can prevent them from obtaining that secret, then the secret will be ours to use, and that hidden power can be used to undo the great wrong done you ages ago — to make your races wholly human again.”

Curt Newton saw superhuman excitement of dawning hope upon the moonlit faces of the man-beasts, as he concluded with that promise.

“Could you really do that?” asked Shih in a throbbing whisper, his green eyes blazing. “Could you make us a wholly human people?”

“I feel certain we could.” Curt Newton’s voice rang with sincerity. “Not your own generation would become wholly human, you must understand. But, with the aid of that ancient secret, your race could be so changed.” Captain Future paused so as to give weight to the sensational announcement he was about to make. Then he spoke in impressive tones.

“The next generation of your children would be born true men!”

Chapter 11: City of Cruelty

SHOUTS of frantic excitement arose from the assembled Clans. Curt Newton himself was a little stunned by the tremendous reaction. He felt a clutch at his arm.

“Chief, did you mean that?” asked Otho. “Can you really transform these creatures into human beings?”

“It could be done, if we find the secret of artificial evolution,” Captain Future affirmed rapidly. “The power that so altered the genetic pattern of men and women to produce these new species, could be used to re-alter their genes so that the children would be human again.”

“It wouldn’t be easy, but should be possible,” rasped the Brain. “We’d be doing a great thing if we could undo the wrong done these creatures ages ago.”

Shih’s roaring voice had succeeded in quieting the wild tumult of the man-beasts. Now the big man-tiger snarled a question.

“Clan-brothers, you have heard — what say you? Shall we welcome these strangers into our brotherhood, and give them all aid they require?”

A yelping voice called back. “Let Golo give answer. The Hoofed One is wisest of us all.”

Thus adjured, the big man-horse stepped forward from among his fellows and stood facing Captain Future. Curt Newton thought he had never met such deep, earnest, penetrating eyes as those with which the great man-horse

looked into his face. He felt in that scrutiny the probing of a searching, instinctive intuition.

Then Golo's deep voice broke the hush. "The Hoofed Ones accept you as clan-brothers, strangers."

Instantly came the eager, yelping cry of Zur. "And the Clan of the Hunting Pack accepts you also. *Hai—ooo!* new brothers!"

Skeen, the man-condor, spoke the acceptance of the Winged Ones, and the voices of the vaguer Clans in the darkness swiftly chimed in.

Last spoke Shih.

"You are brothers of the Tiger Clan now too, strangers," he said.

Corroborating him came the low, growling roar of the man-tigers whose green eyes blazed down through the moonlight from the lower ledges on which they crouched.

"Clan-right and clan-duty is yours now, brothers," Golo said earnestly to Captain Future. "You have but to call, and all in the free Clans will come to your aid as you are bound to come to theirs."

Curt Newton felt more deeply touched than he would have believed possible. The steadfast brotherhood conferred upon his group by these primitive, simple creatures was an honor and a responsibility.

"It is my hope and resolve to fulfill your dream and make your races human once more," he said steadily to them. "But as I said, we shall need your help. And we need it first to find the sky-ship that we pursued to this world. Have any of you seen such a ship landing lately upon Aar?"

He waited hopefully, but the replies that came from the man-beasts dashed his expectations. None had seen a spaceship landing.

"Maybe the *Comet* never arrived here," muttered Ezra Gurney. "Maybe, like I figured, it met with trouble before it ever got near Deneb."

That theory sent chill apprehension through Captain Future. If it were true, if Norton and Winters — and Joan — had met disaster in the galactic spaces —

He asked the assembled Clans a new question. "Have any of you seen anywhere on this world a gleaming thing of metal of great size?"

He was thinking that the *Comet* might have reached Aar and crashed, as their own cruiser had done.

"We have seen no such thing in the forest fastnesses where we hunt, clan-brother," answered the hissing voices of the man-tigers.

“Nor in the glades where we run down our game,” yelled one of the Hunting Pack.

But from one of the man-condors perched high on the moonlit ledges, there came an affirmative reply.

“I glimpsed a strange, great thing of shining metal, such as I had never seen before, late yesterday,” called down the whistling voice of the Winged One.

Skeen called quickly up to the creature. “Where did you see that, Kua?” The man-condor replied.

“In the city Raboon,” he said. “I flew over the place at sunset yesterday, and glimpsed this thing in the great square.”

“Was the thing shaped like this?” Captain Future asked eagerly, outlining the *Comet*’s torpedo shape with his hands.

SLOWLY the man-condor shook his hawk-like head.

“I cannot say,” was the reply. “I was at a great height, when I flew over the city, to avoid being slain by the weapons of the Manlings who inhabit the place.”

“Where is this city Raboon?” Captain Future asked sharply of the Clan-leaders.

Shih answered. “It lies several hours’ travel northeastward from here. It is one of the great cities of the Ancients which is now inhabited by the Manlings.”

“Curtis, that must be the city I glimpsed in the distance as we made our crash-landing,” exclaimed the Brain.

“Do you suppose the metal thing that creature saw in Raboon was the *Comet*?” Otho asked excitedly.

“It might be,” Curt Newton frowned. “Norton may have landed and been captured by the Manlings.”

He made up his mind quickly. “We’re going to Raboon and find out. This is the only lead we’ve procured so far, and though it may prove a false one, we must investigate.”

“Raboon is dangerous,” warned Golo. “The tribe of Manlings who inhabit that dead city are numerous and cruel.”

“All the more reason to go there, if Joan and the rest have been captured by the Manlings,” declared Captain Future.

“Then we go with you, clan-brother,” said Shih quickly. “We can lead you by the quickest route, for we have more than once scouted that city of deadly enemies.”

Golo and Zur and Skeen insisted likewise on joining the party. Realizing the great value of their assistance, Curt Newton did not demur.

Shih’s command rang out to the crowded, eager man-beasts in the moonlit gorge, as their party prepared to leave on the perilous mission.

“Clan-brothers, we may have quick need of you in the hours to come,” enjoined the man-tiger. “Hunt not too far from this region, so that if the call comes, you can answer.”

“We hear, Shih,” came back the eager, noisy reply. “We shall be ready if the clan-call comes.”

Curt Newton and Ezra and the Futuremen started northeastward through the moonlit forest at once. Shih and Zur led the way, and Golo’s towering figure trotted behind. Overhead, above the trees, Skeen’s dark-winged figure flew silently, circling over them as they marched.

The Brain, gliding beside Captain Future, babbled excitedly of a matter that was far from Curt Newton’s mind. “I still cannot believe that the tradition of these creatures is true — that the human race did not originate here at Deneb but came from some place else.

“We know Deneb was the first star inhabited by humans,” he continued. “If the human race did not originate here, where was its origin?”

“Accordin’ to that tale they told, the first men came to Deneb from the Darkness,” reminded Ezra Gurney.

“But what does that mean?” muttered the Brain. “This upsets all our ideas of galactic history. We’ve solved the riddle of why the Denebian empire fell, but we’ve stumbled on an even greater cosmic mystery.”

Captain Future only half-heard. Desperate worry over Joan Randall so occupied his mind that he was unable to give thought to the tremendous implications of the mystery that so perplexed the Brain.

He strode forward just behind the tawny, gliding figure of Shih, though the man-tiger set a pace that few men could have followed. Mile after mile of the great forest they traversed, and now the shafts of moonlight that struck down through the trees came from almost overhead.

Oog, riding Otho’s shoulder, whimpered complainingly and was soothed by the android. Grag had tucked his own pet under his arm and was walking

in front of the big man-horse like a grim metal giant.

Hours of steady travel lay behind them, and old Ezra Gurney was panting audibly for breath, when with a rush of wings Skeen came gliding down into the moonlit glade they were crossing.

THE man-condor, alighting beside them, warned in a low whisper. "You are very near Raboon," he said. "It lies just beyond the next ridge. I could see the fires of the Manlings."

"Otho and I will go ahead and scout the place," suggested Captain Future.

"Zur and I will accompany you," hissed the man-tiger. "Skeen and Golo had best wait here with your friends."

Curt Newton and Otho, with Shih and the man-dog flanking them, started more cautiously on through the forest. They entered a thicket of dense underbrush that clothed a slope of gently rising ground.

The brush ended at the ridge of the slope. The four strangely assorted comrades crouched down and crawled forward the last few yards.

Shih's tawny, slinking form rubbed Curt's elbow as they advanced stealthily. At the tiny sound of a snapping twig on the left, the man-tiger gave vent to a low, angry whisper.

"Have you of the Hunting Pack never learned how to stalk a prey?" he demanded furiously of Zur.

The man-dog's low growl answered. "Look to your own feet, Shih. You brush through the leaves as noisily as a Manling."

They crept on until they reached the edge of the ridge, and then crouched down and peered out of the concealment of the thicket.

Before them in the moonlight lay a mighty city. Its magnitude burst upon Curt Newton and Otho with stunning unexpectedness, for until this moment the denseness of the forest had prevented them from even glimpsing it.

Raboon, city of the great Ancients! It was a metropolis of white, soaring towers that were triangular in cross-section, and the highest of which aspired for two thousand feet into the moonlight. Scores upon scores of these gigantic columns rose from an area of several square miles. And the upper levels of these superhuman structures were joined by airy, giddy bridges and galleries and landing-decks, far, far up in the sky.

And this colossal city was dead. No lights gleamed from those high, sky-

flung towers. No aircraft came or went from the lofty landing-decks. And the forest that hemmed this lost metropolis had encroached upon it, for small trees and bushes had forced their way up through the cracked paving of the broad streets, and had turned garden and park into jungles.

“See yonder, the fires of the Manlings,” hissed Shih, in tones of throbbing hatred.

Captain Future now glimpsed, well toward the center of the dead city, the red light of cooking-fires and torches. He could make out the men and women and children that moved about them.

They were as human as himself, those people. But their leather garments and crude-looking tools and weapons, their sputtering torches and squalid campfires, made miserable contrast to the titanic city they inhabited.

“They are barbarians — a people gone back to the primitive,” he muttered to Otho.

“Chief, look — they’ve got some of the man-beasts in there,” whispered the startled android.

Curt Newton had seen, at the same moment. Four of the human-headed man-horses like Golo were plodding through the city under the whips of Manling masters, harnessed to big logs they were dragging to the campfires.

“Yes, the Manlings enslave us of the Clans when they can catch us, or kill us if they can do nothing else,” snarled Shih, bitterly.

The horrifying spectacle held Captain Future spellbound with deep anger. Then, as he looked beyond the wearily-plodding man-beast slaves, he glimpsed a scene whose astounding significance swept everything else from his mind.

It was his missing space-ship, the *Comet*!

Hours before, back in the *Comet* as it sped through the galactic spaces toward Deneb, Joan Randall had succeeded in half rubbing through the insulation of the two cables whose short-circuit would disable the ship. The girl’s hopes were rising. If she could actually cripple the craft, it would not be long until the pursuing Futuremen overtook it.

IN HER absorption, Joan Randall forgot that Cole Norton’s ultimatum had given her only an hour until she must disclose the inscription-clue. She was abruptly reminded by the opening of the compartment door and the crisp voice of the physicist.

“Well, have you decided to be sensible and —” Norton began.

Then, glimpsing Joan Randall’s activity, he leaped forward with an exclamation of alarm and anger.

“So this is what you’re up to! I should have known better than to leave you in here alone.”

Joan Randall struggled fiercely, but the tiny fists with which she hammered Norton’s face could not prevent the big physicist from dragging her out of the compartment into the main cabin of the *Comet*.

Philip Winters looked up startledly from the chart over which he had been anxiously poring. “What’s the matter, Norton?”

“The matter is that this little wildcat was trying to sabotage our ship,” spat Norton. “We’ll have to keep her out here where we can watch her. Chah Har, tie her hands.”

Joan Randall soon found herself bound into one of the recoil-chairs in the cabin, her wrists tied together for further security.

“Now,” said Cole Norton grimly, “I shall waste no further amenities on you. You know just where the Chamber of Life lies at Deneb, and you are going to tell us at once.” His expression hardened. An expression of fiendish cruelty came into his face.

“I know how to make you talk,” he said. “Torture will do the trick!”

Chapter 12: Wicked Men Agree

JUST at this critical moment a providential interruption saved Joan Randall. Voories, the Earthman of Norton’s three unsavory followers, let out a yell from the control room.

“Norton, how do you decelerate this ship?” he shouted in tones of fright. “We’re getting near Deneb and I don’t know how to handle things. Come quick. I need help.”

Norton made a gesture of exasperation.

“You get a reprieve, Miss Randall,” he said. “I’ll have my hands full getting ready for the landing. But when we reach Deneb you’d better be ready to talk!”

The blond physicist stalked forward with Dr. Winters’ little figure

trailing behind. Joan Randall soon heard the vibration-drive generators droning louder as Norton started the ticklish business of decelerating their immense velocity.

Through the open door and fore-window of the control-room, she could glimpse the vault of space ahead. In it, Deneb had grown to a tiny sun-disk that was still expanding slowly as the ship approached.

In the long, following hours, as the *Comet* steadily slowed down and the blazing disk of Deneb steadily grew in size, Joan Randall remained bound in the chair.

Finally she slept, her head nodding on her shoulder, until the crash of rocket-tubes hours later awakened her. She looked forward and perceived the *Comet* was rushing toward a great planet blanketed by rolling green forests.

"This doesn't look as I expected Deneb's world to look," she heard Philip Winters say in a troubled voice. "It's wilderness."

"There's some sort of big city over to the west," Norton's announced. "I'm going to have a look."

Norton was firing keel and tail rockets alternately now, steering the ship down in a long glide.

"Good heavens, look at the size of those towers," Winters was exclaiming. "But I can't see a soul in the place."

"It's dead, and looks as though it has been dead for ages," rasped Norton. "See how the forest has encroached on it. I'm going to land in the place."

JOAN RANDALL felt the *Comet* sinking vertically on its flaming keel-tubes. It slid down past the up-flung spires of enormous, triangular white towers, and came bumpily to rest. Silence followed the cutting of the cyclotrons. "Well, we're here," said Norton in matter-of-fact tones. But as he strode back into the cabin, there was a gleam in his cold blue eyes.

They opened the ship's door, after testing the atmosphere. Joan Randall was released from the chair, but her wrists remained bound as Norton allowed her to emerge with them from the ship.

They stood in a little, wondering group, staring around the mighty city that surrounded them. The ship had landed in a great central plaza paved with time-cracked marble in whose crevices grass and weeds were growing. Immediately confronting them, at the edge of this round plaza, loomed a huge triangular tower that was the largest in the city.

It and the other geometrical white spires that rose thousands of feet into the hot white sunlight made pygmies of the wondering humans.

Norton spoke in a low voice, as though influenced a little by the solemn silence of this brooding place.

"It's a city of the ancient super-civilization of Deneb, whose builders must have perished ages ago," he said.

"Do you suppose the Chamber of Life we're hunting is here?" asked Philip Winters.

"That," said Norton, "is what we are now going to find out." He turned to the girl. "Time's up, Miss Randall. We want that inscription-clue and we want it now. You'll either tell it, or we'll let Chah Har try a few tricks of Uranian cross-examination on you."

He nodded toward the fat, beady-eyed yellow Uranian, who came waddling expectantly forward.

"Is the Chamber of Life near this dead city?" asked Norton.

"I'm not going to tell you," cried the girl.

Norton shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he said with evident sincerity. "I rather like you and I hate to let Chah Har third-degree you. But the stakes in this game are too big for sentiment."

He nodded to the fat Uranian, who moved toward the girl. Philip Winters started to intervene. Norton instantly drew his atom-pistol and covered the little biologist.

"Winters, stand back or I'll have to kill you," he warned in chilled-steel tones. "Remember, you're no longer of value to me."

"Norton, look," screeched Kul Kan, the cadaverous Martian. "This city is coming alive."

He was pointing to the figures that were stealthily emerging from the giant buildings all around the plaza.

They were men, golden-skinned men clad in rough leather garments and carrying weapons that looked oddly like ancient cross-bows. They had these bow-guns trained upon Norton's party, yet despite this menacing attitude, awe and fear were strong in the faces of these golden barbarians.

"It's a trap," shrilled Winters fearfully. "They hid in the buildings until we'd landed —"

"Don't get panicky," rapped Cole Norton. "These people hid when they

heard our ship coming, because they were scared. Look at their faces. They're just savages, and our ship has frightened them. We may be able to get information from them. Don't use your atom-guns."

"Gods of Mars, look at those others," yelled Kul Kan, his red face livid and his eyes bulging.

They all froze with horror. From behind other big towers where they had concealed themselves, more of the gold-skinned barbaric warriors were coming into the plaza. These warriors, though, were mounted.

They were mounted upon horses which had the heads of men. Man-horses, whose weary, patient faces were as human as their own. Bridles connected to cruel choking-rings around the necks of the creatures were used by the riders to control them.

"Those creatures — devils —" gasped the fat Chah Har, shivering violently.

NORTON'S eyes lighted up.

"Steady," he said. "These people must know something about the secret. If we can make friends with them we're all right."

The physicist listened to the chatter of the awed savages.

"That language they're chattering is a debased form of the ancient Denebian language whose written form we learned," continued Norton. "I'm going to try to talk peace to them. Wait here."

Fearlessly, Cole Norton strode forward toward the nervous warriors. Joan Randall saw one of the gold-skinned barbarians hesitatingly come to meet the tall Earthman.

The savage, a man of over middle age with cunning eyes in a mask-like yellow face, wore a headdress that seemed a badge of authority. For many minutes, he and Norton stood there, speaking and gesturing.

Finally, they appeared to come to agreement. For the barbarian chieftain turned and called something to his warriors. An excited shout went up. The tension left the golden men, and they lowered their weapons and came eagerly closer to the strangers.

Cole Norton's eyes were gleaming when he came back to his group. "We were able to talk fairly well," he reported tautly. "These people call themselves the Manlings. That chief, whose name is Osorkon, is smart and cagy but he has a suspicion of our weapons' power and wants to be friends."

Joan Randall perceived that many hundreds of the barbaric Manlings were now appearing from the hiding-places in the dead city to which they had retreated when the *Comet* approached. Men, women and children swarmed forward to mill around the ship.

She shivered with horror at the sight of many of the weary, semi-human man-horses. Her emotion deepened when she perceived among the savage throngs a number of shaggy, big, man-dogs whose heads and faces also were human, and whom the Manlings used to haul low sledges loaded with burdens. The whips of the human masters cracked across the backs of these pitiful semi-human slaves.

“Man-horses and man-dogs — and goodness knows what other half-human species there may be here,” said Philip Winters thickly, to himself. “This is hideous.”

Norton had been talking again with the chieftain of the Manlings. “Osorkon wants to tender us all a feast. It seems that his home is in that biggest tower. I think we’d better go.”

“What about the Randall girl?” demanded Voories, the hulking Earthman. “If we leave her alone in the *Comet*, she’ll try more tricks.”

“We’ll take her along,” Norton said with a frown. “The chief probably has a good place in which to keep her. It’ll be safe to leave the ship, for these people are too afraid of it to tamper with it.”

Joan Randall her wrists still bound, was led between Chah Har and Voories as they all accompanied the Manling chieftain across the plaza.

They entered the colossal biggest tower in the city, which faced the plaza. Its whole lower floor was a vast hall that had apparently once been an auditorium. But now the marbled floor was thick with dust, and strewn with the bones and refuse and ashes carelessly flung aside by the present savage tenants.

Torches burning in rude sockets dispelled a little of the gloom of this enormous room.

Norton conferred with Osorkon, pointing toward Joan Randall as he spoke. The chieftain nodded, and signed to them to accompany him.

Norton forced the girl after the chief, to the end of the vast hall. There were gaping, empty shafts that had once held elevators. There were also stairs, up which Osorkon led.

ALL the dusty upper levels of the gigantic structure appeared to be unused by the Manlings. Understandably, they disliked climbing so much. The chief led along a debris-strewn hall to a door secured by a strong bar.

Joan Randall was thrust into a dark little room, and the door closed. She heard the falling of the heavy bar.

She looked around dismally. The little marble chamber was empty of furniture, and was thick with dust and dried leaves that had drifted through the window. Its walls bore a faded mural of a beautiful scene — golden-skinned men and women in gracious garments, standing in a dark garden and pointing up at the stars.

The girl examined the door, but it was of a shining metal that remained completely uncorroded by the ages that had passed since it was hung. She turned to the tiny window. It too offered no hope of escape. Its small square aperture had been closed by three vertical bars of the same rustless metal by the ancient builders, probably for safety's sake. Whatever glass or similar material had covered the opening was no longer there.

Joan Randall sat wearily down by the window. She looked down through the bars at the plaza and her spirits sank.

"How will Curt ever follow this far in any other ship?" she asked herself.

Darkness swept down upon the dead metropolis and two moons rose above the forest, casting a silver, pure light upon the dreamlike towers of the dead city.

Joan Randall was not aware that the man Voories was on guard outside her door until she heard his rough voice challenging someone who approached. A moment later, the bar was lifted, and Philip Winters entered her prison.

The little biologist looked as though he were suffering from shock. His thin face wore a sick pallor in the moonlight, and his hands were trembling.

"I've come to tell you that you must give Norton the information he wants," he stammered fearfully to Joan. "I shan't be able to stop him from forcing it out of you. I would if I could, but I can't."

"Then you haven't learned anything about the artificial evolution secret from these savages?" Joan Randall asked.

Winters shook his head. "No, no — these Manlings are only barbarians. They've been able to tell us little except that there have always been semi-human man-beasts on this world, and that there are great numbers of them in

the forests.”

“Doctor Winters, you’ve seen now the monstrous result of artificial evolution applied to humans,” Joan Randall said in earnest tones. “Do you still want to take such a secret back to our own System?”

“No, I don’t,” confessed the little biologist, shaking. His voice was an agony of remorse. “I didn’t realize the hideous potentialities of such a power. But what can I do now? Norton’s resolve is unshaken.”

“You could help me get out of here, and we could escape together in the *Comet*” Joan Randall proposed quickly.

Winters was sweating with fear.

“I’ll try — but I can’t guarantee anything,” he promised. “Norton would murder me in a minute if he suspected.”

When the little biologist had left, Joan Randall felt new hope. Slim as was the chance for freedom, it had been enough to banish her despair.

She waited tensely as the next few hours went by. The brawling, savage revelry below did not quiet down, nor did the biologist return.

Finally she was startled to her feet by the sound of a rustling rush outside her door. She heard a low, muffled, choking cry from Voories, and the thud of a body falling to the floor.

The bar was lifted, and her door was opened. With wild hope, Joan Randall turned toward it. Then she recoiled with a scream of terror.

It was not the biologist who was standing in the dark doorway. It was a vague, monstrous figure out of a nightmare, a dark and unhuman devil’s-shape that was advancing toward her.

Chapter 13: By Wings at Night

PEERING out, Captain Future, crouching with Otho between the fierce man-tiger and the man-dog at the edge of the dead metropolis, felt a sudden electrifying thrill.

“Look at the plaza away in the center of the city,” he told Otho. “Do you see it — something gleaming in the firelight? It’s the *Comet*.”

“Chief, look — there’s Cole Norton now,” exclaimed Otho.

Captain Future’s lean, crouching figure tensed as though to spring

forward as he too descried the figure of the traitorous physicist.

Norton had come out of the biggest tower, into the circle of the firelight. The traitor was accompanied by a tall Manling, to whom he seemed earnestly explaining something as he pointed toward the *Comet*.

Presently, Norton and the barbarian went back into the tower. Curt Newton realized Norton had succeeded in making friends with these savages.

“Do you suppose Joan’s in the *Comet*?” Otho asked.

Captain Future shook his head. “I don’t think Norton would leave her in the ship. He’s aware she would be likely to escape in it.”

“Then she must be held in that biggest tower somewhere,” exclaimed Otho.

Curt Newton’s voice was metallic. “Yes. And I’m going in there and find her, and settle with Norton.”

He was actually starting forward out of their concealment, drawing his proton-pistol, when Shih’s great paw caught and dragged him back.

“There is a way you can get into the tower of the chieftain, unobserved,” Shih said rapidly. “Come back with me to the others.”

Captain Future hesitated. His burning rage against Norton and Winters, his anxiety for Joan Randall and his strong desire to recover his ship, all impelled him to take any risks rather than delay.

But Zur had seconded Shih’s appeal. Reluctantly, he crawled back through the thicket with the two strange creatures and Otho.

They soon had returned to the moonlit glade in which Skeen and Golo waited with Ezra, Grag and the Brain. Curt Newton quickly explained to his comrades what they had discovered, and the need of his entering the city.

“Skeen can take you into the tower of the Manling chieftain, from above,” Shih declared. “Can you not, Skeen?”

The big man-condor nodded, unfolding his mighty wings in readiness for flight.

“Holy sun-imps, he means that Skeen can fly with you over the city and down to that tower, Cap’n Future!” gasped Ezra.

Captain Future instantly grasped the possibilities. He asked the man-condor, “Are you sure you can carry me?”

Skeen smiled. “I have carried an injured clan-brother many times. I can bear your weight if it is not for too long.”

“I shall go with you,” the Brain said coolly to Curt Newton. “You may

need all the help you can get.”

Skeen approached, grasped the belt of Captain Future’s space-jacket in his strong claws, and leaped upward. At the same moment his mighty wings thunderously threshed the air.

Curt Newton felt himself rising swiftly. The wind of the great wings buffeted his face as he glanced down and saw the moonlit glade of giant trees dropping rapidly below them.

They shot up into the full brilliance of the two moons. Skeen flew over the silvered roof of the forest, heading *away* from Raboon and climbing steadily. Curt Newton guessed that his bearer intended to gain altitude before approaching the city.

Higher and higher flew the man-condor on tireless wings. Captain Future glimpsed the square, glittering shape of the Brain gliding close beside them as they climbed. Presently they were almost a mile above the surface of Aar.

“It is high enough,” murmured the whistling voice of Skeen. “Now make no sound, clan-brother, for our danger begins.”

HE HAD turned back toward Raboon. His broad wings were set now in fixed planes, and from that dizzy height he began descending in a long, smooth glide.

Down through the chill air they rushed, the Brain still silently keeping pace nearby. With no other sound than the rustling rush of air past the great pinions, the Winged One swooped down toward the dead city.

Curt Newton saw the tips of the triangular white towers directly beneath, and the tiny red fires of the Manlings on the ground far below. Soundlessly they dropped toward the truncated top of the tallest tower. And softly Skeen came to rest on that narrow space, and set Curt down.

“We were not seen,” whispered the man-condor. “There would have been an alarm otherwise.”

The Brain had dropped with them and was hovering beside them as Captain Future and the man-condor peered down at the fire-lit plaza far below.

Curt Newton turned toward the stair leading downward into the giant structure.

“You had better wait here, Skeen,” he told the man-condor. “Your wings would not be of much use down inside the building, if we’re discovered.”

“I go with you, clan-brother,” said Skeen quietly. “Are you not working for the redemption of all our race?”

Captain Future felt a pang of apprehension as he realized how whole-souledly the man-beasts were counting on him to restore their race to full humanity.

Suppose, even if he finally found the Chamber Of Life, he could not do it? Suppose the secret power of artificial evolution could not be used to right that ancient wrong, and he had to disappoint these loyal creatures?

Curt Newton forced down that apprehension and started for the stair. It was no time now to worry about the future — the present was perilous enough.

“Do the Manlings occupy none but the lowest level of these towers?” he whispered to the man-condor as they descended the steps.

“They rarely venture into the upper levels,” Skeen murmured. “They think them haunted by the ghosts of the dead Ancients.”

The stair was in tenebrous darkness, and Curt Newton felt rather than saw his way. His feet softly crunched dried leaves and other debris that the wind had brought into the tower. The Brain glided noiselessly at his side, while the great man-condor followed silently with his wings folded across his back.

They came down thus into the highest level of apartments in the tower. It was a dusty labyrinth of corridors and chambers, eerily illuminated by bars of silver moonlight from the windows whose glass had long ago been destroyed. Curt Newton looked around, his proton-pistol in his hand.

He spotted the continuation of the stair. They went on down, through level after level of the stupendous tower — through moon-shot halls and rooms where the dust of ages lay thick upon the wrecks of ancient furniture or mechanisms and upon the wonderful murals of the Ancients.

In other circumstances, Captain Future would have given half a lifetime to examine these mysterious relics of the mighty race who had been the ancestors of his own and every other human race in the galaxy. But his pressing anxiety for Joan Randall drove scientific speculation from his mind.

Curt Newton’s legs were tired from descending countless steps, and considerable time had passed, before they began to approach the lowest levels.

“Do you hear them?” whispered Curt Newton. “Quiet, now — you keep

behind me, Skeen.”

They could now hear the riot of savage revelry that came from the Manlings feasting in the lowest level of the tower. Their nerves were strung tensely as they went down another stairway, to the second level.

Captain Future froze abruptly in the moonlight at the foot of the stair. Further along the corridor, he had glimpsed the hulking figure of a big, armed Earthman standing guard outside a barred door.

“One of Norton’s men — and he must be standing guard over Joan,” Curt Newton thought instantly. “If I can get him —”

He meant to steal forward, strike down the unsuspecting Earthman, and get Joan Randall out without the knowledge of those whom he could hear below.

CURT NEWTON never had a chance to carry out his intention. He had stopped so suddenly that Skeen, behind him, bumped into him. The man-condor threshed his wings half-open in recovering his balance.

The hulking Earthman swung around at the sound. He was clear in the bright moonlight from the tall, open windows along the corridor, raising his atom-pistol in alarm.

Captain Future could have shot before the other. But to do so was to betray their presence to those below. He took a gambler’s chance. He flung his proton-pistol at the Earthman’s head with a lightning movement.

“What —” the hulking guard started to exclaim.

The butt of the flying weapon hit his forehead and he collapsed with a groan.

Curt Newton plunged down the moonlit corridor on flying feet, and the big man-condor was beside him in a rustling rush as fast as his own.

The hulking figure over which Curt bent was only half-stunned. Groping at the man’s neck, Curt Newton called over his shoulder.

“Unbar that door and get Joan out while I fix this fellow,” he said.

His fingers were pressing into the neck nerve-centers of the semi-stunned guard, a pressure that would leave him unconscious for hours. He did not realize the fatal mistake he made in letting Skeen unbar the door.

For as the great man-condor lifted the bar and opened the door, the girl prisoned inside came running forward. Then as she glimpsed the towering, winged, weird shape of Skeen in the doorway, she uttered an involuntary cry

of horror.

“Joan, it’s us Futuremen!” Curt Newton said frantically. “Quiet!”

His warning came too late. Joan Randall’s single scream had been followed instantly by shouts of alarm from the lower level.

A horde of Manlings poured up the stairs into the moonlit corridor. As he scrabbled vainly on the dark floor for his lost proton-pistol, Captain Future recognized Cole Norton’s tall figure in the forefront of the horde.

He and his friends were hopelessly trapped in the corridor, for the barbarian tribesmen had come upstairs at both ends of it.

“Simon — Skeen — the window!” Yelled Curt Newton. “Get away!”

“We’ll not leave you, clan-brother,” cried the great man-condor, starting toward Curt Newton and Joan.

“Go, before they have you too,” shouted Captain Future.

As the words left his lips, he was borne to the floor by the yelling horde of Manlings.

He fought fiercely, still struggling to find his gun on the floor. He glimpsed Skeen and the Brain, who apparently now realized the hopelessness of joining him, plunging toward the tall open windows in the side of the hall.

“Don’t let those two escape,” yelled Cole Norton.

The crash of Norton’s atom-gun synchronized with the *twang* of the Manlings’ bow-guns releasing their pointed metal darts at the two plunging figures.

But Skeen and Simon had already hurled themselves through the big glass-less window into the outer night. The thresh of wings, swiftly receding, told that the man-condor and the Brain had made good their escape.

Curt Newton heard the sound only vaguely through the tumult that raged around him as he fought. He had given up the vain search for his proton-pistol and his clenched fists smashed at his Manling attackers.

He was fighting without a chance of victory. He knew it as more of the yelling tribesmen piled upon him. Crushed by their weight, he felt his wrists savagely bound by strips of hide. Then, staggering and panting, he was hauled furiously to his feet.

“It’s Captain Future!” yelled Cole Norton, thunderstruck as he glimpsed Curt Newton’s face in the moonlight. “So I was right when I thought that looked like the Brain who got away through the window with the other.”

“Captain Future?” echoed the Martian, Kul Kan, fearfully. “Gods of

Mars, those Futuremen are devils. How could they follow us across the whole galaxy so swiftly? We've only been on this world a day, ourselves."

"I don't understand myself how they could do it, when there's no other ship as fast as the *Comet*," muttered Norton. "We wasted a lot of time decelerating speed as we approached Deneb. That helped them overtake us."

Curt Newton knew that that was indeed the explanation. His own disastrously delayed deceleration, which had wrecked his cruiser, had at least permitted him to reach this world only a few hours after Norton's party.

MANLING warriors with flaring torches had raced up into the corridor, as the alarm increased. At their head was the chieftain, Osorkon.

"That was one of the Clan of the winged Ones who escaped," Osorkon cried to Norton. He stared at Curt Newton. "Who is this?"

"He is my worst enemy," Norton said rapidly. "He came here to prevent us from reaching the Chamber of Life."

Captain Future felt surprised. Then — Norton had told the Manling chieftain the purpose of his quest here, and was in alliance with him?

Curt Newton looked at the traitorous physicist with a flame in his gray eyes.

"Norton, you left us in a death-trap on Uranus' moon, and you stole our ship," he said. "I might forgive you those things. But you brought Joan into this hell's-nest of peril. I intend to kill you for that."

Norton met his fiery gaze without fright. "You're hardly in a position to talk about what you'll do to me, Future," he reminded Curt Newton coolly.

Joan Randall cried to Captain Future through the tribesmen who held them apart. "Curt, I knew you'd follow. I did everything I could to prevent them from reaching Deneb, but I failed."

The love and confidence in her eyes made Captain Future groan inwardly. It was he who had failed, he thought bitterly.

Philip Winters had pushed through the tense throng. The little biologist stared with ludicrous amazement at Curt Newton.

"The Futuremen here at Deneb!" he gasped.

Osorkon, his cunning eyes flashing alarm, was exclaiming to Norton, "These enemies of yours must have made alliance with the wild Clans — the man-beasts of the forest. One of the Winged Ones was here with them. You ought to kill this man at once."

Chah Har, Norton's fat Uranian henchman, nodded vigorous agreement. "That native's right, Norton. There's no safety for us while Captain Future lives."

Cole Norton's hard voice rose to dominate the bloodthirsty crew. "I'm not killing Captain Future — at least not just yet. I've good reasons. Before we do anything else, we're going to get the secret of the Chamber of Life without any more delay."

He pointed harshly at Joan. "Bring the girl downstairs. She's going to talk, without any further stalling. Keep Future up here and you and Kul Kan stand guard over him, Chah Har."

They had tied Curt's ankles as well as his wrists. He made a furious effort to plunge forward as the Manlings dragged Joan with them. But the effort was hopeless, with the Uranian and Martian holding him.

"Wait a minute, Norton!"

The shrill voice lashed across the torchlit corridor and struck them to silence. It came from Philip Winters.

The little biologist stood between the others and the head of the stairs. Winters' thin face was deadly pale, he was trembling, but behind his spectacles his eyes blazed and his atom-gun was covering Cole Norton.

"You're not going any further with this," shrilled the biologist. "I'm not standing by and letting you use torture on Joan Randall. Stand still, Cole Norton, or I'll kill you!"

Chapter 14: Fight Against Oppressors

BRIEFLY, for a moment Cole Norton stood as if paralyzed with astonishment at the little scientist's intervention. Then an expression of rage suffused his features and he began to expostulate.

"Come to your senses, Winters," he cried. "Torture is the only way we will be able to find the Chamber of Life and the secret of artificial evolution."

"That's just it," cried Winters. "We're not going to find that secret and let you turn our Solar System into a purgatory of monstrosities."

Norton's brows drew together contemptuously. "So you've gone sentimental on me?"

“I’ve come to my senses, if that’s what you mean,” Winters retorted. “I’ve realized the horror that you’d turn loose on our System, to gain power and riches for yourself. I know now Captain Future was right —”

Curt Newton glimpsed Chah Har, beside him, secretly raising his weapon. He yelled a warning to the biologist. Winters turned in confusion.

Instantly, with the speed of a wolf’s snap, Cole Norton drew and fired his atom-pistol. The crashing bolt of fire hit Winter’s breast and he fell in a crumpled heap.

The fanatic biologist who had come across the galaxy to search for the secret of life had found death. He had died in an attempt to right his disastrous mistake.

Norton coolly holstered his weapon. “I knew I’d have to do that sooner or later,” he remarked. “He was getting too many scruples. But it was awkward for a moment.”

Joan Randall was dragged on down the stairs by the Manlings, past the dead biologist’s prone form. Norton called back a final caution to the Martian and Uranian guarding Curt Newton.

“If Future gets free, you two will be the first to die,” he warned. “Keep remembering that.”

That the two criminals appreciated the fact was evidenced by the extreme care with which they watched Captain Future. They had forced him down into a sitting position on the floor of the corridor, and they stood over him with their atom-pistols trained upon him.

Curt Newton’s mind was a seething turmoil of dread. It was dread for Joan Randall that turned his veins to ice. He knew Joan Randall’s character. She would die under torture before she would ever reveal an iota of the secret to Norton. She might be dying down there, now!

Curt Newton strained convulsively at his bonds, at that thought. It was useless. And as though to torment him further, his strained ears caught the sound of a distant, strangled cry of horror. The voice was that of Joan Randall.

While this was taking place, back in the moonlit glade of the great forest, Grag and Otho and old Ezra Gurney waited tensely for the return of Captain Future.

Shih, the man-tiger, the shaggy Zur and big Golo waited with them. And Shih moved restlessly to and fro in feline strides, halting every now and then

to raise his human head and listen.

“There has been no sound of alarm from Raboon,” he hissed. “They have at least entered the city without discovery.”

“They should have taken me with them,” muttered Otho. “I’d be a lot more help to the chief than Simon.”

“And how would you have flown with Skeen and Simon?” demanded Grag. “Maybe you think you could fly by flapping those big ears of yours.”

Otho was outraged. “My ears are real ears, which is more than you can say of the tin microphones you hear with.”

Ezra Gurney intervened testily. “For Space’s sake, do you two have to start scrappin’ now? Cut your rockets before you wake the dead.”

The big man-horse, Golo, had been watching the argument of the Futuremen with puzzled eyes. Now he spoke in his deep voice to Ezra.

“Are they angry with each other, clan-brother?” he asked puzzledly.

“No, they’re not really mad,” drawled the old veteran. “They’re worried about Cap’n Future, and whenever they’re worried, they get to bickerin’ to relieve their minds.”

“Men and their ways are strange to us of the Clans,” said Golo thoughtfully. “Yet our forefathers were men once.”

EZRA, oddly moved by the words, patted the shoulder of the mighty man-horse. “And your descendants will be men again, if Cap’n Future succeeds.”

Zur, the man-dog, said eagerly: “We of the Hunting Pack would die cheerfully to help him succeed in that.”

Grag had seated himself and was soothing his moon-pup pet. Little-Eek, never the bravest of creatures, had been in a state of nervous panic ever since their first encounter with the man-beasts.

Oog, who was more phlegmatic, frisked around Otho’s feet in the moonlight. But even he shrank back fearfully as the great man-tiger suddenly uttered a low, reverberating, hissing whisper.

“Listen!” cried Shih. “There is trouble in the city!”

They heard faintly through the distance the sound of excited cries. A few moments later came the muffled crash of an atom-gun.

“The chief’s in trouble!” cried Otho. “I’m going in there!”

“Wait a minute!” Ezra Gurney exclaimed. “Somebody’s coming —”

They all at the same moment heard the swift rush of wings from the upper night. A few instants later, two flying figures shot down between the giant trees into the moonlit glade.

One of them was Skeen. And the other was the Brain, gliding swiftly down beside the man-condor.

“Where’s the chief — and Joan?” cried Otho in alarm.

“Prisoners, both of them,” rasped the Brain. He told swiftly what had happened. “We got away, and came back here for help.”

A cry of rage broke from Grag. “Then we’re going into the city after them, right now.”

“Wait,” Shih’s green eyes were blazing and his feline tiger-body was quivering as though to spring. “We few can do nothing against the hordes of the Manlings. This is the Clans’ fight, too.”

“Shih speaks truth,” rumbled Golo quickly. “Your leader is our one hope for the redemption of our race. And he is clan-brother of all of us, now.”

“We shall gather the Clans and attack Raboon in force,” the man-tiger continued swiftly.

“Skeen, carry the clan-call across the sky to all the Winged Ones,” Golo told the man-condor. “Shih and Zur, take it back through the forest. Gather all the Clans to meet here for the attack.”

Shih and Zur were already gone, loping swiftly away through the thickets. And Skeen was on the wing, flapping up above the moonlit forest and flying swiftly southeastward.

“*Hai—ooo! Hai—ooo!*” echoed the clan-call, across the sky and through the forests.

Dimly, from far and wide, came back the answer of the forest Clans.

“They are coming,” the man-horse said finally.

Gathering of the Clans! The sky was alive with the rustle and flap of great wings. Skeen had brought his Clan, and in an interminable flock, the man-condors wheeled overhead in the moonlight.

Rush and thunder of countless hoofs reverberated along the ground as the herds of the man-horses arrived. As they stamped and whirled excitedly, hundreds of fierce voices yelled the clan-call, and Zur and the shaggy hordes of the man-dogs poured into the clearing.

“*Hai—ooo!*” yelled Zur across the tumult. “The Hunting Packs are here. Where is the Tiger Clan?”

“Shih and his brothers come now,” called Golo. “See yonder.”

Not with excited roaring, not crashing through the brush, came the hosts of the Tiger Clan. They came like tawny, gliding ghosts, green eyes blazing ferally in the moonlight, with big Shih leading them.

“Are you all here?” Ezra cried to the man-horse. “We daren’t wait any longer or Cap’n Future will be dead.”

“If he’s not dead already,” hissed Otho.

“We are ready,” rumbled Golo. “We do not wait to summon the other Clans, for they could help us little in the attack on Raboon.”

SHIH raised his voice in a snarling shout that was like a trumpet-blast to the man-beasts gathered around and the man-condors above.

Golo was speaking swiftly to Ezra Gurney. “Up on my back, clan-brother! You will not be able to keep pace with us otherwise.”

Ezra Gurney gingerly climbed onto the back of the big man-horse. Otho, at Golo’s suggestion, vaulted to the back of the Hoofed One next him.

“I need no strength but my own,” bellowed Grag. He had placed Eek and Oog in the hollow of a tree, with instructions for them to wait.

“To Raboon,” roared Shih.

Next moment, Ezra Gurney found himself clinging for dear life to the mane of the man-horse as Golo and the Hoofed Ones and all the gathered Clans plunged through the forest.

It was like a broad, surging tide of ferocious life, sweeping through the moonlit forest toward Raboon. Even ahead of the galloping man-horses raced the tawny, loping hordes of the Tiger Clan.

Behind him, Ezra heard the wild, yelping chorus of the man-dogs of Zur.

Branches whipped Ezra’s face, and the wind Whistled shrilly past his ears. He glimpsed Otho, close beside him in the trampling, thundering herd of Hoofed Ones, bunched catlike on his own strange steed. Grag was keeping pace, his mighty metal limbs plunging like pistons.

Of all the experiences that had filled Ezra Gurney’s life in the long years pent on wild interplanetary frontiers, nothing had ever matched this headlong, crazy rush with the man-beast Clans. It seemed only minutes to him before they were all surging up a ridge of thinning thickets beyond which stupendous white towers soared into the moonlight.

“Raboon is ahead!” Golo called back over his shoulder. “Now cling

tightly, clan-brother, and we will try to get through the Manlings to the tower of their chief.”

Ezra glimpsed the breath-taking magnitude of the moonlit dead city, the titanic towers and weed-grown streets, the red fires of the Manlings far in toward the center of the place. Then —

“The man-beasts attack,” shrilled a wild Manling voice in warning, somewhere ahead.

Horns, blown in the city streets, bellowed hoarsely, and out of towers came pouring the hordes of the barbarian humans with their odd crossbow weapons.

“Fang and claw, for those who have oppressed and enslaved us,” roared Shih’s great shout.

And as they plunged forward into Raboon, the Clans answered.

“Fang and claw,” they roared.

Twang! Twang! Like singing notes of plucked strings came the sound of the Manlings’ bow-guns loosing their metal darts at the man-beasts.

Darts whizzed past Ezra Gurney’s ear, and others found their mark in Hoofed Ones who crashed to the pavement in mid-stride. The old veteran had his proton-pistol in his hand, and fired its bolt of blazing force at the foremost of the Manlings ahead.

Otho, leaning far forward over the neck of his man-horse steed, was loosing bolt after bolt of crashing energy from his own pistol. But Grag disdained all weapons but his own mighty metal fists as he plunged forward.

The surging horde of the Clans crashed into the Manlings. Then everything seemed to whirl around Ezra Gurney in a mad phantasmagoria of nightmare battle.

The Manlings fought fiercely. And their bow-guns were deadly at this short range, the heavy metal darts striking down man-beasts on all sides.

But the Clans were blood-mad tonight. Thousands of years of hatred for the barbaric humans who had so long hunted and trapped and slain them had now reached frenzied culmination.

“Gods of Space,” gasped Ezra Gurney, as he clung to Golo’s back and shot.

For Golo himself had plunged in a thundering full gallop at the Manlings, and the great man-horse was rearing and striking down with deadly hoofs at the savages. And the Hoofed Ones all around them were dealing out

trampling death to their foes.

BUT Shih's man-tigers had been ahead of them, springing through the air and alighting among the Manlings, and striking with great claws that ripped and tore faster than the eye could follow. And down from the moonlit sky had swooped the hordes of Skeen, the man-condors whose taloned fingers slashed at the enemy from above and whose wings blotted out the sky.

"*Hai—ooo!*" came a new, mad, yelping chorus to Ezra's ears, through the din of the crazy fight.

The Hunting Pack, a little behind the others, had reached the scene and thrown itself into the battle. And the shaggy hordes of Zur's man-dogs, whose teeth gleamed wolflike in the moonlight as they sprang and pulled down fighting men, seemed to overweight the balance of battle.

The Manlings gave back! Terrorized by the scale and ferocity of this attack of the forest hordes, they retreated fighting toward the plaza.

Grag's booming shout rose above all other sounds, as the giant metal robot who had been tossing Manlings aside like straw, plunged onward. The fierce hunting-yell of the man-beasts answered with a note of triumph.

But Ezra Gurney heard the metallic, high-pitched cry of the Brain, who had flashed down to hover beside him.

"Norton and his men are preparing to take off in the *Comet*" Simon Wright cried. "See yonder."

Ezra Gurney, clinging to Golo's back, peered beyond the raging fight and glimpsed the big, metallic bulk of the *Comet* gleaming in the firelight at the central plaza.

The door of the space-ship was being closed, as he looked. And instantly, he understood.

"Grag! Otho!" he yelled frantically. "Get through and stop the ship from takin' off. They must have Gap'n Future and Joan in it prisoner, if they haven't already killed 'em."

Otho and Grag uttered shouts of anger, and started to fling themselves through the retreating Manlings, regardless of risk.

It was too late. At that moment, there was a thunderous blast of fire from the keel-tubes of the *Comet* and the ship rushed steeply up into the sky!

Chapter 15: Joan Randall's Blunder

ON THE verge of desperation bound hand and foot in the upper level of the chieftain's tower in dead Raboon, Captain Future tensed in every muscle as he heard that cry of horror that came in Joan Randall's voice from the floor below. He knew with terrible clarity what it meant. It meant that Cole Norton was carrying out his threat to torture the secret of the Chamber of Life out of Joan.

Captain Future's veins froze. "She won't tell," he thought, appalled. "She'll let them kill her before she tells."

Curt Newton faced a ghastly dilemma. He could stop whatever they were doing to Joan Randall, by telling Norton the secret. The words of that ancient Denebian inscription rang at this moment in his mind.

Beneath the Prism Peak, in the Crystal Mountains that lie beyond the black sea of the north, lies the Chamber of Life —

Those few words would save the girl he loved. But they meant releasing an ancient horror, giving the ruthless Norton the key to that power of artificial evolution which could make the words of his own Solar System haunted by hideous semi-human creatures such as in this world of Aar.

"I can't do that — we came all this way to Deneb to prevent that," Curt Newton thought frantically. "Yet I can't sacrifice Joan."

There seemed no third course. He was helpless otherwise to intervene. He sat here in the moonshot corridor, his hands bound in front of him and his legs trussed at the ankles, with with Chah Har and Kul Kan sitting watchfully with their atom-pistols resting on their knees.

Into Captain Future's seething mind came a sharp thrill of sudden memory. His own proton-pistol! He had flung it to stun Voories, and then had been unable to find it before Norton and the Manlings had overpowered him. The weapon must still be somewhere here in the corridor.

Curt's eyes rapidly roved the passage, though he was careful not to arouse the suspicion of his guards by too intent a stare.

In a moment, he saw the proton-pistol. His eyes, accustomed now to the semi-darkness of the moon-barred passageway, detected the dull gleam of the weapon from the dark floor ten feet further down the corridor.

“If I could get my hands on it,” thought Captain Future.

He had heard no further sound from below. And that sudden cessation of Joan Randall’s horrified cry was more sinister to him than the cry itself had been.

NEITHER Chah Har nor the cadaverous Martian had glimpsed the pistol lying in the darkness further down the passage. No one would have noticed it unless, like Curt Newton, he had been looking for it.

“But I daren’t try to make a spring for it,” Curt Newton thought desperately. “With hands and feet both tied, I could never reach it before they blasted me.”

A hazardous stratagem formed itself in his mind. He began to twitch his arms and legs, stirring painfully.

“You’ve tied me too tightly — my legs and arms are going numb,” he complained to Chah Har.

The fat, beady-eyed Uranian criminal sneered. “Save your talk. You don’t think we’re simple enough to loosen the cords, Future?”

“At least, let me stand for a little while to restore circulation,” protested Curt Newton.

Kul Kan uttered a sound of harsh mirth. “Get on your feet if you want to. We won’t stop you.”

Curt Newton unsteadily rose to standing position, bracing himself against the wall. He staggered there, purposely wobbling as though unable to keep his balance on his bound feet.

“Hold me up — I’m going to fall,” he exclaimed in pretended alarm, staggering helplessly.

“Go ahead and fall — a bump on this hard floor will help restore your circulation,” mocked Chah Har.

Both criminals were standing well back out of reach of Curt, their atom-guns in their hands, as they enjoyed the spectacle of helplessness he presented.

Curt Newton wobbled more wildly, pitched a little away from the two criminals, and then toppled over and crashed full-length upon the floor.

He fell face-foremost, with bruising force. But he fell upon the proton-pistol.

His bound hands gripped it eagerly. Lying there, pretending to be

stunned, Curt Newton's fingers fumbled hastily at the little ratchet on the side of the weapon's butt, which regulated the intensity of its bolt.

He set the intensity-ratchet, to the lowest lethal point. As he did so, Chah Har strode forward and roughly grasped Curt's shoulder.

"You're not so stunned as all that," rapped the Uranian. "You're acting, but it won't do you any good."

The Uranian, hauling Curt Newton upright as he spoke, glimpsed the proton-pistol grasped by Curt Newton's bound hands.

With a hissing exclamation, Chah Har thrust Captain Future violently backward and raised his atom-pistol to fire.

Falling backward, helpless to retain his balance, Curt Newton fired twice with that phenomenal swiftness and accuracy that had made his name legendary as a fighter in the System.

The thin, needle-like beam of his proton-pistol flashed and burned a tiny hole between Chah Har's eyes. It flashed again in the next fraction of a second, and drove through Kul Kan's breast as the Martian raised his own weapon.

THE next moment, Curt was sprawling on his back upon the floor. He rolled with catlike swiftness and came up on his knees, ready to fire again.

There was no need. Both of the two criminals lay dead upon the moon-barred floor of the passage.

Curt Newton listened. "If Norton and the others down there heard —"

Because he had set the intensity of his weapon to a low point, its needle-like beams had made no more sound than a low, sharp crackling.

The sounds had apparently escaped the attention of those on the lower floor of the tower.

"If I'm not too late —" Curt Newton husked.

He scrambled toward the dead criminals. A search of Chah Har's pockets discovered a wicked-looking Uranian knife.

In less than a minute, Curt Newton had cut himself free. He leaped to his feet, and as he did so, there came a dull, distant roar from far out in the surrounding dead city.

He paid no attention to the turmoil. Joan Randall's peril filled his mind to the exclusion of all else as he hastened toward the stairs.

TALL and grim in the silver bars of moonlight he crossed, his red hair disordered, his face deadly with purpose, Captain Future started softly down those long, dusty steps to the first floor of the great tower.

He heard the surging roar from the distance more loudly, and also heard a clamor of alarm and excitement from the floor below him.

“The man-beasts!” a shrill Manling voice was yelling, down there.

Curt Newton reached the foot of the stair and peered across the vast, dusty, torchlit hall of the Ancients in which Osorkon made his home.

The Manling chieftain himself, and Cole Norton and the criminal Earthman Voories, were hastening out of the hall to the plaza outside, in evident response to the spreading alarm outside.

Most of the Manling warriors who had been feasting here were going with them, though three of the barbarians remained. At one end of the rude feast-table, guarded by those three, Joan Randall sat with her dark head buried in her hands.

The sharp eyes of one of the three Manling guards glimpsed Captain Future at the foot of the stairs. The savage shouted in alarm.

“Joan, down to the floor,” yelled Curt Newton.

She was between him and the three guards who were raising their bow-guns. She looked up, and her tear-stained face lit with sudden joy.

Twang! Twang! Darts from the bow-guns rang viciously off the stairs behind Curt, as Joan Randall flung herself flat in obedience to his cry.

The third Manling guard aimed his bow-gun at Curt with more deliberate care. He never released its dart. As Joan Randall flung herself out of the line of fire, Captain Future squeezed the trigger with vicious rapidity.

The thin beam of his proton-pistol seemed to leap like a living thing from one to another of the savages. The three tumbled to the floor.

Curt Newton was already leaping forward to snatch the girl up from the floor. “Joan, have they hurt you?”

Joan Randall’s tear-stained face was pale with emotion, but she shook her head. “No, Curt, but —”

“Captain Future!”

That cry of rage came from Cole Norton, who with Voories had been hastening back into the torchlit hall.

Curt Newton swung and shot, with deadly purpose. He meant to kill Norton without parley, for the ruthless physicist had forfeited all claim to

mercy by his callous slaying of Philip Winters.

But Norton, always quick-witted, had darted aside as he uttered that exclamation of amazement and rage. His own atom-pistol was in his hand and spat a crashing bolt of white fire across the dim, great room.

Curt Newton dragged Joan Randall down beneath the shelter of the table as the deadly bolt of energy grazed them. Then he leaped to his feet and raced grimly forward.

Norton had already turned and fled. By the time Captain Future reached the door, the two Earthmen were out on the firelit plaza, running toward the gleaming bulk of the *Comet*.

For a moment, Curt Newton was staggered by the scene that lay before him. Raboon had become an inferno of nightmare battle under the two moons. A wild horde of the man-beasts was pressing the resisting Manlings backward toward this central plaza.

“Joan, stay back,” Captain Future flung over his shoulder as he rushed out into the plaza. “The Clans are attacking Raboon.”

Norton and Voories were already hastening into the *Comet*. With them were Osorkon, the chieftain, and a half-dozen of his Manling warriors.

Captain Future immediately understood. Norton realized that the man-beasts were conquering the city, and was making his getaway in the stolen space-ship. And the craven Manling chieftain was accompanying him.

Curt Newton fired as he ran across the firelit plaza. His beam cut down the last two Manling warriors crowding frantically into the ship, but Norton and Voories and the chieftain were already inside. The door of the *Comet* slammed, and the ship shot upward on thunderous, flaming rocket-tubes.

Joan Randall had run fearlessly after him despite his order, and her face was white with horror as she saw the ship roaring steeply up past the tall white towers into the moonlit sky.

“Curt, he’s getting away. Can’t you stop him somehow?” she cried.

“Not without another ship, and there’s no other on Deneb,” he gritted. “But it’s all right, Joan — he didn’t succeed in taking you with them as he meant to do, and he hasn’t got the secret either.”

SHE clung to his arm, sobbing something to him, but he could not hear her. The wild battle of Manlings and man-beasts was sweeping into the plaza itself.

The outnumbered Manlings seemed to have fallen prey to despair at the flight of their chieftain. They were being pressed remorselessly forward by the wild hordes of trampling man-horses and raging man-tigers, by the teeth of the hunting pack and the talons of the swooping Winged Ones.

The Manlings broke and fled in wild rout through the dead city. They and their terrified women and children sought refuge in the forest.

“They’re licked!” rang a shrill, familiar voice across the din. It was Ezra Gurney, mounted on the big black man-horse. “We’ve beaten ‘em!”

Golo, the great man-horse, repeated that cry in a trumpet voice to the raging hordes of the Clans.

“The battle is over, Clan-brothers. The Manlings everywhere flee from us and their chieftain has deserted them!”

A flying white figure leaped toward Curt Newton and Joan. It was Otho, and the android’s slant eyes were fiery with battle-light.

“Chief, thank Space you and Joan are safe. I thought Norton had killed you both or had you in the *Comet*!”

Grag came stalking like a grim steel giant through the excited hordes of the man-beasts, as the Brain glided swiftly down from above. And Ezra Gurney was sliding off the back of Golo to join them.

“Suppose Norton has left Deneb altogether with the *Comet*, how will we ever get away from here?” Grag exclaimed in dismay.

“He won’t leave — he’ll stay to search for the artificial evolution secret,” predicted the Brain.

Curt Newton nodded in swift agreement. “But he can’t find it, without the inscription-clue.”

“Curt, listen —” begged Joan, clutching his sleeve.

The yelping, excited voice of Zur, the man-dog, interrupted. He spoke eagerly to Curt Newton. “Can we of the Hunting Pack not harry the fugitive Manlings through the forests? Between now and sunrise, we could run every one of them down.”

“Shih, his tawny body bleeding from a half-dozen grazing wounds and his eyes shooting green light, uttered a hissing snarl of agreement.

“Not one of them will see tomorrow’s sun if we Clans take their trail.”

“No — no slaughter,” said Captain Future. “You have won a great victory, but human peoples do not massacre their defeated foes. And are your Clans not soon to be human again?”

That argument restrained the fierce bloodthirstiness of the man-beasts as no other could have done. Golo's rumbling voice upheld Curt Newton.

"Our Clan-brother speaks truth. The Manlings here are broken, and will be no menace to us again. We, who were human once and who again will be a human race, will commit no massacre."

"They are very sure that we can make them a human race again," muttered the Brain to Curt Newton. "Even with the secret of artificial evolution, we may not be able to accomplish that."

That tormenting doubt was strong in Captain Future's mind also. But he dared not show it, in the face of the man-beasts' eager faith in him.

"Before we do anything else, we're going to find that secret," he said rapidly. "After it is safe in our possession, and after we've run down Norton and our ship, we can study it and seek to apply it to the re-transformation of the Clans."

"It sure is a good thing you managed to get free when you did, Cap'n Future," said Ezra Gurney warmly. "We'd have been too late to stop Norton from takin' Joan along with him, an' he might have managed to torture that clue out of her."

Joan Randall interrupted. "Cole Norton has that clue to the Chamber of Life's location. I told it to him!"

Curt Newton looked incredulously at the white-faced girl. "Joan, you're joking."

Her lips were quivering, "No, Curt. I've been trying to tell you. Norton forced me to tell him the clue of the ancient inscription."

Chapter 16: Sea of Horrors

REALIZING what this meant, Captain Future was thunderstruck.

"I still can't believe that you'd tell him that, no matter what tortures he threatened you with, Joan."

"Curt, it wasn't me he threatened," choked the girl. "It was you. He had you prisoner, remember. He told me that unless I yielded the clue to the Chamber of Life, he'd kill you at once."

"So that was why Norton temporarily spared my life," exclaimed Captain

Future.

He understood it all now in a flash. Norton was as intelligent as he was ruthless. The physicist had realized that the strongest pressure he could bring to bear on Joan Randall was a threat against the life of the man she loved.

Joan Randall was sobbing. "I had to tell him, Curt. He would have murdered you just as he had murdered Doctor Winters. I tried at first to deceive him, to give a false location of the Chamber of Life. But he appealed to Osorkon for verification of the places I mentioned, and Osorkon said there were no such places on Aar. So I had to tell the truth."

"Gods of Space," gasped Ezra Gurney, appalled. "Then Norton's on his way right now in the *Comet* to seize that secret."

A frozen silence gripped the Futuremen as in their minds unrolled again that apocalyptic vision of Cole Norton returning to the System with a secret knowledge that meant horror for the nine worlds.

"And we can't even follow," muttered Otho, aghast. "We've no ship, not even a rocket-flier. Long before we could overtake him on foot, he'd have the secret and be gone from Deneb."

Curt Newton had taken the sobbing girl into his arms and was soothing her, though his own heart was leaden with weight of the disaster.

"It's not your fault, Joan. You did it for my sake. I know you would never have told him if only your own safety was threatened."

She looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. "I did manage to deceive him a little, Curt. I didn't tell him quite all the secret."

"Just what did you tell him?" he asked, with new hope.

She wiped her eyes. "You remember how the inscription read — 'Beneath the Prism Peak, in the Crystal Mountains that lie beyond the black sea of the north, lies the Chamber of Life —'? Well, I left off the first four words. I said the only location given by the clue was simply that it was somewhere in the Crystal Mountains. I thought it would at least delay him in finding the secret."

She added, "Osorkon confirmed that there were such mountains in the north, so he knew I was telling the truth. But he was suspicious that I hadn't told it all, and that's why he meant to take me along with them when they went north to seek the secret."

A flash crossed Captain Future's gray eyes. "Then there's still a slim chance that we can beat Norton to it. It will take time for him to search those

mountains, and during that time we can maybe overtake him.”

The Brain expressed doubt.

“It may not take Norton long to find what he seeks,” he said. “He is a scientist, and if there’s anything scientifically remarkable about that so-called Prism Peak, he’ll notice it.”

“Still, there’s just a chance that he may search vainly for a long enough time for us to get there,” Curt Newton persisted. “We’ll have to go on foot, and we don’t know how far it may be, but —”

“Clan-brother, I know the way to the black sea of the north,” said Golo in his deep voice. The intelligent eyes of the man-horse were fixed on Curt Newton. “It lies more than four days hard travel north of here. We Clan-leaders can guide you there.”

“Yes, we follow this trail with you,” affirmed Shih in his hissing voice. “It is the quest of the Clans too, remember.”

Skeen, the man-condor, spoke anxiously from where he stood with folded wings.

“But how will you cross the black sea? It swarms with monsters of incredible ferocity, and it bars the way to the Crystal Mountains for half around this world. And I could not carry even one of you for so great a distance as across its wide expanse.”

“We’ll figure out how to cross it when we get there,” Captain Future answered, a little desperately. “We should start at once. Every moment of delay adds to the odds against us.”

“Just let me get Eek and Oog, and I’m ready,” exclaimed Grag.

SHORTLY afterward, taking leave of the excited Clans, Captain Future’s small party moved out of moonlit Ra-boon into the giant Forests. They plunged due north upon their desperate pursuit of the man who was by now within reach of the greatest and most terrible scientific secret of the ages.

Through the green gloom of the giant forests, a small and strangely-assorted company marched. For four days, with only night halts for sleep, they had maintained a killing pace.

Captain Future, Joan Randall, Ezra Gurney and Otho were mounted on four of the big man-horses, for Golo had brought three of his fellow Hoofed Ones with him. Grag tramped beside them with huge strides. The Brain glided effortlessly along.

Shih and Zur scouted ahead, and the keen eyes of the man-tiger and the man-dog had missed no danger of the forest during their urgent march. And high above the wilderness, circling in the sunlight and spying out the way for miles ahead, flew Skeen, the man-condor.

“Skeen descends,” called Shih, loping back to the main party as they entered a long glade. “It may be that he sees peril ahead.”

The big man-condor was swooping down between the giant trees, out of the sunlit sky. He alighted with a rustling rush beside them.

“The black sea is only two hours march ahead,” he reported in his whistling voice. “Head a little more to the west of north, to reach it in the shortest time.”

Curt Newton’s drawn face lighted. “That’s good. We should be there by noon.”

“And when we get there, how do we cross it to reach them Crystal Mountains?” old Ezra Gurney asked keenly.

“We’ll cross it,” Captain Future replied confidently. “I have a plan.”

Golo, the big man-horse whom he bestrode, looked around doubtfully at Curt. “I don’t know what your plan is, but I fear it will be of little avail against the monsters of that ocean,” rumbled the Hoofed One.

Shih, the man-tiger, voiced somber agreement. “They are the most ferocious creatures upon Aar, those dwellers in the black sea. Only the Clan of the Swimmers is able to live in those waters.”

“The Clan of the Swimmers? Who are they?” Joan Randall asked the man-beasts.

Golo answered. “They are one of our Clans, descended like us from the semi-human races created by the experiments of the evil ones long ago. But they are a water-clan, not a land one — they are man-seals who dwell in this northern sea and who have a strange city or village on some rocks far out in its waters.”

Zur chimed in, in his eager, yelping voice. “They are Clan-brothers of ours, but we have little real contact with them, since they are of the sea and we are of the forests.”

Ezra Gurney shook his head incredulously. “All these semi-human peoples — incredible! I still half think I’m dreamin’! How could they have ever been created?”

“I can understand the principle of their creation, though not the exact

method,” Captain Future answered thoughtfully, as the whole party started forward at quickened pace. “I’ve been discussing it with Simon. We agree that it could be done by manipulation of the genes.”

“The genes?” echoed the old veteran blankly. “What’s that? Remember, I ain’t no scientist.

CURT NEWTON explained, as they rode forward. “The genes are the tiny units of heredity in any living creature. They control the physical form of the next generation. Alter the pattern of those genes, and you will alter the physical form of the next generation. Change the gene-pattern of a fruit-fly, and its descendants will be born without wings. Tamper with the far more complex gene-pattern of a man, and his descendants will be radically different in physical factors.

“Nature itself is forever tampering with the genes — thus causing strange new species to arise which we call mutations. Certain experiments have shown us that it is possible to tamper artificially with the genes by subjecting them to hard radiation, and thus to produce new mutations or species artificially. But the gene-pattern of man is so vastly complicated that our scientists have never found a way to chart it so that desired changes could be produced in the race at will. The super-science of the Ancients, however, might have found that way.”

“And if they did, that’s the secret of artificial evolution?” exclaimed Ezra.

Captain Future nodded somberly. “Yes, that is the secret by which the man-beasts were originally created from men — the secret that Cole Norton wants.”

“Then with that hidden secret, you could reverse the process so that the descendants of these man-beasts would be true men again?”

“I hope that we could,” Curt answered, that haunting doubt in his mind as he spoke. “It might be beyond our power to do that, though.”

They were moving rapidly on through the forest as he spoke, with Skeen again circling low above the tops of the giant trees ahead.

The blazing white disk of Deneb had reached the zenith when the huge trees began to thin out ahead. They glimpsed open space beyond.

“There’s the sea,” cried Joan Randall, an eager flush on her face. Then her voice changed. “But what a sea.”

Amazement fell on all the Futuremen as they emerged from the forest and stopped, gazing out from a narrow, sandy little beach.

Vast waters stretched before them. North, east and west rolled the stygian expanse of an inky ocean such as they had never before looked upon. They realized at once that its waves carried in suspension vast quantities of jet-colored mineral which gave the whole sea its somber black hue. But the realization in no way diminished the powerfully weird impression created in them by the spectacle of this vast ebony ocean heaving beneath the sky.

The black waste rolled to the skyline, and they could see no land in any direction. But from the north, there shot into the sky a glittering aurora of intense brilliance.

Lances of light shook and stabbed from that northern horizon like the waving of titan swords.

Curt Newton stared eagerly. "Does that radiance come from the Crystal Mountains?"

Skeen, who had glided down to alight by them, nodded.

"They reflect the sun, so blindly that the unprotected eye cannot look upon them by day."

"And somewhere among them is the place we're seeking — the Prism Peak," Captain Future said tensely.

"The inscription-clue didn't say where that might be among the mountains, though," said Joan doubtfully. "Remember?"

She quoted that pregnant inscription which had brought Norton and themselves so far across the galaxy.

"Beneath the Prism Peak, in the Crystal Mountains that lie beyond the black sea of the north, lies the Chamber of Life in which were bred new human races. Seek it not lightly, for it is guarded by the undying ones, and it holds within it the seeds of doom."

"It sure doesn't tell where Prism Peak is among the mountains," grumbled Ezra. "Still, Norton's worse off than we are — he don't even know to look for the Peak."

"Unless he has noticed it and deduced its importance," muttered the Brain. "He's highly intelligent, and has had four days to search. He may already have found the Chamber of Life."

GOLO had listened with intense interest to the recital of the ancient inscription. Now the man-horse spoke wonderingly.

“Then the place we seek is guarded by the undying ones? I did not know that.”

“You know something about the undying ones referred to?” Captain Future asked quickly.

“I know only what our traditions tell,” the Hoofed One answered slowly. “They say that when the great Ancients came first to this world from the Darkness that was their origin, they had the power of undying life when they wished to use it.”

“The same old riddle — the Darkness,” murmured the Brain. “Where was it? From where did those progenitors of the human race come?”

Curt Newton made no comment. But a strange look had crossed his face, as a new and startling speculation invaded his mind.

He thought he could make a guess now at the answer to that great mystery of the Darkness whence the ancient Denebians had come. The reference to their ability to remain undying could mean only one thing.

“Yet that can’t be true!” Curt Newton thought, stupefied. “If the first Ancients came here from there —”

Ezra Gurney’s dry voice interrupted his dazed speculations. “I still don’t see how in space we’re goin’ to get across this sea.”

Captain Future gestured toward the big trees that grew to the very edge of the narrow beach. “There’s our way. A raft.”

It was what he had had in mind all along. In a few minutes, the work of constructing such a raft was in full swing.

Curt Newton and Ezra Gurney felled big trees by flashes of their proton-pistols and trimmed and cut them to length by the same means. Grag bent his colossal strength to the task of rolling the logs down into the water.

And there, Otho skillfully bound them together, lashing them with tough vines.

An oblong, heavy raft capable of supporting them all soon floated on the black waters.

They had shaped rough paddles for steering and propulsion.

Shih looked doubtfully at the clumsy craft. “The monsters of the deep will destroy it like a toy,” predicted the man-tiger.

“We have our pistols and we’ll take our chances,” Curt Newton said tersely. “But there’s no use of you of the Clans risking it. You’ve guided us thus far and we’re indebted enough —”

Zur interrupted. The man-dog demanded:

“Are we Clan-brothers or not, that we should desert you here?”

“Zur speaks well — we go with you,” rumbled Golo. “This quest is for the dream of our race, remember.”

They climbed aboard the big, heavy log raft. Grag exerted his strength to shove off from the beach. The robot stood at the stern steering-paddle like a grim metal giant as they paddled out onto the heaving black waves.

Curt Newton laid their course straight out toward the glittering glare of the northern horizon. Before they had gone more than a few rods from shore, he descried a dark shape that lifted from the black waves in the distance and then again submerged.

“One of the monsters of this sea,” said Golo nervously. “They are the biggest and most terrible creatures upon our world.”

“Things like that don’t bother us any,” scoffed Otho. “Why, I remember one time back on Neptune’s ocean in our own System —”

HE NEVER finished the words. There was a sudden boiling tumult in the waters around the raft. Up from the waves, directly ahead of the craft, rose a hideous, scaled reptilian head of incredible size.

Cold, filmy eyes, then stared down at those on the raft, and enormous jaws opened.

“Paddle westward,” yelled Captain Future. “Quick!”

As he shouted, he leveled his proton-pistol, thumbed its intensity-ratchet to the highest power, and released its crashing bolt of energy at the enormous head towering over them.

The beam seared into the lower jaw of the sea-monster. The huge, hideous head jerked wildly.

Next instant, the whole raft seemed to rise in the water and tilt sidewise. As Curt Newton hit the water, he glimpsed the vast, scaled green bulk of the monster’s body, which had risen to overturn them.



Chapter 17: Perils of the Deep

QUICKLY Captain Future came up like a cork to hear Ezra Gurney's sputtering yell.

"Look out," shouted the old man.

The hideous reptilian head was looming above them as they struggled in the water. Captain Future had not released his grip upon the proton-pistol, and he instantly brought it up and fired again.

This time, the beam seared into one of the filmy eyes of the creature. The thing uttered a deafening hiss and threshed the waves in wild convulsions of agony and rage.

"Back to shore, quick," cried Curt Newton to his swimming companions.

The man-beasts swam even more swiftly than the Futuremen. Curt Newton had his arm around Joan Randall's shoulders, but she was too strong a swimmer to need his support. The Brain and Skeen had taken to the air as the raft upset. The raft itself was drifting back toward shore with the tide.

They clambered drippingly up onto the beach. The threshing convulsions of the wounded monster had ceased and there was no sign of it out in the waters now.

"Either its wound was fatal, or it was scared off," Captain Future said, panting.

"Where is the metal one?" asked Shih, shaking himself with true feline dislike for a wetting.

Grag was not in sight. He had sunk like a stone when the raft overturned. But Captain Future was not worried, for Grag did not breathe and could not be drowned.

In fact, Grag soon came marching up out of the water, no worse for his submersion. He dragged the raft up onto the beach with him.

"Where's my Eek?" he demanded anxiously.

"I got him and Oog ashore," reassured Otho. "Though I ought've let that little mutt of yours drown, after the trick you played on me."

Ezra Gurney was dismal.

"Cap'n Future, we'll never get across that sea on any raft with critters like that swarmin' in there," he said.

Joan Randall shuddered. But Curt Newton was undismayed. "We must

get across,” he cried. “Norton is over there now, if he hasn’t already obtained the secret and gone.”

“Skeen and I could fly across and see *what* we could do,” suggested Simon Wright.

Curt Newton shook his head. “You two alone could accomplish nothing against Norton,” he said. “He has all the *Comet*’s weapons, and could use them in you.”

A thought had occurred to Captain Future.

“Didn’t you say that in this sea lives a semi-human race of man-seals who are more than a match for those monsters?” he asked Golo.

The Hoofed One answered in the affirmative. “Yes, the Clan of the Swimmers, who are our clan-brothers. They are so swift and skillful that they can vanquish the largest monsters that inhabit this ocean.

“Then,” proposed Curt Newton, “couldn’t we call on them for help? To convoy our raft across this sea?”

Shih uttered an exclamation.

“The Swimmers would help us, if we sent them the clan-call for aid,” he said. “And they could escort us safely across.”

Golo too betrayed excited new hope. “We shall try it. Skeen, fly westward to the rocks where the Swimmers have their city, and tell them of our quest and our need for help.”

The big man-condor spread his wings and plunged upward into the sky. He disappeared from sight, flapping out westward over the black sea.

They waited in suspense. Curt Newton realized the precariousness of his plan, but it seemed the only chance for them to cross the ocean in time to checkmate Norton. To march around the great sea would take weeks.

It seemed a long time before Skeen came flying back. But the man-condor brought cheering news.

“The Swimmers will help us,” he announced. “When I told them you strangers were clan-brothers, and that your quest’s success would make our races human again, they promised to come at once.”

They waited some time longer, scanning the dark watery waste. Then, out of the waves near the beach, there rose a strange head.

It was a human head in most respects, yet was round and streamlined, the nose flattened and the ears set close against the skull. The eyes were very large, and dark, and intelligent.

THE body of the creature, glimpsed vaguely in the swirling black water, was more seal-like than human. It too was streamlined, with short limbs that ended in powerful flippers instead of feet. The hands too were flipper-like, and one held a short, stone-pointed spear.

"Hai—ooo, clan-brothers," the man-seal's hoarse voice called. "We have come as you asked."

"It is Ro, leader of the Clan of the Swimmers," said Golo quickly. "And see, he has brought many of his clan with him."

Scores of man-seals were raising their heads above the water behind Ro. All of the strange creatures carried the short spears.

"Hai—ooo, brother," Captain Future said in the customary clan-greeting. He pointed northward to the glittering aurora of light beyond the watery horizon. "We desire to cross to the Crystal Mountains. Can you help us against the sea-monsters?"

"Aye, we will help," answered Ro. "We Swimmers can handle the monsters, for though they are big, they are very slow and clumsy! And we will aid to the utmost, for Skeen has told us what your quest means to us."

Curt Newton's hopes rose. "Get back aboard the raft, everybody," he ordered.

Again aboard the raft, they pushed out from the beach once more. The man-seals swam up to the craft, darting swiftly through the water.

"Paddle toward the east," Eo directed Curt Newton. "There is a strong northward current there that will take you across the sea in short time."

They did as directed. As the heavy raft forged slowly eastward over the waves, the Swimmers were darting and diving all around and ahead of it to scout the way.

The raft came into the grip of a strong tidal current that raced almost due north. With greatly accelerated speed, their clumsy vessel swung out onto the vast bosom of the black sea.

There was a sudden flurry in the water a few hundred yards ahead of them. From one of the man-seals there came a sharp cry.

"Hai—ooo, brothers, one of the Scaled Ones approaches."

Zippering through the water in answer to his cry went all Ro's followers, holding their short spears ready for action.

"Holy sun-imps, there's another of them monsters," cried Ezra Gurney.

A scaled green bulk was rising mountainously in the water ahead. It was one of the enormous reptiles, and it was turning and striking furiously at the man-seals who rushed to attack it from all sides.

Not once did the great jaws close on one of the attackers. The Swimmers were far too swift for it. They rushed in like streaks of light, stabbed deep with their spears, and whirled and were gone in an instant.

The black water crimsoned with the blood of the wounded monster. There was a final frenzied flurry of spray and steam. And then the great creature floated dead, its white belly turned toward the sky.

Twice again in the next two hours, as the raft glided steadily across the black ocean on the powerful northward current, the Swimmers who escorted them battled scaly monsters which sought to attack them. Each time, the man-seals' weapons quickly slew the enormous attackers.

On and on went the strange company of voyagers over the heaving inky waves. The green shoreline behind had faded from sight. The sun was declining toward the horizon, but a wonderful aurora of light that blazed from the skyline ahead was becoming stronger.

At sundown the raft was within a half mile of the black ocean's northern shore. From that shore, almost at the edge of the water, rose the stupendous glittering peaks of an incredible mountain range.

The Crystal Mountains were just what their name implied. They were a great range, extending miles east and west. Each separate peak was like an enormous, glittering diamond, with facets and edges as regularly geometrical as though artificially cut.

A TITAN range of diamond mountains, whose highest peaks rose thousands of feet into the sky. No two of the geometrical peaks seemed alike in shape, some having hundreds of facets and some only a few dozen. They flung back the dying sunlight in a blinding blaze of splendor, of shaking pennons and banners of light.

Dusk came. Curt Newton leaped ashore as the raft ground into the sand of a strip of beach. The others followed quickly.

In the deepening twilight, the Futuremen and their companions looked around. The shimmering, incredible mountains rose only a few hundred yards inland from the beach on which they stood.

The complex wilderness of gigantic crystals presented a labyrinth that

dashed Captain Future's confidence. How were they to find their way in this maze of diamond peaks?

"Which one of 'em do you suppose is Prism Peak?" asked Ezra Gurney.

"I've reason to think that the Prism Peak mentioned as the location of the Chamber of Life would be an octahedral formation," said Curt Newton.

"We're not going to start hunting for that peak now; What we're here for is to find and deal with Cole Norton and his band. They must be somewhere in these mountains, seeking the Chamber of Life."

"I could soon spot them for you if they're here," Skeen suggested.

"I was thinking of that," Curt nodded. "Simon will go with you. Fly high and don't let yourselves be seen by Norton's party. As soon as you've located them, come back at once with your information. Look for the *Comet*, and you'll find Norton somewhere near it."

Skeen and the Brain rose at once into the darkening twilight. High overhead, they separated. The man-condor flew eastward, and the Brain glided toward the west, to reconnoiter different sections of the mountains.

Curt Newton turned to the others.

"As soon as we learn where Norton's party is, we start," he said.

"Nothing is safe until we've retaken the *Comet* and dealt with that traitor."

Joan Randall's face was pale in the dusk. "It will mean a desperate fight, Curt. We have only a few proton-pistols, and Norton and Voories have all the weapons of your ship, and Osorkon's Manlings to aid them."

Captain Future waited in a fever of impatience for the return of his flying scouts. The twilight had deepened to darkness, and the looming crystal peaks were like vague, shimmering ghosts in the obscurity.

Zur turned and faced the east. The man-dog raised his head in a low, soft howling cry.

"The moons are rising."

Up from the horizon drifted the two brilliant satellites. The silver light of the two moons poured across the inky waves of the heaving ocean behind them and struck the Crystal Mountains. The shimmering peaks were instantly transformed to glory.

"Skeen is returning," warned Shih.

Both Skeen and the Brain were gliding back down through the moonlight.

"We couldn't spot the *Comet* anywhere in these mountains," reported

Simon. "Norton isn't here."

A chill invaded Captain Future's heart. The information was catastrophic, but he rallied his stubborn will against the hopelessness that threatened to conquer him.

"Norton must still be here," he cried. "He couldn't have found the Chamber of Life so quickly."

"No, lad, the *Comet* is not here," concurred the Brain. Simon added, "I did spot an octahedral peak that must be Prism Peak."

"Where is it?" Captain Future asked quickly.

"A mile or more west of here, near the shore of the sea."

"We're going there," Curt Newton said. "If that is where the Chamber of Life lies, we can soon find out whether or not Norton has been there and gone with the secret."

SKEEN and Simon led the way westward through the moonlit diamond peaks. It was a journey that in other circumstances would have entranced them with rapt wonder.

But Captain Future was too weighted by foreboding to note the weird beauty of the scene.

"There's the peak I saw," rasped the Brain, from beside him.

Ahead of them loomed one of the crystalline peaks that was octahedral in shape, its one apex soaring into the sky and its other buried in the ground. Like a colossal diamond it glittered, towering above the surrounding crystalline formations.

"It must be Prism Peak," Curt Newton declared, as they hurried onward with accelerated pace. "It's the only octahedral one we've found. An octahedral prism would of all shapes best serve to focus cosmic radiation, and focused cosmic radiation was the agent employed to alter the gene-patterns of living creatures and thus mutate them into new species."

They reached the base of the towering crystal, whose glittering sides shelved out and upward over their heads.

Golo looked up in awe and wonder. "Then this was the place where long ago our ancestors were made into our semi-human races?"

"I think so," Curt Newton said. "The inscription said that the Chamber of Life lies beneath Prism Peak. There must be some way under it."

"Chief, look at this," called out Otho.

They hurried to the android. He had been inspecting the shelving base of the gigantic crystal. He pointed at the slanting, gleaming cliff that leaned out over them.

There was the outline of a door in the glittering rock, a ten-foot high portal. It was no more than a thin, almost imperceptible crack in the solid mountain. There was nothing else, except a curious raised pattern of sixty-four tiny studs in the cliff beside that portal.

Here was the entrance to the fabulous Chamber of Life!

Chapter 18: Hope for Man-Beasts

EAGERLY Captain Future pressed the studs, first one by one, then in different combinations, hoping to open the portal. Nothing happened.

“We do not know the combination,” rasped the Brain. “And the possible combinations are almost unlimited in number.”

Curt Newton stepped back. He looked up at the towering planes of the eight-faceted peak, his grey eyes brilliant with excitement.

“Whoever devised this door and lock, did so for one purpose — to keep chance meddlers out of the Chamber of Life,” he said. “There can be no doubt from what we read of the ancient records, that those who found the secret of artificial evolution wished to preserve it here until the civil strife of this world was over and the secret could be used again in an intelligent way.”

“What are you gettin’ at? What’s that got to do with this lock?” asked Ezra Gurney.

“Just this — whoever locked up the Chamber of Life would want to make sure that only intelligent seekers could open it,” Captain Future pointed out. “So they would devise a lock which could only be opened by someone well acquainted with scientific principles.”

“You mean that the lock’s combination is built upon a scientific formula of some kind?” Joan Randall exclaimed.

“A mathematical formula, if I’m right,” he replied. “There are sixty-four studs. I think the combination to be used on them hinges upon the geometrical relation between the eight facets of the peak itself.”

He went further back, staring up at the moonlit peak and keenly

estimating measurements and ratios to evolve the mathematical formula that would express the relationship of the eight sides.

But it was the Brain who calculated the formula first. Simon was unmatched in abstruse scientific calculation.

He repeated the formula to Curt Newton and Captain Future nodded.

"I think that will do it," he said. "We'll soon find out."

He pressed the studs in the sequence determined by that formula. As he pressed the last of them, there was a sighing sound. A tall, wide section of the smooth cliff sank inward. The portal had opened.

They looked into a high, gleaming corridor that ran straight into the heart of the base of Prism Peak.

"The Chamber of Life, open to us at last," breathed Joan Randall.

"We'll soon find out if Norton has been ahead of us," exclaimed Captain Future, racing into the corridor.

They all followed him excitedly. This high passageway was shimmeringly illuminated by the brilliant moonlight refracted into it through the semi-transparent crystalline rock. It ran straight inward.

It suddenly debouched into a big domed hall that had been carved from the heart of the crystalline mountain. The domed chamber was six hundred feet in diameter and seemed almost as high.

It was a place of moon-magic. The glittering walls curved gently up toward the lofty ceiling of the dome. In that ceiling was set a cluster of hundreds of small lenses, through which curdled moonlight seemed to flow. It was as though they stood in the brilliant heart of a gigantic diamond.

"The Chamber of Life!" whispered Ezra Gurney, awe upon his wrinkled face.

"The place where our human ancestors were made into semi-human races," cried Shih.

For around this glittering, incredible hall there stood towering machines and instruments of utterly unfamiliar design and purpose. Instruments of the super-science of the ancient Denebians these were, they knew.

And there was a stairway at one side, leading down into an even vaster hollow space beneath the Chamber of Life. They could glimpse, down there, a small, spindle-shaped space-ship, hangared here inside Prism Peak.

Curt Newton pointed upward, his face flaming with excitement.

"Look at those lenses in the ceiling, Simon," he cried. "They must have

been used to concentrate the cosmic radiation collected by Prism Peak. Our guess was right. That is how the Ancients achieved artificial evolution.”

HIS voice rang with thankful triumph through the moon-vague diamond chamber. “And Cole Norton has not been here, for nothing here has been disturbed. He couldn’t find it!”

“Chief,” called Otho from the side of the chamber. “Look at this.”

They hastened toward him across the smooth floor. And all of them were stunned by the thing at which the android pointed.

It was a high, square block of silvery metal. Upon it rested two crystal caskets. In each casket lay a human body.

They were a man and a woman. But no such man or woman as Captain Future had ever encountered in any of the worlds of the vast universe of stars.

Their skins were of warm golden color, and their hair a metallic yellow. They wore simple, knee-length garments that appeared woven of iridescent metal and that flashed back the vague light brilliantly.

The man’s face was aquiline, handsome, but with the stamp of an intelligence and authority that indicated middle age. Though he lay with eyes closed, the power and intellect in that golden face were overwhelming. The woman, whose long yellow hair lay curled about her shoulders, had the same intellectual power in the chiseled beauty of her face.

“The Ancients!” came the hoarse, deep exclamation of Golo. “The true Ancients, of long ago, who built this place.”

Joan Randall clutched Curt Newton’s sleeve. “Curt, remember the inscription-clue! ‘— seek not the Chamber of Life, for it is guarded by the undying.’ ”

“The, undying?” cried Ezra. “But these two are dead and have been dead for ages?”

Captain Future did not answer. He had glimpsed, upon the side of the silver block some four feet from the floor, an inconspicuous lever.

His brain rocked to stupefying revelation as he guessed at last the whole answer to the age-old mystery of the Ancients. Their origin in the so-called Darkness, their traditional ability to remain undying, the caskets before him — they all added up to only one possible solution.

“The truth of this is beyond our dreams,” cried Curt Newton. “There’s a wonder here that our science has never envisioned. Thank the stars that Cole

Norton didn't find *this!*"

A cool voice rang across the glittering domed Chamber from behind them.

"You're a little premature in your thankfulness, Future. Don't move, any of you!"

Unperceived by any of them in their fascinated inspection of the caskets, Cole Norton and the hulking Voories, and Osorkon and his savage Manlings had entered the Chamber from the corridor.

Norton and his hulking followers held the heaviest proton-guns of the *Comet's* equipment in their hands, covering Curt Newton and all his party. Those rifle-like weapons could blast them all with one discharge of energy. And Norton's hard, deadly face showed that he was ready to fire.

Curt Newton knew that they were looking death in the face. There was no mercy in Norton's eyes. He wondered momentarily that the traitor had not slain them without a word of warning — until he realized that Norton wished to take no chance of destroying the scientific secrets in this place by the blast of those terrible weapons.

The transition from triumph to despair was so abrupt Captain Future almost obeyed the instinct to snatch his proton-pistol from its holster. Yet his first movement would depress Norton's finger on the trigger and destroy them all.

A low, terrible growl was issuing from the throat of Shih, beside him. Curt Newton knew that the fierce man-tiger was gathering to spring. And that spring would signal a blast of energy that would annihilate them all.

"That girl very cleverly withheld the vital part of the clue to this Chamber's location," Cole Norton was saying. "When I had searched these mountains without success, I decided to wait and let you lead me to the Chamber of Life, Future.

"I knew you'd soon be here. So we hid your ship in a cleft in which it could not be spotted, and waited and watched the sea. When we saw you coming, we concealed ourselves and then trailed you here."

CAPTAIN FUTURE'S desperate mind had hit upon the one possibility left him. He took a gambler's chance that was based upon nothing but his own fantastic theory about the events of ages ago.

He dared not move his hands an inch, without inviting the destroying

blast. But his back was against the silver block on which the twin caskets rested. The little lever in that block was nudging his spine.

Curt Newton shifted his body imperceptibly, pressing it against that lever. He felt his movement drag the lever sideways in its slot. And nothing happened.

“Now,” Cole Norton said coolly, “Osorkon will take your weapons and you will march outside. I beg of you not to be foolish enough to resist.”

Outside was death! Curt Newton knew it beyond doubt — knew that as soon as they had left the Chamber of Life, they would be blasted down.

Osorkon took a step forward, doubtfully eyeing the blazing-eyed man-beasts. Curt Newton was aware of Shih bunching to spring at the hated Manling chieftain.

He felt in that moment a curious humming vibration inside the block behind his back. Wild hope soared in him.

Then it happened. There was a low sighing sound from above and behind him, from the two caskets upon the silver block.

Cole Norton’s watchful gaze shifted for a moment above Curt Newton’s head, to the caskets. The physicist’s eyes bulged with incredulous emotion, his face froze.

“The Ancients,” screamed Osorkon, his yellow face a mask of horror.

Only for that one instant did Norton lose his iron control and take his gaze from Captain Future. But Curt Newton had waited for that moment. His hand dipped to his proton-pistol with the speed of light.

Norton glimpsed the movement. His eyes came back to Curt, and the heavy weapon that had sagged a little in his frozen hands jerked up again.

But too late. Curt Newton pressed the trigger as his proton-pistol came clear of its holster. The bright, thin beam drove through Norton’s heart, and then leaped like a flash of lightning to strike the hulking Voories in his tracks.

“The Ancients,” Osorkon and the other Manlings were screaming, as they turned and ran in mad terror out through the corridor.

A terrible, snarling roar and a high, yelping cry — and the tawny length of Shih and the shaggy figure of Zur hurtled after the fleeing men.

Joan Randall was clinging wildly to Captain Future, was shaking violently, her face deathly as she looked back upward.

“Curt,” she choked, pointing to the top of the block.

Curt Newton knew what he would see as he swung around, knew what it

was that had distracted Norton and his party for that fatal instant, that had frozen the Futuremen and Ezra in petrified awe.

The covers of the crystal caskets had slid aside. And the golden-skinned man and woman who had lain in them were rising to their feet!

“They’re comin’ to life!” stammered Ezra Gurney. “Gods of space, it can’t be happenin’.”

“Steady,” Captain Future called, though he himself was quivering with excitement. “They were only in suspended animation. I had figured that, and had guessed that the lever was to start the mechanism that would wake them from the trance. That’s why I took a chance on waking them. It was the only way to distract Norton.”

The golden man and woman had glimpsed Curt Newton’s group. Instantly, the hand of the man made a swift gesture. A ringlike instrument upon his hand flashed.

And Captain Future and all his companions froze motionless, as though gripped by an unseen force. They could move no muscle.

The golden man came down from the block, with the woman behind him. He approached Curt Newton, and looked steadily into his face.

The deep, dark eyes of the awakened sleeper seemed to probe into Captain Future’s inmost thoughts. He felt the impact of a hypnotic power that could read his mind like an open book.

Then the stern golden face relaxed. He made another curious gesture with the hand that wore that curious little instrument. And the numbing force that had gripped Curt Newton’s group was dissolved.

QUIETLY the man spoke, in the pure form of the ancient language of Deneb.

“Have no fear, I have read in your mind that you came not to this Chamber of Life for evil, but to prevent evil.”

Curt Newton tried to speak steadily.

“You two are the undying — the two Ancients who long ago created these semi-human races?” he inquired.

The golden man looked at him. And there was a deep, strange sorrow and pity in his eyes as he gazed at the man-horse and at Shih and Zur, who had returned with blazing eyes into the great hall.

“We are not undying, though we can halt our life-processes for long

intervals of sleep,” he said. “But we are those who created the new races of humans, yes. That was our sin, and long we have waited to undo it.”

He spoke quietly, sorrowfully.

“I am Khor,” he said. “I and my mate, Ata, were great scientists in the days of Deneb’s greatest glory — the days when the pioneering ships of our mighty civilization were colonizing all the galaxy. We dreamed of using artificial evolution to create new human species who could adapt themselves more easily to the colonizing of alien worlds.

“We planned to use the powers of cosmic radiation to alter the pattern of the human genes, and thus produce controlled new mutations. This gigantic prism-mountain is a natural collector of the cosmic radiation. Beneath it, we hollowed out this Chamber in which we used the focused radiation upon human subjects to alter the gene-patterns and produce new and different humans.

“But our plans were twisted to purposes of evil. There were those among our rulers who wished to have wholly new semi-human peoples who would be fitted for specialized tasks and who could be used as slaves. They induced us to create such semi-human man-beasts, hiding their real purpose from us and assuring us that these half-human races were intended for the colonizing of distant and difficult worlds.

“Too late, Ata and I learned that the man-beasts we had created were being bred for use as slaves. We recoiled with horror from what our science had wrought. And half the people in our Denebian civilization shrank with equal horror from it. War broke out between our people over the issue. And that dire civil war not only wrecked Denebian civilization but was also the wreck of the great cosmic empire which had been established throughout the galaxy.

“Ata and I wished to undo our work, but the war raged on unheeding to us. Finally, we retired into this Chamber of Life, and entered the sleep of suspended animation whose secret has been known to my people since they first came here from the Darkness. We hoped that when our people finally came to their senses and the war had ended, they would come and awake us and ask us to undo the evil and make the man-beast races human again.

“But they never came. It must be that, before they could come to their senses, our Denebian people irretrievably ruined their own civilization by their war, so that all memory of us was almost forgotten. And so we have

slept on through the ages, until now at last you came and opened the door and awakened us.”

As Khor’s voice ceased, Curt Newton asked the golden man the question upon which his companions were hanging with heart-and-soul attention.

“Then you can undo your ancient work?” Captain Future asked. “You can make the man-beasts a human race again?”

“We can — and we will,” Khor affirmed. His deep eyes had that haunting sorrow strong in them as he continued, “But not until their next generation will they be human again. The present ones cannot be changed.”

Golo spoke eagerly. “We do not care for ourselves, if we can die knowing that our descendants will be true humans as they should be.”

“Yes, that has been the dream of the Clans for ages,” affirmed the great man-tiger.

“Then we shall begin with you now,” said Khor to the man-beasts. “Stand beneath the lenses of the dome.”

Golo and the others obeyed him. The golden man and woman went to a bank of mechanisms that towered at one side of the Chamber.

CURT NEWTON and his comrades stood back, watchful and fascinated. The enigmatic machines of the Ancients hummed with power. The moonlight, that flowed through the clustered lenses of the ceiling, changed abruptly into a shooting glare of radiance that struck down upon the man-beasts.

It lasted for but a few moments, bathing the creatures in its fiercest glare and then snapping out. But Curt knew that in those moments, the power of unbelievably concentrated cosmic rays had been used to alter forever the gene-pattern, the units of heredity, in the bodies of the man-beasts.

“It is done,” Khor told them. “You yourselves will not change. But your descendants will be — men.”

The golden woman spoke softly to Khor, and he nodded and turned back to Captain Future.

“We wish to re-transform all the man-beasts upon this world, in the same way,” he said. “Only then, will the wrong we did be undone.”

“We’ll summon them,” cried Golo eagerly. “They’ll come from all over Aar.”

Curt Newton and his companions left the two Ancients in the Chamber of

Life, and went back outside Prism Peak.

In the moonlight, they found out there the bodies of Osorkon and his Manlings. A glance showed how they had died. Shih and Zur had had their vengeance for an enslaved and oppressed race, at last.

Golo's voice rang like a trumpet as he addressed the man-condor.

"Fly south with the clan-call, Skeen," he said. "Fly fast and far, and carry the word to all the Clans that the redemption of our race awaits them here."

Skeen plunged into the air, and was gone, arrowing southward across the black sea in the moonlight.

"And now to find the *Comet*," Curt Newton said.

It was Shih, with his marvelous tracking ability, who back-trailed Norton's party to the overhanging cleft a mile away in which they had cunningly concealed the ship of the Futuremen.

Curt Newton brought the *Comet* to the beach near Prism Peak. And after landing it there, his weary frame succumbed to the demands of nature and he slept the sleep of exhaustion. Others of his party did likewise.

Chapter 19: Ancient Superscience

HOURS later, Captain Future awakened. Two nights had passed and again the moons were rising over the Crystal Mountains. And from all over Aar, the Clans were coming.

They came with wild eagerness, these hosts of man-beasts whose dream for generations had been the regaining of humanity. As they came, they trooped into the Chamber of Life to stand beneath the glare of concentrated cosmic radiation by which Khor and Ata re-altered the gene-patterns.

For days, the subtle transformation of the heredity of a race went on. Not until ten nights later had the last of the man-beasts passed through the Chamber.

The hosts of the Clans gathered in the moonlight and frantically exulted in the redemption of their race. They, themselves, were unchanged. But their descendants would be true humans, and their dream was fulfilled.

"And now?" Joan Randall asked Curt Newton wonderingly, as they stood amid the Clans near Prism Peak.

“Look,” he said. “Khor and Ata are coming forth.”

A whole big section in the side of Prism Peak near the portal had suddenly magically opened. Out of it was emerging the strange little spindle-shaped space-ship that had been hangared beneath the Chamber of Life.

And as the little ship emerged, Prism Peak sank suddenly to dust behind it. Some force had been released that had destroyed forever the octahedral mountain and all the wonders of ancient science it contained.

The spindle-like ship poised beside the *Comet*. And from the strange craft, Khor and Ata came to speak a last word to the Futuremen.

“This is farewell,” said the golden man. “Now that we have undone the evil we unwittingly created long ago, we have destroyed the Chamber of Life so that that evil may never again be repeated. And now we are leaving this world forever.”

“Leaving Aar?” cried Curt Newton. “But why? Aar is your world.”

Khor shook his head sadly. “Aar is no longer the world we knew. There is no place in it for us. So Ata and I are going back to the place from which our fathers first came to the world of this star, the place of our race’s origin.

The Brain cried an eager question.

“Where is that place of origin of our race, that mysterious Darkness from which the first men came? The mystery of that has baffled us all this time,” he asked.

Khor answered slowly.

“I cannot tell you that,” he said. “It is too dangerous for your races yet to know. For there are secrets and wonders of science at that far birthplace of man, which might tempt evil ones among your people to seek and possess. Just as evil ones among you sought to possess the Chamber of Life and its powers. Some day, your race may learn the real truth as to the origin of humanity. By then, let us hope, there will be no more evil men among your people who would make the knowledge dangerous. And now — farewell.”

The golden man and woman entered the spindle ship. It rose smoothly into the moonlight, watched in reverent awe by the gathered Clans.

The Brain had turned away and entered the *Comet*. And Ezra Gurney looked after him pityingly.

“Simon is bitterly disappointed,” he murmured. “He was countin’ on learnin’ the answer to that mystery.”

“I think I can guess the answer — but it’s only a guess,” Captain Future

said thoughtfully.

The spindle-shaped ship disappeared in the moonlit sky. Khor and Ata, who had waited in sleep for ages to make reparation for their mistake, had gone back to the mysterious birthplace of the human race.

There was a long silence, in which Curt Newton looked around at the hosts of the Clans, and then at the loyal group of man-beast leaders.

"We must leave now too, clan-brothers," Curt Newton said to them. "Our own world calls us homeward."

It was the deep voice of Golo, the great man-horse, that answered.

"Though you go back into the stars, we shall not forget you," he promised. "We know that to you, our race owes its deliverance."

"Now that your races can look forward to manhood again, now that the power of the Manlings to oppress you has been broken, there should be peace here," Captain Future said earnestly. "You and the Manlings will soon again be one race, remember. Together, you can in time restore the ancient glories of this world."

WITHOUT hesitation the man-horse agreed.

"We shall work now toward peace and cooperation with the Manlings," Golo assured. "For very soon there will not be Manlings and man-beasts on this world, but only men."

The others were already entering the *Comet*. But the man-beasts were crowding around Curt, loath to let him go.

"You will come back some day and run the forest trails again with us of the Hunting Pack?" cried Zur, the shaggy man-dog.

"And gather with us once more in the Valley of the Council by moonrise?" exclaimed Skeen.

Curt Newton felt strong emotion, as he stood in the door of his ship.

"We'll come back, some day," he promised them.

Several hours later the *Comet* was throbbing through galactic space at all the tremendous speed of which its vibration-drive was capable. Already Deneb was a white star dropping far astern. Ahead, amid the hosts of suns, shone the faint and far yellow spark that was home. Curt Newton, sitting in the pilot-chair with Joan Randall snuggled beside him, eyed that distant spark with a great and tired content.

Beside them, Otho was mysteriously busy. The android had brought forth

his disguise-kit and was eagerly setting out its materials.

“What are you going to do with that, Otho?” Joan Randall asked wonderingly.

“Hush, don’t let Grag hear you,” Otho enjoined, glancing alertly back toward the main cabin. Then he chuckled. “I’m going to play a practical joke on that robot. Just watch.”

Otho was a supreme master of the art of disguise. And now, as they watched, they saw him achieve a miracle in metamorphosis.

He covered his white face and hands with smooth tan stain. A drop of chemical changed the pigment of his eyes temporarily to clear gray. False red hair cunningly applied to his scalp transformed his appearance further.

Then Otho distorted his incredibly plastic features suddenly into wholly new features. The red, unruly hair, the clear gray eyes, the tanned, handsome new features —

“Why, he’s made himself into an exact double of you Curt,” exclaimed Joan Randall unbelievably.

“I get it, now,” he grinned.

Otho had indeed made himself into such an exact replica of Captain Future that even Joan Randall could not tell the difference between them.

“Now,” said Otho exultantly, “watch me pay off Mr. Grag.”

Imitating Curt Newton’s lithe stride, the disguised android stalked back into the main cabin. Curt Newton and Joan Randall peered around the door-edge, to watch.

Back in that cabin, the Brain was engrossed in the mysterious calculations that had unceasingly occupied him ever since they left Deneb. Ezra was dozing in a chair. Grag sat fondling Eek and talking to the moon-pup as was his habit.

“Grag,” said Otho, in a voice that was identical with Curt’s own.

Grag looked up, and asked, “What is it, Chief?”

The robot was utterly deceived. And Otho took full advantage of it. He stood, looking at Grag and shaking his head disgustedly.

Grag grew worried at that look. “Why, what’s wrong, Chief?”

“Grag, I’ve come to a decision,” said Otho crisply. “This bickering of yours with Otho has gone on long enough. You’re always picking on Otho, who never does anything to deserve it. I’m going to have to fire you out of the Futuremen. When we get back to the System, you can go your own way.”

Grag seemed unable to believe his ears. He goggled at the pseudo-Captain Future ludicrously.

“Chief, you can’t be serious. You wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

“I would, and I will,” affirmed the disguised android sternly. “Otho is worth twenty of you, and I can’t stand the way you annoy him.”

If it had been possible for Grag to have tears in his photoelectric eyes, they would have been there. “But Chief, Otho’s to blame as much as I am,” protested Grag. “It’s not all my fault if we scrap.”

“Trying to lay the blame on poor Otho, eh?” snapped the pretended Captain Future. “That settles it. I’m through with you.”

“No, no, Chief,” begged Grag. “I didn’t mean to blame Otho.”

“You admit, then, that you’re totally to blame for all the arguments and that you’re one hundred percent wrong in them?” Otho demanded.

GRAG made a strangled sound. “Y-yes, I agree I am. Otho never did anything. It’s all my fault.”

The disguised android appeared to consider sternly, “Well, I still don’t know —”

The real Curt Newton ruined it at that moment, by bursting into laughter that he could no longer repress.

Grag, hearing that familiar voice, darted forward and stared bewilderedly from the pretended Captain Future to the real one.

Then he uttered a howl of fury and swung back menacingly on Otho. “Now I understand! Why, you low-down, blasted, lying excuse for a man, I’ll —”

“Hold it, Grag,” called Curt Newton as the infuriated robot prepared to take summary vengeance. “It was coming to you, for the practical jokes you are always playing on Otho.”

Grag glared. “When I get you alone, Otho —”

Simon Wright interrupted. The Brain’s metallic voice had a quiver of excitement in it as he called.

“Curtis, look at this! I’ve finally solved the mystery!”

They went hastily to the desk over which the Brain had pored upon his calculations for all these hours.

Ezra Gurney, awakened, crowded with them.

“The mystery of man’s origin!” Simon Wright continued in an excited

voice. "The riddle that has baffled us so long, as to where the human race first came from to Deneb."

"Simon, you've solved that?" Joan Randall exclaimed wonderingly. "You know then where Khor and Ata went?"

"Yes," said the Brain. "You remember that when they left, after refusing to tell me their destination, I entered the *Comet* at once? What I did was to put 'tracer-rays' on Khor's spaceship, by means of which I could follow its flight far out into space. He came from a different universe, the great System of stars. Now we know the Darkness from which legend says the first men came was the awful darkness of inter-galactic space. Across it they came, eons ago, colonists who sprang from that great universe far across the void."

Then the Brain saw Captain Future's shining eyes.

"You knew it already, Curtis?" he asked.

"No, Simon," said Curt Newton. "I only guessed it. It was the legend that the first men had the power of remaining undying when they came to Deneb, that gave me the clue. I guessed that 'undying' referred to a sleep of suspended animation. That would only be utilized by voyagers who had to cross such a vast abyss as the space between universes."

Captain Future went to the window. And they looked forth with him in awe at the faint, tiny patch of light that was the far Andromeda galaxy.

"Our ancestors came from there, in the dim eons of the past, to colonize this galaxy. The parent-race from which they came must still exist there. Some day, somehow, we are going to go there and find out."

THE END

