

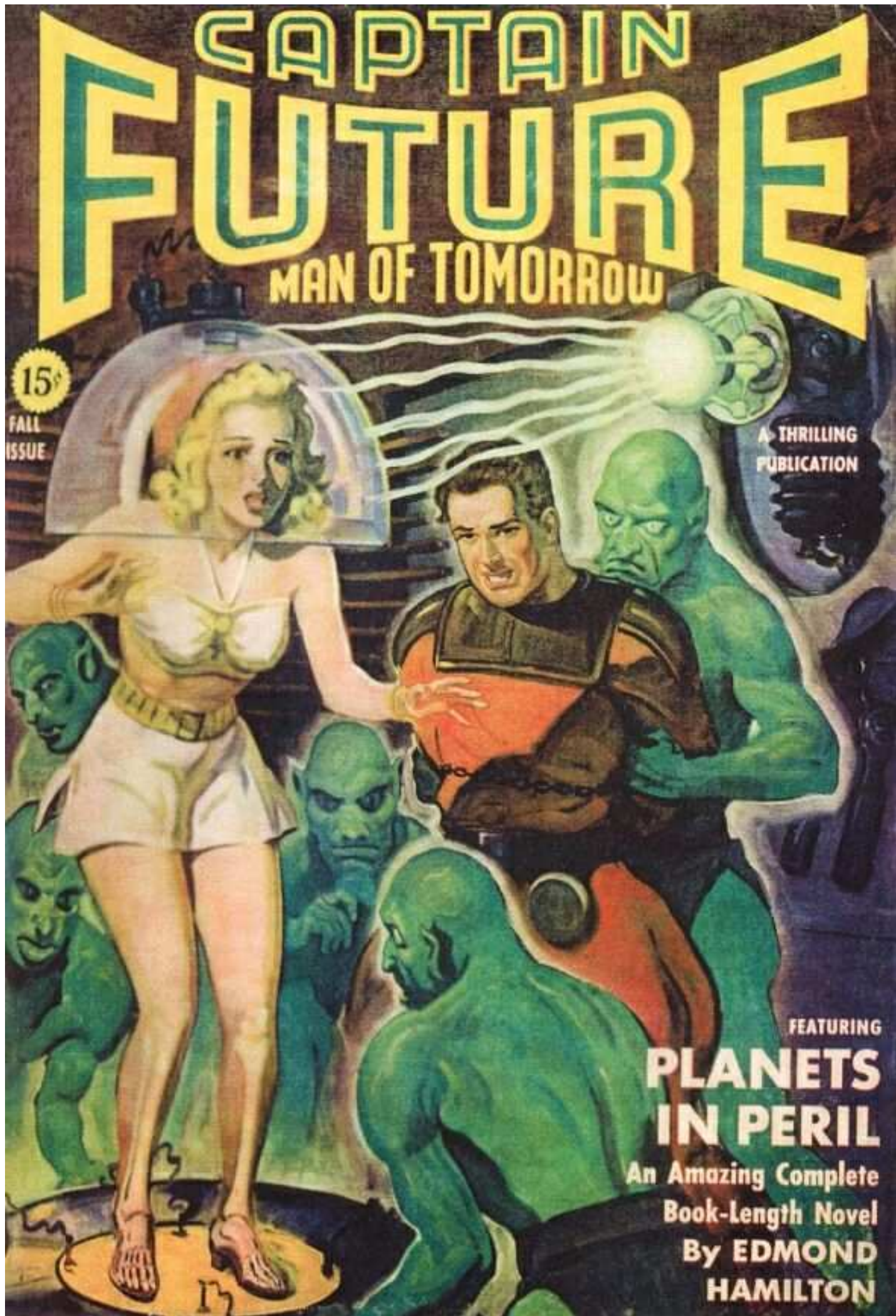
CAPTAIN FUTURE

MAN OF TOMORROW

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FALL
ISSUE

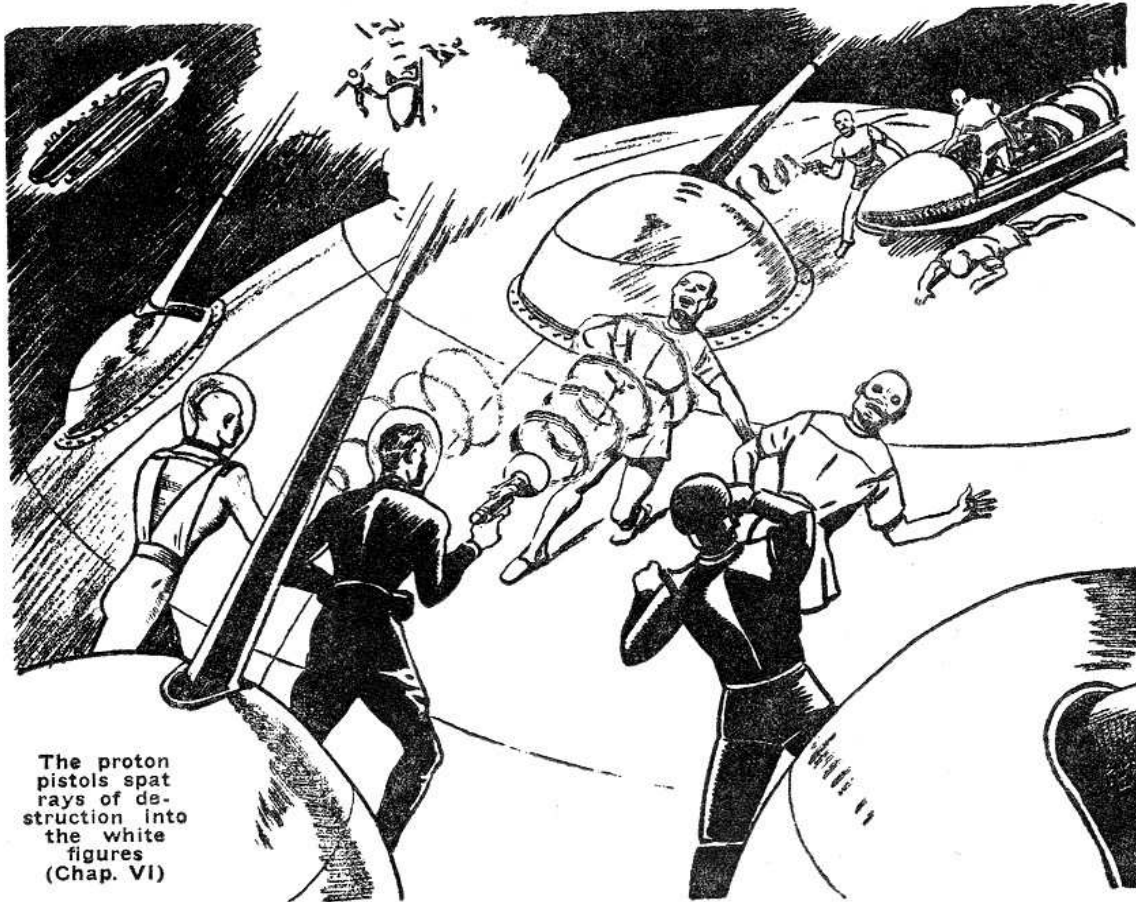
A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



FEATURING
**PLANETS
IN PERIL**

An Amazing Complete
Book-Length Novel
By **EDMOND
HAMILTON**

PLANETS IN PERIL



The proton pistols spat rays of destruction into the white figures (Chap. VI)

Planets in Peril

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Through an Unguessable Abyss Fraught with Peril, Curt Newton and the Futuremen Set Out to Save the Remnants of a Great Civilization from Suicide and Destruction!

CHAPTER I

People from Beyond

LIKE a huge red eye, Mars peered down from the starry sky at the blossoming paradise of its little moon Deimos. This tiny satellite was a man-made fairyland, created by artificial air and water and gravitation.

Balmy night breezes set the tall trees to nodding in the pink planet-glow. Birds called from the shrubs that bordered little streams in the shadowy parks around metal man-

sions. To Martians, this Garden Moon was a haven of beauty and peace. But peace was far from the Martian who stood in front of a small chromaloy house, scanning the night sky.

"Why don't they come?" he muttered tensely to himself, his eyes desperately searching the heavens. "There's only an hour left—"

Tiko Thrin was an elderly Martian, a little, withered red man wrapped in a synthewool cloak despite the night's warmth. His incongruously big, bald head was tilted far back as his thick-lensed spectacles surveyed the starry

A COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

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sky in an agony of impatience.

"The greatest event in the history of the Solar System — and they'll be too late for it!" he thought despairingly.

Then the little Martian scientist stiffened. A low drone of rocket tubes came on the balmy breeze. A gleaming speck was cutting across the stars, slanting down toward the little moon in a long glide. It grew into a sleek rocket cruiser that dived toward the Martian with a staccato roar.

Tiko Thrin skipped back in alarm. But the cruiser, its keel and brake rockets exploding spouts of atomic fire, was already landing smoothly on the lawn. Its door opened, and a slim, dark-haired girl in white space slacks emerged into the pink planet-light. She was laughing.

"What's the matter — did my landing scare you, Tiko?"

Joan Randall, Earthgirl secret agent of the Solar System Government, was a boyishly pretty figure as she came toward him.

"Where are Captain Future and the Futuremen?" Tiko asked quickly.

Joan waved toward the cruiser.

"There comes the Brain now. I brought him, and the others will be along soon."

A WEIRD shape was emerging from the cruiser. It looked like a square box of transparent metal, floating in the air upon almost invisible magnetic propulsion beams.

This was the Brain, one of the famous Futuremen. That square box was a serum-case in which ingenious mechanisms kept alive a living human brain. In the "face" of the case were the Brain's lenslike glass eyes, mounted on flexible stalks, and his microphone mouth or speech organ.

Once, long ago, the Brain had been an ordinary human Earthman. He had been Doctor Simon Wright, a brilliant, aging

scientist. Death had claimed his failing body. But he had escaped that death by having his living brain removed surgically from his body and placed in this serum-case.

He came gliding silently through the soft planet-light toward the pretty Earthgirl and the old Martian. Both of them knew him well.

"Why didn't Captain Future come?" Tiko Thrin asked tensely. "I told you in my message that it was urgent."

The Brain, posed beside them, contemplated the excited little Martian with expressionless lens-eyes as he spoke in his rasping voice.

"Captain Future and the other two Futuremen went to Venus a week ago," he declared. "They've been helping Ezra Gurney smooth out some trouble with the marsh-men there. But before I had Joan bring me here, I teleaudioed them to come on here. They should arrive at any moment.

"Why did you ask us to come here?" the Brain continued in metallic accents. "You interrupted an extremely engrossing experiment of mine."

"Yes, what's all the mystery about, Tiko?" Joan challenged. "You can't call the Futuremen on the run for nothing. It had better be big!" Tiko Thrin's withered red face became solemn.

"It is big. What is going to happen here tonight will mark an epoch in the history of the Solar System." He paused dramatically. "I've established contact with another universe, and one of its people is going to visit me tonight!"

The Brain seemed startled, for his lens-eyes fastened sharply on the little Martian's face.

"You can't be serious!"

"It's true!" Tiko affirmed eagerly.

"I don't understand," Joan said puzzledly. "You know I'm no scientist. What do you mean by 'another universe'?"

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Shiri was the first to be placed upon the weird platform (Chap. XIII)

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Tiko Thrin explained.

"Our three-dimensional universe is limited and finite, for our three-dimensional space is curved. Thus our universe is a great three-dimensional bubble floating in the extra-dimensional abyss. It's been believed that there are other bubbles, other universes, out in that abyss.

"This other universe which I've contacted is such a bubble. It's unthinkable remote from us. I have calculated that it must be at least twenty billion light-years distant, but my power-beam reached it."

The Brain was incredulous.

"No System scientist has ever yet succeeded in sending a beam beyond our own three-dimensional universe," he stated.

"I know, and it wasn't my science that enabled me to do it," admitted Tiko Thrin. "You remember that queer race, the Alius, whom we fought on the comet-world — who were invaders from outside? You remember that we fell heir to all their strange scientific apparatus? Well, I've been studying and altering the Alius apparatus, hoping to be able to make contact with the inhabitants of another universe.

"And I succeeded! I sent out signals along a power-beam that I projected along the fourth dimension. The signals were quickly answered. For weeks, I've been in steady communication with the people of an unthinkable distant universe."

"But that's impossible!" protested the Brain. "The theory of relativity shows that the fourth dimension is non-spatial in nature. You couldn't send any beam along a non-spatial dimension."

"But I have," insisted Tiko. "I've talked with a man of that universe, have slowly learned his language. His name is Gerdek — he's of a human people who call themselves the Tarasts. And this man Gerdek is going to come across the abyss

bodily tonight."

THE little Martian scientist rushed on. "I've utilized the scientific secrets of the Alius to build an apparatus that would transmit matter, broken down into electrons, along my beam. I taught Gerdek, in that other universe, to build such an apparatus too. When both machines are turned on, solid matter can flash from one universe to the other on the beam."

"I want to see this apparatus of yours," said the Brain abruptly. "I still can't believe that it's scientifically possible."

Tiko Thrin led the way with nervous haste toward his little chromaloy house. The Brain glided close beside him in the pink planet-glow, while Joan Randall followed with a feeling of increasing excitement.

Mingled with Joan's excitement was a dawning apprehension. This talk of a visitor from another universe recalled to her only too vividly those other terrible visitants from outside, with whom the Futuremen had struggled desperately. Remembering those alien Alius, she felt a chill of dread at the thought of another such visitation.

Her uneasiness deepened when they entered Tiko Thrin's laboratory. The room was crowded with electrical and physical apparatus. Four giant atomic generators droned softly at the end of the room, feeding power into tall accumulators connected by a maze of cables to various instruments. Many of these looming machines were devices of the alien Alius science.

The little Martian pointed proudly to a big object.

"There it is. The matter-transmitter and receiver, which will enable a man of that distant universe to come here tonight."

The Brain glided to the mechanism. He poised, studying it with his strange lens-eyes that moved uncannily on their

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flexible stalks.

"I see," he muttered. "You've adapted the Alius method of photon-transmission to handle electrons."

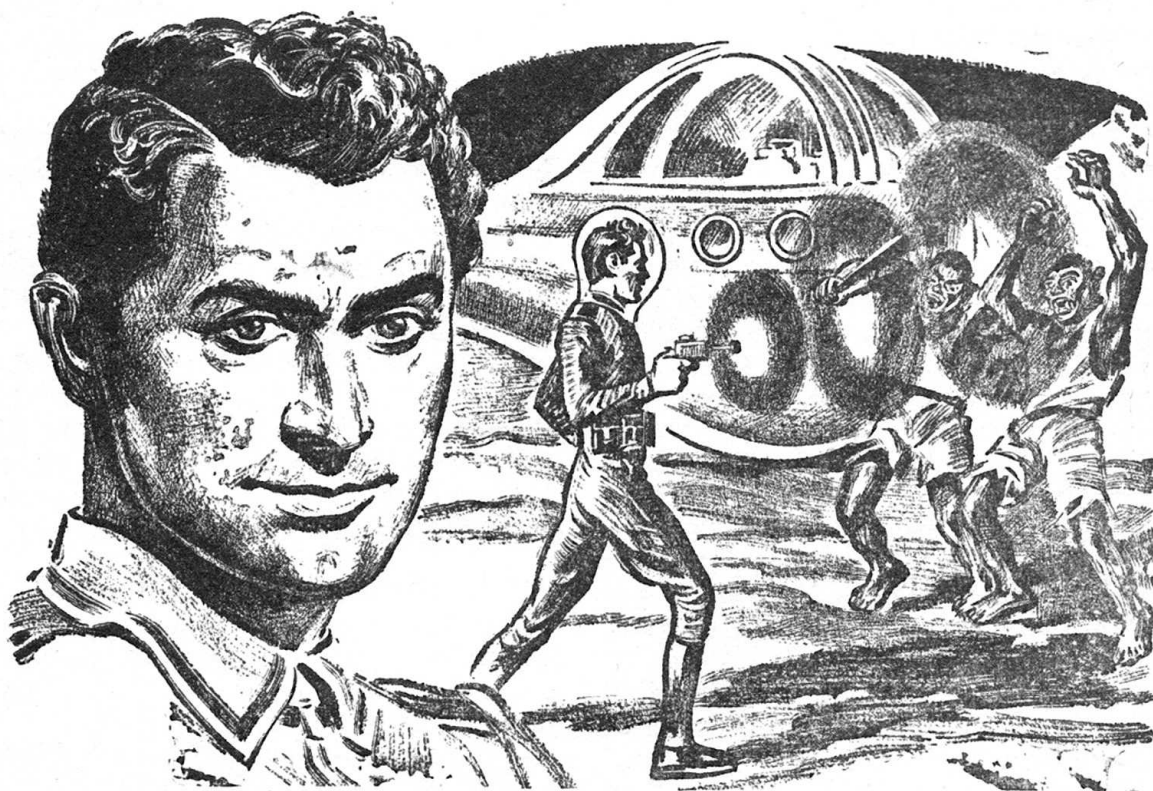
The main feature of the machine was a big, barrel-like chamber of transparent metal. Its interior walls bristled with thousands of tiny copper electrodes, all pointing inward. Complexities of wiring led from these electrodes to the tall switchboard nearby. This switchboard

Gerdek is going to come through from his own distant universe." Joan's nervousness increased.

"Tiko, I don't like this I Your machine creates a bridge between our universe and that other one. It might be dangerous."

The Martian blinked at her uncomprehendingly.

"There's no danger. The Tarasts — the people of that other universe — are humans like us. And Gerdek, the man



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contained banks of dials and relays, and an ordinary speech microphone. Above the board was mounted a curious antenna of copper sheets in queer arrangement.

The Brain keenly studied the fantastic geometrical design of the copper planes. "This antenna is hypothetically set to project or receive a beam along the fourth dimension," he admitted. "But it can't do it. No ordinary power-beam can travel along a non-spatial dimension."

"You'll find out differently in twenty minutes," said Tiko Thrin. "That's when

who's coming through, is friendly. I've talked with him for weeks."

"He might pretend that he's friendly, so that you'll open a way for him into our universe," persisted the worried girl. "But we don't know that he's really friendly. We don't know that he's really even human!"

Tiko patted her hand.

"Don't worry, Joan. If Gerdek is hostile when he materializes in that chamber, I can instantly project him back."

"But it might not be so easy to do that,

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once he's here," Joan pointed out anxiously. "At least, wait until Captain Future arrives."

"I can't do that," replied Tiko hurriedly, glancing at the chronometers. "It's almost the time set by Gerdek and myself for the attempt. I'm going to call him now."

JOAN stepped back, but her lovely face was pale and troubled as she watched the little scientist working hastily at the switchboard.

"There's nothing to worry about," the Brain told her confidently. "His beam won't work along the fourth dimension. It can't."

Tiko Thrin had closed a series of switches. Tall vacuum tubes behind the switchboard silently lit up. A shimmering, pearly white glow enveloped the fantastic copper planes of the curious antenna.

In a moment, the little Martian spoke loudly into the switchboard microphone. "Gerdek! Gerdek, nya kurul di rad!"

Strange call in a strange language! A call into the infinite abyss outside the known universe, a cry to an alien universe twenty billion light-years away!

Almost immediately, a deep, vibrant male voice issued from the loudspeaker beside the microphone.

"Rasta, kol! Amal ta fafir mutin!"

Tiko Thrin turned a face glistening with excitement toward the girl and the Brain.

"He's there, ready to come through. He's going to turn on the transmitter I taught him to build — in two minutes, he'll be here!"

"I don't understand," whispered Joan to Simon Wright. "If he's really billions of light-years away, how could his reply come so quickly?"

The Brain, who was staring with a fixity that indicated astonishment, made a reluctant concession.

"If that beam is working across the fourth dimension," he said, "it would

operate instantaneously by short-cutting the three ordinary dimensions. But I still can't believe —"

Tiko Thrin, sweating with excitement, reached a clawlike hand to close the largest switch on the board. The big vacuum tubes flared up brilliantly as the full power of the accumulators rushed into them. In the transparent chamber, a thread of crackling lightning stabbed from each of the thousands of tiny copper electrodes.

Joan Randall, watching with mingled awe and dread, saw those thousands of gushing threads of light coalescing swiftly at the center of the chamber. They formed a shining cloud, which almost faster than the eye could perceive grew more dense and definite of outline.

"Why, it's working!" exclaimed the Brain incredulously. "Those jets are electrons, drawn across the abyss and now reforming into their original patterns!"

Joan heard a bell clang warningly. A red light flashed on the switchboard. With a convulsive movement, Tiko opened the switches.

"Look!" shrilled the little Martian scientist exultantly. "It succeeded! I've opened a road to another universe!"

The shining haze inside the chamber was rapidly dissipating. Through it, they could vaguely discern a human figure. Then they stiffened with amazement as they saw that there were two figures in the chamber. They were a man and a girl.

They were human in every respect — yet there was a subtle unearthliness about them. Their skin was a pure, marbly white, without a trace of color. Both the young man and the girl had hair of a platinum shade that was almost white. The man's hair was close-cropped, the girl's flowed to her shoulders in a wonderful torrent of platinum tresses. Both had dark eyes, with unusually large pupils.

The man was handsome, the girl of unearthly loveliness. The former wore a tight jacket and breeches of silky black

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cloth, the girl a loose black robe of the same material. They were staggering as they stood there in the transparent chamber — breathing with difficulty, seemingly under terrible strain.

Joan cried out in sharp alarm. The two in the chamber were looking out at their hosts. And both the man and the girl had suddenly drawn and leveled gunlike objects that were obviously weapons.

CHAPTER II

The Futuremen

LIKE a shooting star, a small ship hurtled across the planetary orbits of the Solar System. The sun and the worlds of Venus and Earth lay far behind it. It was racing at tremendous speed toward the red dot of Mars.

The few officers of passing space liners and freighters who sighted that little ship recognized it instantly. Who was there in the whole System who did not know the Comet, ship of the famous Futuremen? Who had not heard the countless tales of daring forays to far worlds and stars made in that very craft by Captain Future, most adventurous of all planeteters?

Curtis Newton, the young Earthman known to nine worlds as Captain Future, sat at the space-stick in the crowded control room of the Comet and sang cheerfully to himself. He sang:

I'm only a lonely spaceman
With no world to call my home —

The dolefulness of the old space song was belied by Curt's high spirits. His head was cocked back, his mop of torch-red hair glistening. Humor danced in his gray eyes and tanned, handsome face.

Curt's long, lean figure, clad in a drab zipper suit to which was belted a slim,

deadly proton pistol, was stretched out easily in the pilot's chair. His feet rested lightly on the eye and brake-blast pedals, his brown hand loosely grasping the space-stick.

I've seen all moons and planets
But I still just like to roam —

Captain Future stopped singing, as a glance at the space sextant told him the Comet was approaching a dangerous meteor zone. He turned his head and called back to the main cabin of the ship.

"Come on up here, Otho! I'll need you soon to watch the meteorometers for me."

There was no answer to his summons. He heard, over the throb of the rockets, the mutter of two voices arguing back there.

Curt raised his voice.

"You cockeyed son of a test-tube, did you hear me call you?"

There was still no answer, for the disputing voices back in the cabin had now become loud and strident. Curt's own call went unheeded.

With an impatient exclamation, Captain Future rose to his feet. He snapped on the automatic pilot to hold the ship on course, then strode angrily back into the main cabin.

The two Futuremen back there were kneeling on the floor, so deeply engrossed that they hardly paid attention to Curt's entrance.

"Be with you in a minute, Chief," said Otho, without turning. "Grag and I are settling a bet."

Otho looked like a rather striking young man — a lithe, white-skinned individual with a hairless head and slanted, glittering green eyes in a fierce, reckless face. But Otho was no ordinary man. He was an android, or synthetic man. He had been created in a laboratory, years ago. And he was more swift, more skillful, more dangerous than any normal man.

Grag, the other Futureman, was even

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more extraordinary. For Grag was a robot — a mighty, seven-foot figure whose manlike body was of massive metal. His bulbous metal head encased a metal-sponge brain that was the seat of his strong, strange mind. The robot's gleaming photo-electric eyes glanced up toward Curt, as he spoke in his booming mechanical voice.

"I bet my best proton gun against Otho's fire-ruby ring that my Eek could whip that miserable little pet of his," Grag informed him.

"Why, you must be space-struck," Curt Newton snorted. "Your Eek couldn't whip a fly — he's the biggest coward that ever lived."

"That's what I tried to tell him, Chief," chuckled Otho. "But Grag thinks that cowardly moon-pup of his has a chance. Just watch!"

EACH of the Futuremen had put his pet down on the floor. Otho's mascot, whose name was Oog, was a meteor-mimic, a fat little white beast with solemn eyes. It was an asteroidal animal that had the unique power of taking any form at will, by means of a protean cell-shifting ability.

Oog was ordinarily the mildest-tempered of animals. But Otho had prodded and teased him to fighting pitch. Now, Oog abruptly changed his shape and became an octopoid thing that advanced menacingly on Eek.

Eek, Grag's pet, was a moon-pup. It was a sharp-nosed, beady-eyed little gray animal, a little-known species that inhabited the barren lunar satellite of Earth. This particular moon-pup happened to be the most arrant coward alive, as Captain Future well knew.

"Go ahead and kill that moon-pup, Oog!" Otho incited his pet. He chortled. "Watch Eek run for it now. He's frozen stiff already."

The moon-pup was indeed watching

the queerly altered Oog advance menacingly, as though frozen. But Eek did not run away, as he always had done before when even the slightest danger threatened.

Instead of fleeing, Eek opened his jaws in a soundless snarl and suddenly flung himself upon Oog. He smacked Oog down, clawed him up and batted him down again, and then mopped up the floor with him. With a yelp of amazement and pain, Oog resumed his own shape and hastily fled.

"I told you Eek would whip him!" Grag boomed triumphantly. "You can just hand over that ring, Otho."

Otho had watched with incredulous consternation, and Captain Future too was astonished. Neither had expected Eek to fight.

"I must be dreaming!" Otho gasped. "That moon-pup was always afraid of his own shadow before. He must be either crazy or —"

With a sudden suspicion, Otho grabbed up Eek and examined him. He uttered an angry cry as he saw smears of gray liquid upon Eek's jaws.

"I thought so!" Otho exclaimed furiously. "You've fed him radium-liquor and got him drunk!" he accused Grag. "That's why he was brave."

Grag uttered a chuckling sound.

"What if I did give Eek a little stimulant that way? There was nothing against it in our bet."

Otho furiously handed over the fire-ruby ring.

"That's what I get for betting with a robot! You're not human enough to know anything about good sportsmanship."

"Not human? Says who?" bellowed Grag angrily. "I'm a blasted sight more human than any synthetic rubber imitation of a man like you!"

Captain Future interrupted.

"Look, I don't want to bother you two too much," he said with dangerous

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politeness, "but we're approaching a meteor zone. It would be awfully nice if I could have a little help in the control room. Would it annoy you to come forward and assist me, Otho?"

"Why, no, Chief," Otho answered importantly. "I'm always glad to do any little favor for —"

He ducked and dodged for the control room as Curt aimed a swift kick at him. In the next half hour, Otho called out the readings of the meteorometers and Curt shifted the space-stick at each warning. The still-angry android interspersed his readings with loudly muttered comments upon the trickery of Grag, who had followed them forward.

Curt Newton grinned to himself. He was used to this perpetual bickering of Grag and Otho. He had heard it all his life, for Grag and Otho and the Brain had been with him since he was born.

The story of Curt Newton's birth and upbringing was one of the strangest in history. Years ago, a brilliant scientist named Roger Newton had fled from enemies on Earth and taken refuge on the wild, barren Moon. With him had gone his young wife and his strange colleague, Simon Wright, the Brain.

They had built a home and laboratory beneath Tycho crater. In it, a son had been born to Roger Newton and his wife. Here Newton and the Brain had pursued their experiments designed to create intelligent living beings, and had created Grag, the robot and Otho, the android.

BUT their enemies followed them, and killed Roger Newton and his wife. The murderers themselves met quick retribution. And thus the orphaned infant was left to the care of the three strange beings: the Brain, the robot and the android. These three, through the years, had guarded and reared the child upon the lonely Moon. And they had given him an education such as no boy had ever before

received.

The Brain had supervised Curt's scientific education until the boy approached his tutor in wizardry of science. Otho had taught him swiftness and cleverness. Grag had carefully fostered his physical strength. It was small wonder that Curt Newton grew up into a man of tomorrow.

The finest human scientist and most audacious planeteer in the System, Curt had so devoted his powers to fight for the System's peoples that they named him Captain Future, and called his three loyal comrades the Futuremen.

"Well, we're through that cursed meteor zone at last," announced Otho, turning with relief from the meteorometers.

He gestured to the bright red dot of Mars ahead. "We'll reach Deimos in a few hours," he said.

"I don't see why Tiko Thrin had to drag us all the way out here to Deimos," complained Grag. "What's it all about, anyway?"

"Tiko wouldn't say, according to Simon," Curt replied. "He said only that it was imperative we come. It must be important. Tiko Thrin isn't a man to exaggerate."

"Bah! Those Martians are all nutty," Otho scoffed. "We'll get there and he'll have some crazy new scientific idea to tell us. You'll see."

The Comet rapidly swept closer toward the burning crimson sphere of Mars. Captain Future skillfully steered in a broad curve toward the hurtling little satellite of Deimos. He brought the ship down smoothly toward the shadowed night-side of the tiny moon.

The planet-lit face of the Garden Moon was clear as a map to Curt's eyes. Soon he was landing their craft on the tree-bordered lawn of Tiko Thrin's small chromaloy house.

"Hello, that's Joan coming!" Curt exclaimed, as he and Grag and Otho

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emerged into the soft planet-glow.

His pulse had jumped, as it always did, at sight of the slim Earthgirl he loved. She was running toward them across the velvety lawn.

"Something must be wrong," Otho muttered. "She's in a big hurry —" But Curt had already strode forward to meet the girl. He greeted her by

exuberantly picking her up in his arms and holding her high in the air.

"Show a little affection, Mr. Randall, or I'll toss you right off this low-gravity moon," he threatened cheerfully.

"Curt, put me down!" she ordered urgently. "Something has happened — something tremendous."

Captain Future's face sobered instantly, and he set her on her feet. "What is it, Joan?"

She was breathless, her eyes brilliant with excitement. "Curt, in the house are two people from another universe!"

As Curt Newton and the two Futuremen looked at her incredulously, she rushed on.

"They're humans, Curt, but they're not like us. The man's name is Gerdek, and the girl is his sister, Shiri. They materialized here less than an hour ago, by means of Tiko's power-beam —"

"Hold on, Joan!" Captain Future begged. "You're getting all mixed up in your excitement. You say that Tiko managed to bring these two people out of a different three-dimensional universe?"

Joan's dark head bobbed.

"Yes. He bridged the abyss between our universe and theirs with a power-beam along the fourth dimension."

"Impossible!" Curt exclaimed. "According to all relativity theory, the fourth dimension is non-spatial. No beam could work across it."

"That's what Simon said at first, but Tiko did it," the girl insisted. "I admit I was scared at first. Especially since we had expected only the man Gerdek to



The Cold One's limbs gave way beneath him.
(Chap. XVIII)

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appear, and didn't know that his sister was coming along with him.

"And Gerdek and his sister were alarmed, too, when they first materialized! It was sight of the Brain that startled them. They thought at first he was some kind of mechanical monster, and raised their weapons to protect themselves. But Tiko soon convinced them we were all friendly. Tiko has been talking to them, learning their story —"

CAPTAIN FUTURE'S gray eyes lit with excitement, and he started toward the little house.

"Joan, come on — I want to see those people. If they really came from a different universe, Tiko has got something big."

"Holy moon-cats, I still can't believe it!" exclaimed Otho, hastening with Grag beside them.

"Curt, I've heard part of their story that Tiko translated for us, and it's a wonderful, heart-breaking tale!" Joan was saying as they hurried across the lawn. "The universe that Gerdek and his sister come from is a dying universe.

"Its people are fighting a terrible battle against extinction. And these two took the awful risk of being dematerialized and hurled across the abyss, in the hope of getting help here for their doomed people."

Captain Future and his companions stepped inside of Tiko Thrin's crowded laboratory, and halted. The tall, red-haired planeteer and the lithe android and mighty metal robot made a striking group as they stared.

Curt's eyes were fixed on the pale-haired young man and girl who had jumped up as he entered. He realized at once that they represented a race wholly unfamiliar to him. The marble whiteness of their complexions, the handsomeness of the man and the unearthly, platinum-tressed beauty of the girl were as subtly

strange as their black garments.

Future had expected this man Gerdek and his sister to show astonishment at sight of his robot and android comrades.

But, to his surprise, it was upon himself that the gaze of the man and the girl fixed instantly.

With eyes dilated by amazement, these two visitors from another universe stared at Captain Future's hair. Then they burst into excited speech in their own language.

CHAPTER III

National Hero

CURT NEWTON was dumfounded by the excitement which his own appearance had somehow stirred in the strange man and girl. They seemed unable to take their eyes off him.

He turned to the little Martian scientist. "What are they saying, Tiko?"

"I didn't get it all," Tiko Thrin confessed puzzledly. "But as far as I can gather, it's your red hair that has excited them."

"My hair?" Captain Future echoed, mystified. "What's so unusual about that?" The Martian questioned Gerdek and Shiri in their own language. They replied with an eager rush of words.

"They say," Tiko translated, "that none of their people has hair like yours. Their legends tell of a time when some of them had dark or even red hair, but now they are all a pale-haired people."

"Tell them we're more interested in their reason for coming here than in the color of their hair," Curt Newton said impatiently.

Gerdek and Shiri had by now got over their startled surprise. But the girl still had breathless emotion in her fine face as she looked at Curt.

Her brother was saying something to

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her in a rapid, eager tone. They scrutinized Curt's tall figure intently. Gerdek appeared to be excitedly proposing something connected with Captain Future.

Tiko Thrin looked perplexed.

"I don't understand this," he told Curt. "The man keeps harping on your red hair. He's telling his sister that because you're red-haired, you might be able to save his doomed people."

"Say, this is goofy!" Otho exclaimed. "How the devil is the Chief's red hair going to save anybody from doom?"

"Aw, these people must be still space-happy from their trip," growled Grag. "We're getting nowhere," Captain Future said decisively. "Tiko, ask the man to

tell us slowly what his universe is like and why his people are doomed. You translate for the rest of us as he goes along."

Gerdek nodded quickly when the little Martian made the request. He began to speak in low, eager tones, looking with a strangely hopeful expression at Curt. The girl Shiri searched Curt's face with her great, dark violet eyes as her brother talked. Tiko Thrin translated.

"Our universe is much different from this one of yours," Gerdek declared. "Like yours, it is a great bubble of three-dimensional curved space floating in the extra-dimensional abyss. But our universe is apparently much larger than yours in diameter. And ours is a dying universe, almost a dead one.

"Long, long ago our universe was much like yours. It contained hosts of hot, bright suns whose outpouring radiation supported life on myriads of planets. That was when we Tarasts rose to civilization and glory. The scientific powers of our race so expanded that we were able to spread out and colonize the worlds of hundreds of stars.

"The great hero of that long-past period of expansion was a scientist and leader named Kaffr, whose memory has been

revered ever since by my race.

"But that was all ages ago. As time passed, millennium after millennium, millions after millions of years, the decline of our universe set in. Its suns could not pour out radiation forever. Each star, as the carbon-nitrogen cycle consumed its free hydrogen, waned and cooled. The inexorable laws of entropy were taking effect. The older suns of our universe ran down through the spectrum to dull red, and then were dark, cold cinders.

"The lights of our universe were going out, one by one! We could not halt that stupendous natural process — nothing could. Our far-flung race had sadly to abandon the frozen worlds of the burned-out suns, and migrate to other stars. So began the first somber retreat of the Tarast civilization from the borders of our cosmic empire."

GERDEK paused for emphasis.

"That retreat has been going on, ever since. For the last four million years, my people have abandoned one frozen stellar system after another. It has been a slow withdrawal, you see. A universe does not die in a day.

"Each generation during those four million years saw little retrogression during its lifetime — only the occasional abandonment of some star's worlds. It has been slow — but it has been very sure.

"In more recent ages, the cosmic retreat of our empire has been accelerated by two factors. One is the decay of our scientific powers, an intellectual degeneration that inevitably resulted from the psychological effects of our hopeless retreat. Very many techniques and knowledges were lost or forgotten as world after world was abandoned.

"We still retain and operate many mechanical devices, but the spirit of scientific experimentation is almost dead. We Tarasts are now, it is obvious to me, inferior to you people of this universe in

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science.

"The other factor that deepens the hopelessness for us is a more tangible and terrifying one. It is the threat of the Cold Ones. That is the name we give to a new and hostile race of intelligent creatures that has appeared in our dying universe.

"The Cold Ones are unhuman in many respects. They are the product of a disastrous chain of biological events that took place on the frozen planet of a dead star. They have advanced as we retreated, conquering world after world that we abandoned. For they can live in the endless icy darkness of airless worlds, where we would die.

"Our retreat, and their advance, have now almost reached the fatal climax. Most of our universe is already blacked-out by death, a vast wilderness of ashen bulks that once were stars, and icy spheres that once were smiling worlds. The last millions of us Tarasts now huddle together upon the chill worlds of a few smoldering stars that are not yet completely dead.

"Now the Cold Ones are reaching toward that dying star-cluster that is our last refuge. Already they have established a base there from which they attack our crowded worlds."

Gerdek's handsome young face was quivering with emotion as he went on with his saga of a dying civilization.

"Is it any wonder that most of my people have lost all hope for the future?

'Soon,' they murmur, 'our race will be gone and the Cold Ones will inherit our dead universe. It is futile to resist the laws of nature.'

"So they have no more interest in science, in the glory of our past. Sunk in despair, more and more of them lose hope for the future of our race, and think only of the present. More and more listen to Vostol's plan."

"Vostol's plan?" Captain Future repeated, puzzled by the reference. But Gerdek went on.

"Only a handful of us have clung to hope and have tried to keep the ancient science alive," he said. "My sister Shiri and I are of that small group. We have exhorted our people not to surrender or to despair. We have told them that if the Tarast race can only endure, the time will come when our dying universe will be reborn to new life once more.

"For we of the little scientist group are certain that our universe will be reborn! We have found, among the records left by the brilliant scientists of our great past age, mathematical calculations that seem to prove that the laws of entropy will reverse themselves, when the cooling of our universe reaches a critical point.

"We ourselves have not the scientific knowledge now to understand all these ancient records, but we believe them and have tried to make our people believe them.

"But our people have not believed," Gerdek said sadly. "They have rejected the half-proofs we were able to present, and have listened instead to those like Vostol, who counsel surrendering to the inevitable and thinking only of our own immediate future.

"If we few scientists could only prove to our people that the rebirth of our universe will come, we would inspire them to new hope for our race and to new struggle against the advancing Cold Ones.

"That is why Shiri and I have come to your universe to ask for your help," Gerdek concluded. "When we first accidentally received your signals, we guessed your science was greater than our own decayed scientific knowledge. You, with your greater knowledge, would be able to give my people the will and the means to fight against racial extinction."

CAPTAIN FUTURE was a little staggered by the implied proposal.

"You mean that you want us to go out to that distant, dying universe of yours?"

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Just how could we help if we did?"

Gerdek answered instantly.

"You, with your greater scientific knowledge, could convince my people that our universe will be reborn. And you could help us fight the powerful Cold Ones, help us to hang on until the great day of resurrection comes."

Curt looked doubtful. The girl Shiri saw the doubt on his face, and asked him a tense, quick question through the Martian translator.

"You believe that our universe will be revived, do you not? The ancient scientists of our race whose records we found were certain of it."

Curt Newton nodded.

"I'm certain of it, too. Our science of cosmogony tells us that a three-dimensional universe like ours or your own will cool and darken and die only to a certain point. When the amount of entropy reaches that critical point, the dead universe will be reborn."

Joan looked astounded.

"Are you sure of that, Curt? I admit I'm no scientist. But I always had the idea that when all the stars of a universe were cold and dead, that universe would remain dead forever."

"No, that was the old idea of early physicists," Captain Future told her. "They believed that the second law of thermodynamics was immutable, that the flow of energy into lower forms was a one-way, irreversible process. But generations ago, as far back as the year nineteen forty-one, they began to see that they had been too positive about it."

"The great physicist Einstein of that era finally admitted that cosmic laws were immutable in appearance only, and that the Heisenberg principle of uncertainty might rule in cosmic as well as atomic physics. Millikan, his contemporary, had always insisted that the decay of a universe might only be part of a great cycle."

"Finally, J. B. S. Haldane, another famous scientific name of that age, propounded his theory of cosmic 'dynamism,' which asserted that a dead universe would be reborn in time."

"Haldane's theory set the cosmogonists of later generations on the right track. We know now, from searching mathematical investigation, that every three-dimensional universe has a continuous cycle of decay and rebirth. It begins as a comparatively small bubble of three-dimensional space."

"But as the matter of its stars and its world melt into radiation, that bubble of space expands. That universe expands until it is a much vaster sphere, containing a welter of radiation and a few inert embers of burned-out suns."

"Then, when it reaches a critical point in size, the curved space of the bubble gives way under the strain. The bubble collapses upon itself just as a balloon blown too big will burst and collapse. The bubble of space becomes suddenly in that way a much smaller sphere, a much smaller universe. The immense amounts of free radiation, now compressed into that smaller universe, build rapidly into new nebulae, suns, planets."

Gerdek's dark eyes were brilliant with hope when he understood.

"Then if my people can keep their race alive until the critical point is reached and our universe is reborn, our racial future will be assured!"

Shiri impulsively grasped Curt's hand.

"If you could convince our Tarast people of that and could help them hold off the Cold Ones, you would have saved us."

Captain Future frowned.

"I'd certainly like to help your people. But — they wouldn't listen to your own assurances. Would they listen to us strangers, no matter what scientific proofs we presented?"

"They'd listen to you!" Shiri cried when

Tiko had translated. "They'd believe anything you said — because of your red hair."

"My hair?" Curt looked blank. "I still don't see what that has to do with it."

SHIRI explained eagerly. "We Tarasts have legends of a great hero of our race, whose memory is still venerated among us. His name was Kaffr, and he lived ages ago and led our people in the conquest of our universe."

"Tradition says that he had flame-red hair, something not seen among my people for hundreds of generations. Tradition also says that in the hour of our direst need, Kaffr will return from the dead to help his people."

Curt nodded understandingly.

"Sure, every race has old legends like that. But what about it?" Shiri's great violet eyes flashed.

"If you, with your flame-red hair, appeared in our universe, you could tell my people that you were Kaffr himself, come back from death to help them. They'd believe you! And they would believe and do everything that you told them."

"Holy space-imps!" exclaimed Grag, astonished. "They want you to palm yourself off as their national hero, Chief!"

CHAPTER IV

Into Infinity

CURT NEWTON was stunned also by the proposal.

"It's a crazy idea," he told the two Tarasts vehemently. "How could I

impersonate this fellow Kaffr? I don't know your language or your customs. I may not look in the least like the man, aside from my hair."

"That would not matter, for nobody

now knows what Kaffr really looked like," Gerdek assured him. "It has been ages since he died, remember. All that we have are just dim traditions — his superhuman powers, his intrepidity, his wisdom. The flame- red hair is the only definite point."

"And we could teach you everything you would need to know before you appeared to our people," Shiri added eagerly to Curt.

Captain Future hesitated. The adventure that offered itself seemed a mad one.

To enter a completely alien universe — to pass himself off as the revered, half-deified racial hero of a whole people!

But a picture leaped into his mind. A somber mental vision of an unthinkable distant universe of dark, dead stars and frozen worlds; of a cold, unhuman menace that crept like a slow tide of horror toward the last, flickering stars and worlds that were the final refuge of a despairing human race.

He turned and looked at the Brain and the other Futuremen.

"I'm in favor of trying to help these people, even though this plan seems hopelessly risky," Curt stated. "But I can't take you into a venture like this against your judgment. Are you willing to go?"

Otho's slant-green eyes glittered with excitement.

"Go? Of course we go! Who'd miss a chance to visit a whole new universe? Why, it's the greatest opportunity for adventure we ever had!"

Grag agreed, in his rumbling voice. The giant robot never cared where he went, as long as Captain Future was leading the way.

The Brain spoke more deliberately.

"You do not underestimate the riskiness of this proposal, lad. If those people discover that you're only an impostor impersonating their racial hero, they'll tear you to bits."

Shiri looked troubled when that was

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translated.

"It is true, they would do that. But it will not be discovered. It must not be discovered!"

"Despite the risk," the Brain concluded, "I am in favor of trying it. In that distant, alien universe, opportunity for scientific research would be almost unlimited. And also, I want very much to investigate this puzzling fourth-dimensional beam- travel that Tiko Thrin has somehow devised."

"I am afraid you will not learn much about that," Gerdek warned him. "The journey from our own universe to this one seemed little more than a mad confusion of indescribable sensations."

Captain Future's gray eyes gleamed with that eager light that only great purpose and the lure of far cosmic frontiers could summon forth.

"Good, it's settled! Gerdek, we'll come to your universe. I'll do my utmost to carry through this impersonation, if you think that's the only way in which we can succeed in helping your people. We'll bring our own ship, the Comet. We may need its resources before we're through."

Otho objected, pointing to the barrel-shaped chamber of Tiko Thrin's matter-transmitter.

"We can't get the Comet into that little chamber."

"Which means that we'll have to build a much bigger matter-transmitter of the same design," Curt declared. "Gerdek and Shiri will have to build a similar receiver

of large size, at their end. It will simply be a matter of duplicating in a larger scale the mechanism that Tiko Thrin has already taught them to construct."

When the details of that were settled, the Tarast man and his sister prepared to return to their own universe. Gerdek wrung Curt's hand, and the platinum-tressed girl's violet eyes were wet and shining with emotion as she parted from Captain Future.

"You have given us new hope," she

told him through Tiko Thrin. "We shall be able to predict that soon Kaffr will return to his people and save them. They'll be afire with hope."

"I only hope it won't end in tragic disappointment for them," Curt murmured uneasily. "I don't like impostors, even when they have as great a purpose as this one."

GERDEK and Shiri entered the transparent chamber, and Tiko Thrin closed it upon them. The little Martian scientist sweated at the switchboard. A haze of shining force enwrapped the two Tarasts as power was turned on. When it was shut off and the haze faded, the two had vanished.

"Just think — they're already back in their own universe, billions of light-years away!" marveled Tiko.

"I didn't like the way that girl eyed you," Joan told Captain Future half seriously. "I'm going to watch you when we reach her universe."

"When we reach it?" echoed Curt, startled. "Listen, Joan — you don't by any remote chance think I'm crazy enough to take you along on as dangerous a venture as this?"

Joan's brown eyes grew stormy.

"Do you think I'd let you go off without me to a universe where all the women are platinum blondes?"

Curt chuckled, but then grew sober.

"Joan, listen — it's not just the danger you'd run that I'm thinking of. Someone ought to be here to help Tiko guard the matter-transmitter. If anything happened to it, we'd never be able to get back here."

"That's just an excuse to leave me behind," Joan declared indignantly. Then her face softened. "Oh, all right, Curt — I don't want to make it difficult for you. I'll stay here."

The following few weeks marked intense labor and preparation by the Futuremen. Out in the grounds of Tiko

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Thrin's little estate they constructed the larger matter-transmitter that was required. It was of the same basic design as the laboratory model, but its huge transparent chamber was ovoid in shape, the more easily to accommodate the Comet.

During intervals snatched from their work, Curt Newton and the Futuremen learned the Tarast language as best they could from Tiko Thrin. The big new transmitter rapidly took shape. But frequently the work was delayed when the Brain went into one of his reveries of abstract scientific speculation, from which it was hard to arouse him.

"I'm trying to fathom the theoretical basis of these transmitters," Simon Wright replied when Captain Future protested. "You know, lad, I still can't believe that the fourth dimension is really spatial in nature."

Joan asked a puzzled question.

"But, Simon, when we were fighting those Alius on the comet-world, you and

Curt always referred to the fourth dimension of space."

"We meant the fourth spatial dimension," the Brain corrected. "That is really the fifth dimension, for according to the theory of relativity, the true fourth should be non-spatial."

Curt was impatient.

"Simon, in spite of the tenets of relativity, we know the fourth must be spatial, for we've seen that Tiko's power-beam can traverse it. We've no time now for theoretical considerations. We can investigate the theory of it later."

"Oh, very well," muttered the Brain. "But I still can't understand it. Neither can Tiko, for he simply adapted the apparatus of the alien Alius without investigation of its underlying principles."

The big transmitter finally was completed. Its huge ovoid chamber glittered like a great jewel on the green breast of the Garden Moon, crowned by

the towering antenna of copper planes in curious arrangement.

The night of the Futuremen's start was at hand. At this prearranged time, Gerdek and Shiri would be expecting them at the big receiver they had been building in their faraway universe. The Comet had already been eased into the ovoid chamber.

Joan clung to Captain Future.

"I'm afraid, Curt. I never felt this way before. A remote, alien universe — and you're going there to carry out an impersonation that means death if you're discovered. It frightens me."

"And I thought you were a real planeteer," he reproached her with pretended severity.

But he held her close, before he strode away.

JOAN stood in the planet-glow, rigid with emotion as she watched Curt's tall, lean figure enter the sleek little ship in the chamber. She caught the final wave of his hand from the control room, as Tiko Thrin closed the chamber and hastened to the switchboard.

A bursting blaze of shining force suddenly enwrapped the interior of the chamber and hid the Comet. Thousands of threads of lightning seemed to stream out of the haze toward the tiny copper electrodes that lined the chamber. Then they faded, and the haze died away.

Joan felt a strange chill as she saw that the big chamber now was empty. The little ship was dematerialized, gone.

The Comet and its four dauntless occupants had been hurled across the unthinkable abysses of an untraveled dimension to that distant, dying universe.

CHAPTER V

Dusk of Empire

CURT NEWTON had found the three Futuremen awaiting him in the crowded control room of the Comet, when he made his way into the ovoid chamber and entered the ship. Oog and Eek were wrestling playfully on the floor.

"All ready?" Curt had asked. "In five minutes well be hurtling out of this universe."

"Say, what would happen if Gerdek and Shiri didn't have their apparatus turned on to receive us?" Grag asked.

"What are you trying to do — ruin my morale before we start?" Otho demanded of the robot.

Curt had leaned forward at the window and waved to Joan, whom he could see standing outside the transparent ovoid chamber. He also descried Tiko Thrin at the big switchboard nearby. The little Martian was closing the last switches.

Then everything seemed to explode in a blaze of force. Captain Future felt the stunning shock of unprecedented energies in every fiber of his body. He had a sensation of falling into a bottomless abyss. Yet even though the powerful beam was hurling the Comet and its occupants across vast dimensions, Curt retained a measure of consciousness and was able to peer drunkenly out.

He had a nightmare vision of unreal spaces, through which the ship was hurtling at velocity inconceivable. It was not the void of ordinary space. This was the extra-dimensional abyss, whose super-geometrical tangle of complex coordinates baffled human perceptions. The perspective of this super-space was all wrong, impossibly curved and distorted.

Brilliant bubbles of shimmering, unreal appearance floated and streamed in this vast abyss. Each bubble was a separate

three-dimension universe like his own, Future knew. Universes upon universes, dancing in the cosmic gulf like bubbles of shining foam! The Comet seemed hurtling amid those foaming universes in an impossible complicated corkscrew curve, yet at the same time it seemed somehow to be flying in a straight line!

Captain Future had dared many alien realms in the past. But never had his mind felt so crushed and puny and helpless as now, in the unplumbed abyss of extra-dimensional spaces outside his own universe. His intelligence recoiled from the effort to comprehend this insane welter of curved spaces and the streaming rush of countless spherical universes.

Curt became aware that they were now somehow inside one of the bubble-universes. He vaguely sensed it as a distorted sphere of space which enclosed a brooding darkness. No glitter of brilliant young stars dispelled its night — nothing but cold, black cinders of burned-out suns, icy specks of frozen planets, and far away a cluster of smoldering red stars not yet quite dead.

The Comet seemed hurtling toward that cluster of dying suns, rushing deep into it toward a lurid crimson star around which circled five worlds. The innermost of those worlds loomed up —

There came again a sharp, wrenching shock that Captain Future felt through every fiber. He struggled against dizzy nausea, and realized that now his sensations were again those of his physical body. As his vision cleared, he found himself slumped in the pilot's chair. The Futuremen were staggering dazedly beside him, peering excitedly out of the window.

"Jumping sun-imps, we're not on Deimos now!" stuttered Otho. "Look out there!"

"I don't see anything much," Grag complained. "And I still feel awful dizzy." The Comet was resting inside another transparent ovoid chamber exactly like

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the one they had left. But this chamber and its auxiliary apparatus stood on the paved floor of a dusky, open court inside some big building.

The building itself was a massive, ancient-looking structure of synthetic white marble. Its sheer walls rose all around the court for a hundred feet. There was visible overhead an oddly blurred square of dusky crimson sky.

"We've made it," Curt Newton said, his voice a little hoarse. "We're in Gerdek's matter-receiver — in another universe."

AWE fell upon the Futuremen, mingled with a feeling of incredulity. There was a silence, in which the scared Oog and Eek whimpered.

"You mean we're really twenty billion light-years away from our own universe?" Otho said unbelievably. "How could we come so far, so quickly?"

Curt struggled against his own strong feeling of unreality.

"We traveled across the fourth dimension, short-cutting the other three."

"It's still hard to believe that the fourth dimension could be spatial," muttered the Brain, with lingering doubt. "I meant to take data during our traverse that would solve that mystery, but was too overcome to do so."

"Look, there's Shiri!" exclaimed Otho, suddenly pointing out. "But who's that with her? It doesn't look like Gerdek."

Two figures were visible out there in the dusky court, running toward the chamber in which the Comet now lay. Captain Future hastily rose to his feet, shaking off the weakness that persisted in his body.

"Come on!" he said. "But leave Eek and Oog in the ship for the time being." They emerged from the Comet into the big chamber of the matter-receiver, and

passed out through a door of that chamber into the open court.

The air was surprisingly warm.

Gravitation seemed about equal to that of Earth. Curt looked up quickly at the somber, dark red sky. What was that odd blur across it? Was it a transparent roof high above?

Speculation was cut short as Shiri reached them. The Tarast girl, her platinum hair flowing down to the shoulders of her silky black robe, seemed possessed by tremendous excitement. Her pale, lovely face and big violet eyes held anxiety and fear.

"You have not come a moment too soon!" she cried to Curt. "A crisis is upon us. You alone can save the situation, but we must act quickly."

"Why, what's wrong?" Curt asked sharply. "Where's Gerdek?"

"Gerdek is at the meeting of the Council of Suns," Shiri replied rapidly. "He had to be there, to meet the accusations of Vostol and his party. He told me to bring you there the moment you arrived."

The girl's companion muttered to her in a tone of urgency. He was a fat, middle-aged Tarast, pale-haired like all these people, with a plump face now drawn by alarm.

"But why should I go to this meeting of your Council?" Captain Future was asking puzzledly.

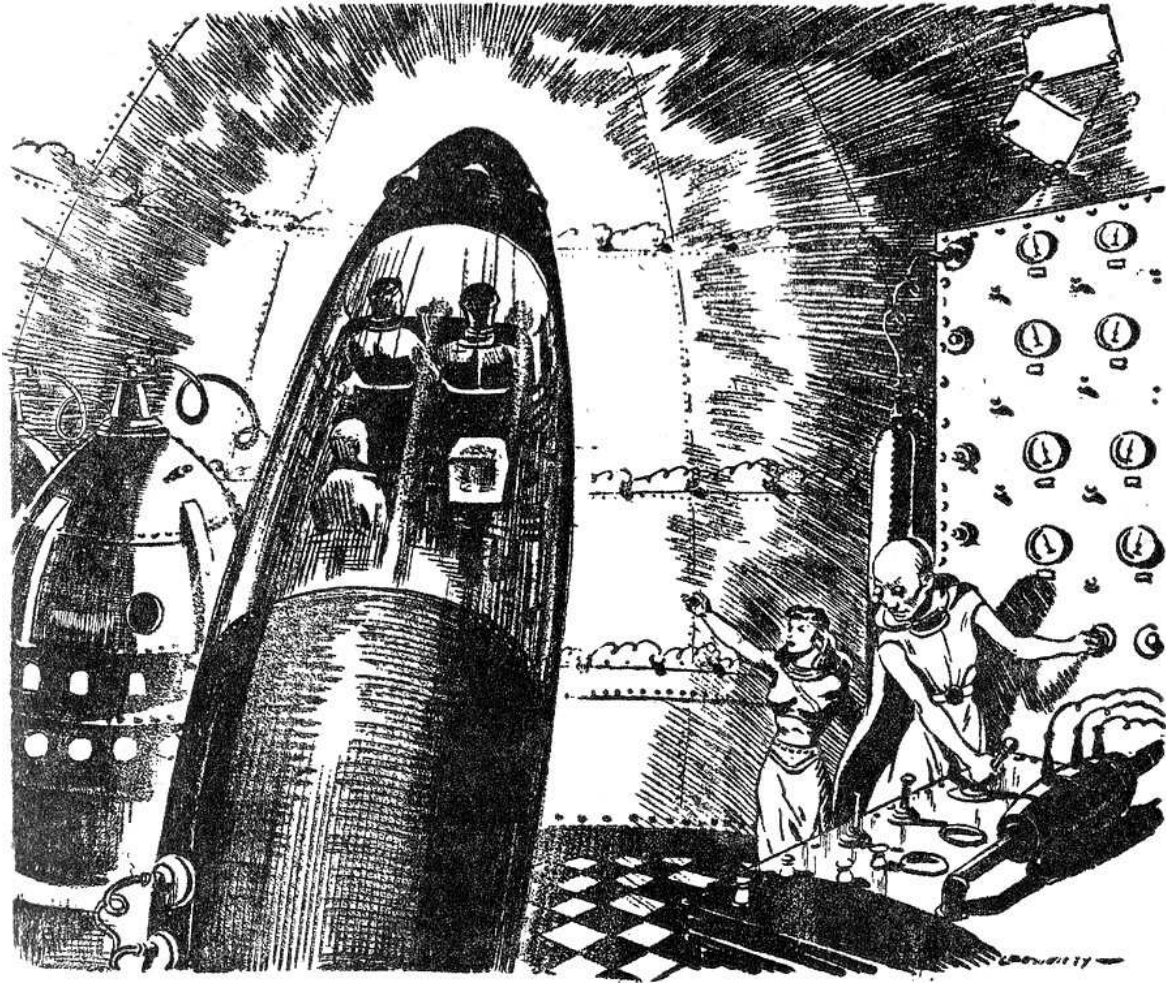
Shiri replied hastily.

"Gerdek has been telling the Council for weeks that our great hero Kaffr would come back from the dead. He has made them this promise so that they would postpone acceptance of Vostol's plan. But now Vostol is demanding that my brother prove his assertion. The only way Gerdek can prove it is to produce Kaffr before the Council — to produce you."

Curt was staggered.

"But we didn't plan that I should undertake to impersonate Kaffr until I had been coached for the part, so that I wouldn't make any slips!"

"I know, but now you must play your



Tiko Thrin closed the chamber and hastened to the switchboard. (Chap. IV)

part at once," Shiri said urgently. "Vostol and his party have brought matters to a head. Unless Kaffr appears today, we of the scientist party will be forever discredited and everything will be lost."

Curt was appalled. To impersonate, without any preparation whatever, the great racial hero of these alien people! To convince them that he was that hero returned after long ages from the dead!

The audacity of the proposal seemed insane. And he did not know the meaning of all this talk about someone named Vostol, who was apparently Gerdek's opponent and who had proposed some kind of plan. He didn't know anything, Curt thought dismayedly.

"Chief, it's crazy!" Otho echoed his thoughts. "You can't just walk in and say,

'I'm Kaffr!' Why, you can't even speak their language very well yet."

"Please come!" Shiri pleaded. "Your whole mission to this universe depends upon it. I'll explain as we are on our way."

THE agony of pleading on her pale face decided Captain Future. He resolved to take the plunge.

"All right, I'll do as you ask. Do you want the Futuremen to come with me?" "Yes, they must come too. Such superhuman followers will strengthen your assertion that you are the legendary Kaffr." She gestured toward the fat, anxious man hovering nearby.

"Dordo will guard everything here," Shiri explained. "He is utterly loyal to our party."

Her warm fingers closed upon Curt's wrist and she led the way hastily to a door in the wall of the court. They passed through cool, shadowy rooms and halls

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with walls of synthetic white marble and beautiful hangings of woven silk tapestries. The furniture was of shining metal, in bare, austere esthetic designs.

But everything in the place looked old. Dust filmed the bright colors of the tapestries, corrosion stained the metal chairs and couches. The marble floors and walls were crumbling and cracked in many places. All of the rooms had a musty ancient look.

Curt's tall figure kept pace with the hurrying girl. Grag clanked along behind them and Otho hastened excitedly to overtake them. The Brain, cool and imperturbable as always, glided silently in the rear. Hurriedly they passed through the building and emerged from it onto a broad open terrace, into a flood of somber red sunlight.

Captain Future paused, amazed.

"Good Lord, you didn't tell me that the place was like this!"

The Futuremen also halted in startled wonder as their eyes took in the astonishing vista.

"It looks like one of the dome-cities on Pluto, only a thousand times bigger!" Otho exclaimed.

They were looking across a vast and ancient metropolis of white buildings and green verdure. The countless structures of synthetic marble were of rectilinear, flat-roofed architecture, surrounded by colonnades and terraced gardens.

The whole city was enclosed by a gigantic transparent dome, that was supported by many massive columns. Through this vast roof fell the somber, dusky light of a huge dull-red sun now sinking toward the horizon. Outside the hothouse city lay an arctic wilderness of snow and ice, whose frozen white wastes made strange contrast to the warmth and beauty within.

"Please do not delay," begged Shiri, as the Futuremen stared in amazement. "My flyer is waiting — we must hurry!"

The urgency of her plea impelled Curt Newton and his comrades toward the small craft that rested on the terrace. It was a curiously egg-shaped craft less than half the size of the Comet.

They entered it with Shiri. She dropped into a seat at the front and pressed simple controls. The flyer rose in the air with a hum of power.

"This craft operates by propulsion vibrations, like the Comet's high-speed drive," guessed the Brain, glancing at the machinery in the rear.

Shiri nodded.

"We have bigger ships of the same design, star-cruisers designed to travel the great distances between suns. Once we had thousands of such ships that came and went across all our cosmic empire. Now we have only a few left."

"You have more machines and scientific devices than I expected," Otho commented. "You told us that your people's science was almost dead."

"It is almost dead," Shiri answered sadly. "The ships and machines we have were all built long ago. There are few technicians among us now who can even repair them. Things wear out, and are never replaced."

She was driving the little flyer low across the hothouse city. There were other similar flyers abroad beneath the dome, but only a few.

CURT looked down with intense interest that even the coming crucial ordeal could not dull. The city seemed very densely populated. In its streets he could see great numbers of the pale-haired Tarast people, all wearing the silky black garments that seemed universal.

This place was ancient indeed, he saw. Many of the streets and buildings were in disrepair. In the dull red sunset, it all had a depressingly shabby aspect. Even the great dome that arched over the metropolis was itself patched in a number of places.

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Shiri was speaking.

"This city, Bebemos, lies on the equator of the frozen planet Tarasia. For ages, this place has been the capital of the Tarast empire. Here has always met the Council of Suns, which once ruled a domain that included every habitable world in our universe. But that was long ago. Now the Cold Ones hold most of our dying universe, and we really reign over only the worlds of this star-cluster."

"I've got to know what I'll be up against when I face your Council," Curt reminded her urgently. "How can I claim I'm Kaffr, when my appearance, my dress, even my use of your language will all give me away?"

"They'll not betray you," Shiri reassured him. "Remember, it has been millions of years since Kaffr lived. They'd expect him to look and talk differently."

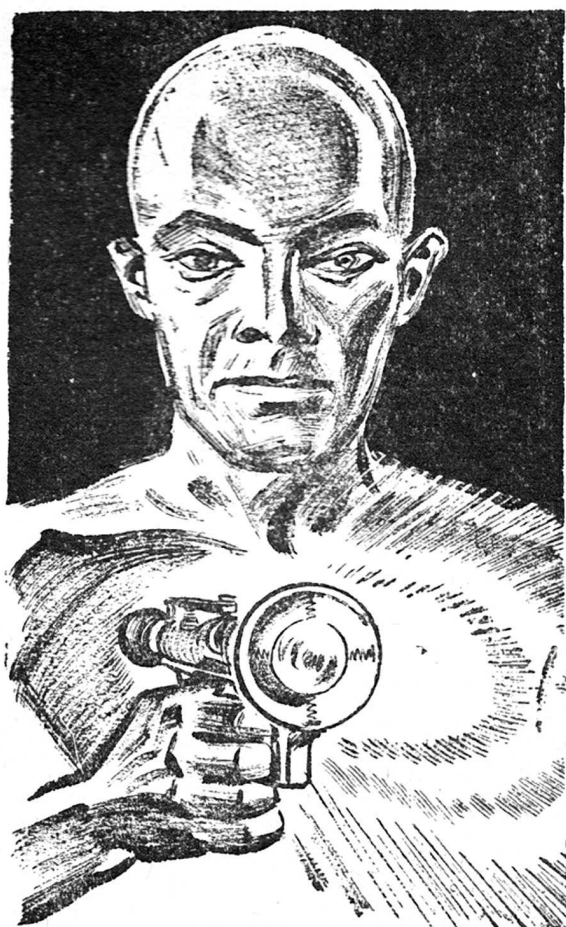
"I still think the whole scheme's whacky!" Otho objected strenuously. "These Tarasts may have decayed in scientific knowledge, but surely they're too intelligent to believe that a man millions of years dead can come back to life!"

"Tell them you were not really dead — only sleeping," Shiri said anxiously. "There're legends that Kaffr never really died, but would return when his people needed him, so it will fit in."

"All our knowledge of Kaffr is really only dim legend," she added. "The tradition is that it was he who first led the Tarast people out to colonize and conquer the rest of the universe. Probably he was really some able leader in the faraway age of our first expansion, whose name survived in dim legend."

"All that's really known about his appearance is that he was red-haired, so you won't be challenged on that."

"But this Vostol you mentioned," Curt persisted. "You say he's an opponent of yours and Gerdek's party. What do you mean by that?"



OTHO

"There's no time to explain fully, for we've almost reached the Hall of Suns," Shiri said rapidly. "You must understand that this cluster of dying stars is all of the universe we Tarasts now hold. The Cold Ones dominate the rest, and are now seeking to conquer this last stronghold of ours. They've established a base somewhere in the outer parts of the cluster, from which they launch frequent attacks on our capital here."

"Recently, the Cold Ones proposed a treaty with us. They would let us in peace, and attack our worlds here no more. In return, we were to agree that we Tarasts would have no more children. Thus our present generation would live in peace and comfort. After it died out, our race would be extinct and the Cold Ones would inherit this cluster, too."

Shiri's violet eyes flashed.

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"Vostol and many others are in favor of accepting this proposal. They say our race will soon become extinct anyway, when our last suns die completely. We might as well have peace and happiness for this last generation, they contend. But Gerdek and I and others like us, who have sought to restore the ancient science, maintain that our dying universe will in time be reborn and that we must keep up the fight against the Cold Ones.

"However, Vostol's arguments have appealed greatly to the Council and the people. It will take a powerful influence to defeat him. You — the legendary Kaffr — may be able to do it."

"Some job you're being handed, Chief," said Otho pessimistically. "What happens to us if they discover you're an impostor?"

"You must not let that happen!" Shiri exclaimed distressedly. "You must guard against any slip, until we can coach you more thoroughly."

Captain Future realized the enormity of the task that was being given him. But there was little time to reflect upon its risky nature. Shiri was guiding the little flyer lower.

"This is the Hall of Suns," she said.

IT WAS a mammoth structure, this building from which once had been directed the government of a whole universe. It towered over the city Bebemos like a man-made mountain, dominating everything.

In cross-section, the great pile was a half moon. In front of its straight side was

a big, crowded plaza, from which rose the giant stone figure of a statue in heroic size. As their craft slanted down past the statue, Curt noticed that the figure represented a man whose strong, idealized face was turned boldly up toward the heavens.

"What is that monument?" he asked the girl, and the answer she gave him over her shoulder startled him.

"It is a statue of Kaffr — of our great racial hero."

Curt Newton felt a sinking sensation. More and more, the audacity of this proposed impersonation unnerved him. How could he manage to pass himself off as that heroic figure who had died long ages ago?

Shiri was landing near a small entrance in the rear or curved side of the Hall of Suns. There had been great crowds of Tarasts on the front plaza, which it was evidently her purpose to avoid.

"This way," she breathed, leading the way out of the flyer.

"There is a passage that leads directly to the stage of the Council Room." Captain Future and his comrades followed her into the building. Curt could not

help noticing that this mastodonic structure was ancient and crumbling, like everything else he had so far seen in the city.

They followed corridors lighted by luminous bands along the walls. They came finally to a door which Shiri opened for a few inches, after making a warning sign.

Curt heard a man's voice, powerful and clear, yet echoing as though through great spaces to his ears. Shiri abruptly grasped Future's hand.

"It is Vostol speaking now to the Council!" she whispered. "He is challenging my brother. Listen!"

Curt bent and peered through the crack of the open door. He found himself looking out into an interior amphitheater of colossal size. Tall windows admitted the dying red light, to illuminate rising tiers of thousands upon thousands of white marble seats.

But most of those seats were empty. In the great, dusty room, only a few hundred Tarast men and women sat in the first tiers. So much had the once-mighty Council of Suns shrunk as its cosmic empire faded.

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The tiers of seats faced a broad stage directly in front of the door through which Curt looked. Upon this stage were three Tarast men. One was an aged chairman who sat with his back to Captain Future. Another of the three was Gerdek, who stood a little to one side, his handsome face tense and almost desperate in expression.

The third man, speaking to the silent hundreds of the Council, held the center of the stage. Vostol, as Shiri had named the speaker, was a young, stalwart man whose voice rang out into the vast, shadowy hall with an accent of earnest conviction.

"I say again that Gerdek and his friends seek to dupe you like children!" Vostol was declaring ringingly. "They tell you a fable of the approaching return of Kaffr, only to ply you to their will. Can a man dead these millions of years come back to life?"

Gerdek spoke in defiant interruption.

"An ordinary man could not. But Kaffr had powers beyond those of ordinary men. All our legends tell us that."

There was a low murmur of agreement from the Council. It was expressive of age-old reverence for the great hero of the Tarasts.

BUT Vostol voiced the incredulity that was on the faces of others.

"Kaffr is a great legend, an heroic legend, but only a legend now," he declared. "I revere his memory. It is Gerdek and his fellow-conspirators who desecrate that memory by their lying assertions that Kaffr is on the eve of returning to our midst."

"He will return," Gerdek insisted desperately. "All the ancient prophecies

predict that when his people need him most, Kaffr will come back to lead them again. And we have found old records of predictions that make it certain the time of his coming is near at hand."

"But when will he come?" Vostol cried.

"If you have proofs that he will come, you must be able to tell us the exact time at which mighty Kaffr will return from the dead."

Gerdek looked trapped and desperate in the face of that demand. The members of the Council were rising to their feet, shouting in an uproar of disputing accusations and assertions.

"It is now or never!" whispered Shiri frantically to Curt Newton.

Curt set his teeth, and strode suddenly out through the door onto the stage. The

Brain and robot and android followed him.

For a moment, in the uproar of shouting dispute, no one noticed them. Then Gerdek's eyes widened as they fell on Captain Future's tall figure. The young Tarast uttered a shout that brought quick silence.

Gerdek pointed a trembling finger dramatically at Curt Newton.

"Kaffr comes back to us this very day," he cried hoarsely. "Kaffr is here now!"

CHAPTER VI

Under the Red Moons

SILENCE born of stupefaction held the vast hall. Dazed amazement was on the face of every Tarast there, as they looked unbelievably at the tall figure of Curt Newton. A shaft of light from the sinking sun struck through the tall windows to touch his red hair to flame. Behind him were grouped the silent figures of the three strange Futuremen.

"Kaffr!" gasped the aged chairman of the Council of Suns, his eyes dilated by an incredulous awe. "It is he! The flame-haired one!"

And a swelling chorus of whispers that throbbed with utter excitement came from the spellbound, staring Council members.

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"Kaffr!"

Curt Newton, confronting those awed white faces, nerved himself for the ordeal. He was about to undertake the most audacious impersonation in history.

That meant that he must speak falsehoods now. He hated that necessity from the bottom of his soul. But he felt that it was justified by the fact that success of this impersonation might mean preservation of this desperate, dying human race.

A babel of cries was coming from the Council members. Confusion of unprecedented excitement reigned. Faces were afire with wild emotion as they looked up at Captain Future.

"Did I not tell you that Kaffr would return?" Gerdek was shouting eagerly. "He has come back to lead us against the Cold Ones!"

Vostol had been stunned and bewildered until now, staring at Curt and his comrades with the same unbelieving awe as the rest. But now Vostol seemed to recover from his first astonishment. A shade of doubt appeared on his aggressive, earnest face.

"How can this man be Kaffr?" he cried. "We all know that Kaffr died millions of years ago. I still say that not even Kaffr could come back from the dead!"

That cry of doubt momentarily checked the excited uproar. Curt saw the first signs of doubt appear on the faces of Council members. He realized that he must assert himself if the impersonation was not to fall through.

"I am Kaffr," Curt said solemnly. "And I did not die, ages ago. I went into a trance of suspended animation from which I have now awakened."

His voice rang out.

"Millions of years ago, I led the Tarast people in their first space-conquests of other worlds. I guided them in laying the foundations of cosmic empire. But I foresaw that a time would come when this

universe would wane and die, and that then I would be sorely needed.

"So I entered that trance of suspended animation, arranging to wake when the remote time had come that would see dire need of my leadership."

Curt gestured toward the silent Brain and robot and android behind him.

"My ancient comrades entered that trance with me, and have awakened with me. They, and I, have come to give our services once more to the Tarast people for whom we fought long ago."

A sigh of deep emotion came from his listeners. And Curt Newton rushed on, seeking to override all doubts in these critical first moments.

"Tell me — are we not needed now?" throbbed his clear voice, his gray eyes sweeping their faces. "Has the time come that I foresaw?"

The aged chairman answered, in a voice that was hoarse with feeling.

"Kaffr, if you are indeed our ancient hero, you come back to us at a truly fateful hour. Our empire is shrunken and dying. This Council of Suns of which I, Igir, am chairman, rules now only over this last cluster of waning stars and worlds that hold the surviving millions of our race.

"This last stronghold of ours is constantly attacked by the hordes of the Cold Ones, unhuman enemies whom the disastrous experiments of a Tarast scientist loosed upon our universe. Their attacks grow ever fiercer. And they say they will not cease these attacks unless we agree to stop having children, so that after this generation our race shall end."

THE old chairman gestured with a trembling hand toward the stalwart figure of Vostol.

"Vostol and many others sincerely believe it would be best to make such a treaty with the Cold Ones; for they say that our race must soon become extinct anyway, when our universe dies

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completely. But Gerdek and others who have sought to revive our once-great science, claim that our universe will be reborn in time and that we must fight on."

Curt Newton had listened tensely. He saw that the moment had come for him to fulfill the purpose of his impersonation.

"Make a treaty with the Cold Ones?" Curt cried in ringing tones. "Make a treaty with deadly enemies? Is it possible that you can dream of doing that? If so, the Tarast race has decayed indeed since the long-gone days when your remote ancestors and I first conquered space!"

His voice flared.

"It is not the Tarast tradition to parley with menacing enemies, but to fight! It was so that we won dominion over other worlds and stars in the days gone by. It is so that you will revive the ancient glory of our all-conquering race!"

Curt's ringing words, the proud, martial appearance of his tall figure and of the grim Futuremen, seemed to act like a bugle-blast upon most of the men before him, reminding them of past glories of their race.

"Kaffr speaks truth!" a young member of the Council yelled. "We are no frightened cowards to cringe before the Cold Ones!"

"With Kaffr to lead us, we'll blast them from the sky!" cried another. "We'll never commit race suicide to buy a craven peace for ourselves."

Gerdek's handsome face was flaming with eager excitement as he saw that Curt's words were winning the day. Shiri had appeared now beside her brother, and was leaning forward to drink in every word.

"Furthermore," rang out Captain Future's clear voice, "I say that the man Gerdek is right. This dying universe will be reborn, in time. My comrades and I can give you scientific proof of it. You have only to hold on against all enemies, and the Tarast empire will rise again."

Shouts of enthusiasm greeted this assertion. Yet Curt's keen eyes noticed that many among the Council looked silent and a little doubtful, now that their first bewildered excitement was passing.

And Vostol was raising his voice above the uproar, demanding that he be heard. "Members of the Council, will you let yourselves be carried away by brave

phrases?" he cried. "We have as yet no proof whatever that this man is really Kaffr." "Proof?" cried an excited Tarast. "His appearance is proof! Not for ages has any man among us had flame-red hair like Kaffr's. And who but Kaffr would have such superhuman comrades as he has?"

"I demand that this man's identity be established by thorough investigation," clamored Vostol.

He was supported now by a number of voices. Other voices cried out angrily against the demand. The hall became a turmoil of excited shouts.

Curt looked tensely at Gerdek. His impersonation would soon be unmasked, if he were forced to undergo searching questioning before Gerdek and Shiri had coached him further.

"The devil!" Otho was hissing. "That Vostol is a born skeptic. They'd all accept you if it weren't for him."

"Shall I shut that fellow up, Chief?" growled Grag.

"No — hold it," Curt whispered. "I've got to carry this through somehow." At this tense moment, the tumultuous argument in the great room was interrupted. A wild-eyed Tarast guard, gripping in his hand a gunlike weapon, came bursting in with a shout.

"The crowds outside the Hall of Suns have gone crazy!" yelled the officer. "They've heard that Kaffr has returned, and they're mad with excitement. The whole city is gathering!"

NIGHT had fallen outside. But through the tall windows came a

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deep, roaring sound like the thunder of distant surf. Tens of thousands of voices were shouting out there.

"Kaffr! Kaffr!" came the cry.

"They'll be pouring in here in a moment if Kaffr doesn't appear!" warned the guard officer. "They're insane with joy."

Igir, the old chairman, looked irresolutely at Curt. "Then you must show yourself to the people, Kaffr."

"I protest!" flared Vostol. "It has not yet been proved that this man is the ancient hero."

"Listen to that crowd!" cried Gerdek. "The Tarast people do not need proofs — they know that the prophecies of legend have been fulfilled and that Kaffr has come back to save them. The mere sight of him will give them new courage."

Curt Newton felt an inner recoil from the necessity that faced him. It was one thing to impersonate the ancient hero before the Council. It was another thing to delude a whole people.

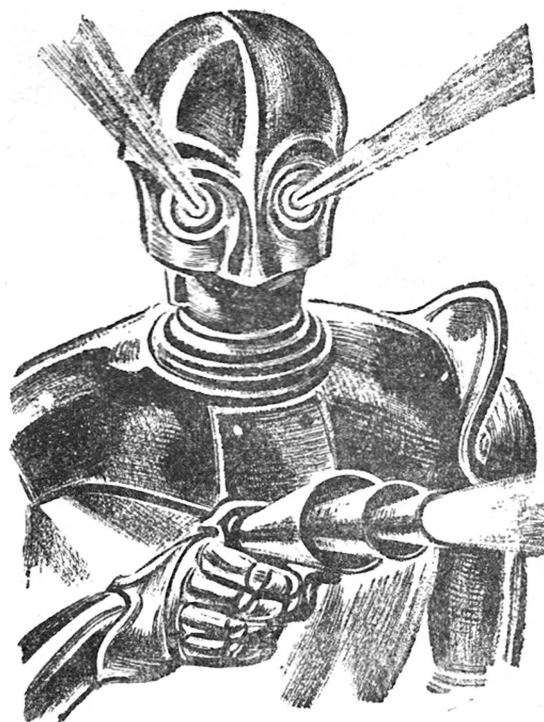
But this was why he had come across dimensional abysses to this universe. His imposture had no profit for himself. Indeed, he was risking his life to inspire these people and preserve them from extinction. He must go through with the job.

"I am Kaffr, and I will speak to my people!" Curt declared in high, vibrant tones. "Are there any doubters here who would dare try to prevent me?"

He stepped forward as he spoke, with the Futuremen following him closely. He moved down off the great stage and up the aisle of the amphitheater in the direction from which the — guard officer had come.

And the Council made way for him. Some there might be among them who doubted, yet superstitious awe made them step hastily back to clear a path for that proud, tall red-haired figure and his three grim friends.

Gerdek and Shiri were close behind



GRAG

Curt. And the whole Council fell in instantly after them, sweeping along in a tumult of electric excitement that drowned the persistent protests of Vostol's party.

"So far, you're carrying it off," said Gerdek under his breath, his breathing quick with tension. "But for the sake of the gods, don't make any slips! Vostol would seize on them at once."

Lights were shining along the halls, and Tarast guards with awed reverence in their eyes saluted Curt Newton as he passed. He emerged at the head of the excited party onto a terrace outside the Hall of Suns.

Night lay over Bebemos. Lights were gleaming all across the ancient capital. And through the dim curve of transparent roof high overhead came the lurid light of two dull-red moons that were climbing into the sky.

The great plaza in front of the mammoth building was packed with a surging throng of countless thousands. They swirled and eddied around the colossal statue and against the front of the building. The light falling upon them revealed a sea of white faces that were all turned as one toward Curt Newton as he

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appeared.

The clamor of that tremendous throng died to a dead, absolute silence at his appearance. For a long moment that hush was uncanny. In it, the vast throng stared up at the tall, red-haired figure in the terrace. And then —

"Kaffr!"

That thunderous shout hit Curt in the face like a stunning wave of sound. It had in it a mad rejoicing almost beyond expression.

It was the cry of a people who looked out of a deepening shadow of cosmic doom and saw a savior. It was the cry of men who saw their hero of ages of ancient tradition, face to face.

"Kaffr has returned!"

CURT NEWTON quailed inwardly under the impact of that tremendous greeting. It was not really for him, that frantic acclaim. It was for the hero of the dim past, the man whose statue loomed high in the dark.

But the agony of entreaty on the faces of Shiri and Gerdek steadied Curt. He raised his hand commandingly for silence.

"Yes, my people, Kaffr has awakened from long sleep to return to you in this hour of peril," rang his clear voice.

It almost seemed to Curt Newton, as he spoke, that the spirit of the real Kaffr was somehow whispering the words to him from the dead.

"I have returned to counsel you in this great crisis of our racial history," he went on. "And my first counsel is, not to despair or surrender to doom. The valor of our race won cosmic empires for us long ago, and it will save us now."

A flaming shout of utter faith and loyalty answered him. Again he raised his hand for quiet. But as the roar of the vast crowd ebbed, it was suddenly succeeded by a new and nerve-chilling sound.

A piercing, wailing note rose from somewhere atop the Hall of Suns,

climbing in rapid crescendo to a screaming shriek that echoed across Bebemos like a chorus of demons. Within a moment, that eerie warning drowned out all other sounds.

"The raid warning!" cried old Igir, his face wild with alarm. "It means another attack by the Cold Ones!"

A Tarast officer came racing out of the building, saluting.

"A strong force of Cold One ships reported off Tarasia, heading toward

Bebemos!" he reported to the old chairman.

Curt found Gerdek at his side in the wild confusion. The young Tarast was explaining feverishly.

"The Cold Ones have attacked Bebemos several times recently — they seek to shatter the roof that alone makes life possible here. They'll be on us in a few moments. It is up to you to lead the defense."

"But everything here is unfamiliar to me!" Captain Future exclaimed. "I don't know anything about your weapons or defenses —"

"It's a fight, and that's all we need to know!" cried Otho, his slant-green eyes glittering with sudden excitement.

"Just tell the people to take their defense posts — they all know what to do!" Gerdek whispered hastily to Curt.

Captain Future quickly followed the suggestion. His raised hand brought silence except for the continual eerie shriek of the warning.

"People of Bebemos, to your stations!" he shouted. "Let me see tonight whether you can fight as your ancestors fought ages ago!"

The irresolution and startled panic of the throng instantly evaporated and there crashed out a yell of confidence and courage.

"We obey, Kaffr! With you to lead us, we'll destroy them when they come!" The scene became one of uproar and confusion

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as the crowd broke up, men

running in every direction to their stations of defense. Flyers roared low across the roofs of the city, and the screaming signal of warning never abated for a moment.

Tarast soldiery, armed with the gunlike weapons, were racing toward the giant columns that supported the great dome. Curt found himself and the Futuremen led hastily along by Gerdek and Shiri toward one of those great pillars.

"My station is in Turret Fourteen, and you had best stay with me," Gerdek was saying as they ran. "Hurry!"

Curt Newton was more than a little bewildered by the rush of events in this totally unfamiliar place. He understood nothing of the plans of attack or defense utilized by the opposing forces.

But he realized the desperate urgency of the moment. Without asking for further explanations, he accompanied Gerdek and Shiri. They reached the big pillar that was their destination. It was hollow, and inside it was an atomic-powered elevator. They shot rapidly upward.

THE car stopped. They emerged from it into a big turret that jutted up like a large blister from the curve of the domed roof. There were other turrets here and there over the roof, and they had transparent walls like the dome itself. From each turret protruded long gun muzzles.

Tarast soldiers were already at their posts at the guns here in Turret Fourteen. They wore space-suits, and Gerdek hastily snatched other suits from a rack and handed them to Curt and the Futuremen.

"Suits on!" he warned. "If the Cold Ones shatter the walls of this turret, the bitter cold outside would paralyze you at once."

"I don't need any suit," growled Grag, tossing aside the garment disdainfully. The Brain was watching with his usual

imperturbability.

Curt and Otho followed the example of Gerdek and his sister in donning the suits and transparent helmets. Inside each helmet was an all-wave interphone to make conversation possible at short ranges.

"There they come!" yelled one of the Tarasts. He was pointing up toward the sky.

Captain Future looked up tensely through the turret's transparent wall. The scene was weird, with the two moons dripping bloody light upon the vast, curved dome of Bebemos.

Down through the lurid light, long, slim craft were swooping with unbelievable swiftness upon the city. Curt's heart hammered. The Cold Ones, the mysterious spawn of icy night who had overrun almost all this universe!

Guns of turrets all across the roof spat streams of small shells toward the diving ships. The shells, Curt realized at once, were atom-shells containing a charge of unstable matter that was released into a flare of atomic force wherever they struck.

The flares danced like lightning amid the diving attackers. Ships of the Cold Ones sagged and fell to crash on the roof. By the flares of their own destruction, Curt glimpsed their incredible nature.

"Good God, those spaceships are open!" he cried. "They're just fast space-sleds. How can their crews survive in airless space?"

"The Cold Ones do not need air to breathe," Gerdek said from the breech of the gun he was handling. "Ha — we got that one!"

But the diving attackers were loosing a hot fire of similar atom-shells as they swooped. They seemed to concentrate their fire on the gun turrets. The flares bit holes in the tough substance of the dome.

Captain Future glimpsed, through the battle's mad confusion, a half score of space-sleds that swooped headlong to a

reckless landing on the roof near a neighboring turret. He saw a horde of white, weird-looking figures jump from the sleds to attack that turret.

"They're trying to take Turret Thirteen!" yelled Gerdek in alarm. "If they take it, they'll use its own guns on the dome."

He tore open a door in the wall of their own turret. "We've got to stop that!" Gerdek exclaimed. "Come on!"

Captain Future needed no second invitation. He had been itching to get into this fight, and here was the chance.

With Grag and Otho and Gerdek, and half the Tarast soldiers in their crew, they pitched out of their stronghold and ran across the surface of the vast dome toward the fight around Turret Thirteen.

Curt's proton pistol spat thin, dazzling rays of destruction into the vague horde of white figures hammering at the threatened turret. Otho too was shooting as he ran, and Gerdek and his soldiers were using their weapons to loose little, flaring atom-shells.

The Cold Ones turned savagely to meet this new attack. In the mingled light of the two red moons and the battle's dancing flares, the appearance of the attackers became clear to Curt for the first time.

"They're devils!" screeched Otho in horrified amazement. "Look at them!" The Cold Ones were indeed ghastly figures. Their bodies were of human size

and shape but they were not of flesh. They were of bone, gleaming, hard white bodies with skull-like heads from which two uncanny eyes looked forth with fixed, unwinking glare. They looked, indeed, horribly like human men changed by some dreadful metamorphosis into ossified creatures.

CHAPTER VII

On a Dead World

GRAG was in the thick of the fight around Turret Thirteen before he realized the enemy's uncanny nature. The big robot had plunged into the melee with a will, disdaining the use of any weapons except his own mighty metal fists. Those fists smashed into the vague white figures of the Cold Ones with shattering effect.

Then, by the mingled light of the red moons and the exploding atom-shells, Grag saw his antagonists more clearly. At the same time came the amazed cries of Captain Future and Otho. The robot felt an equal astonishment.

"Jumping imps of Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "What are these things?"

The bodies of white bone, the skull-like, fleshless heads and faces, the glaring, unwinking eyes seemed born of a nightmare.

Captain Future's shout rallied Grag from his astonishment. "Drive them away from the turret!" Curt was shouting.

The robot pitched into the fight. It had now become a swirling combat that seethed around the threatened Turret Thirteen. Cold Ones seeking to force their way into that turret had been taken by surprise by Gerdek's Tarasts and the Futuremen. The atom-guns of the defenders had already scythed down many of the weird, bony invaders.

The Cold Ones turned, using their own hand atom-guns. Deadly flares of force exploded all through the melee. Space-suited men and alien invaders slipped and staggered on the smooth roof. The raiders from the sky were still hotly attacking all over domed Bebemos.

Grag's metal fists smashed into skull-faces like pile-drivers. The robot felt bony heads split and shatter beneath his blows. Atom-shells whizzed past him. The scene

was a chaos of nightmare combat under the bloodlike light of the two climbing moons.

The Cold Ones who had landed on the roof gave back before the fierce attack of Tarasts and Futuremen, Their attempt to rush Turret Thirteen having been broken, they hastily retreated now toward their parked space-sleds. The whole great raid on Bebemos seemed to be ebbing.

"Don't let 'em get away!" Captain Future was yelling.

Curt and Otho were wielding their proton pistols with deadly effect. Cold Ones were falling like ripe grain before the reaper.

Grag had plunged forward after the retreating enemy. He overtook a group of

sudden jerk, and hit the deck with an impact that momentarily stunned him. He woke to sudden realization that a heavy metal cable was being hastily wrapped around his body.

"What the devil!" he roared ragingly, trying to get up and resume the fight.

It was too late. During the moment he had been dazed, the Cold Ones on the space-sled had seized the opportunity to bind him.

Furiously, Grag sought to break his bonds. Even his gigantic strength could not accomplish it. The metal cable was thick and strong, evidently having been designed for towing the space-sled in emergencies.

"Captured!" thought Grag furiously.

*Captain Future and His Companions Battle for Survival on an
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IN

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COMING NEXT ISSUE



them who were hastily leaping into their parked space-sled — a long, open, flat-decked craft with low side walls.

Booming his battle-cry, Grag jumped into the low craft after the escaping Cold Ones. One of the creatures was already twisting controls of the machinery at the stem. The space-sled suddenly rushed up from the roof into the night, with tremendous acceleration.

Grag was flung from his feet by the

"Captured by a lot of living skeletons!" The space-sled was climbing into the night sky at a terrific rate. Its motive power appeared to be an electromagnetic vibration drive produced by the machinery at the stern. Such a drive, Grag knew, could achieve speeds many times the velocity of light.

The Comet was equipped with the same means of propulsion.

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ALL the other space-sleds of the Cold Ones raiders were rising through the night also. They had broken off the attack on Bebemos, apparently having failed in an effort to take the Tarasts by surprise. They shot in close formation out into open space, and started at high speed through the cluster of dead and dying suns.

"This is a nice fix to get into," Grag thought ruefully. "Wonder why they captured me instead of trying to kill me?"

He observed his captors more closely. He saw that these Cold Ones were not really skeletal figures, though he had applied that term to them in his rage. The arms, legs and torsos of the creatures were of human shape and size. But they seemed of solid white bone instead of flesh. The blank, bony faces of the skull-like heads were hideously noseless, though they had a mouth opening between hinged jaws.

The Cold Ones wore no clothing, except a harness of straps from which depended their hand atom-guns. Each had snapped his harness to a ring in the deck, and had secured Grag to a similar ring. Though their space-sled was now out in open, airless space, and though they had no protection at all from the cold void, the creatures seemed unaffected.

"They don't breathe air, any more than I do," thought Grag. "So they don't need to close in their spacecraft. And cold doesn't seem to bother them any more than it does me."

Two of the Cold Ones approached Grag's bound figure, snapping their harnesses to rings closer to him. They inspected him with those glaring, unwinking eyes that were horribly like big, pale jewels.

"This isn't a human like the Tarasts," Grag clearly heard one of the Cold Ones remark to the other. "Yet it was fighting for them. What can it be?"

"What do you mean, I'm not human?" bellowed Grag angrily. It was his most sensitive point. "Why, you skull-faced

sons of perdition —"

He stopped suddenly, for he realized that out here in airless space his words could not carry to his captors. Then how in the world had he been able to hear the Cold Ones speak to each other, he wondered.

"If this creature is really a new device of the Tarasts," one of the Cold Ones was now telling the other, "it would be well for us to investigate it thoroughly. That is why I ordered you to capture it instead of destroying it. We'll take it to Commander Njdd, at advance base."

Grag abruptly realized that in speaking to one another, the Cold Ones did not move their bony jaws. The fact was that his captors were not really speaking at all, though at first he had thought they were. They were conversing telepathically, and his brain caught their thoughts.

These creatures, the robot now perceived, would be wholly unable to communicate were it not for their well-developed telepathic faculty. For they spent most of their lives in airless voids where sound was impossible.

The two now left Grag to his own devices, and returned to the stern of the flying space-sled. Grag made another furious effort to burst the cable wrapped around him, but with the same negative result. He gave it up and twisted around to see where they were going.

The space-sleds of the Cold Ones, about forty ships in all, were flying at tremendous velocity through a veritable jungle of dead and dying suns. All about them in space were black, dead suns with frozen planets, and here and there an occasional star that still glowed redly with waning light. They were passing out through the close-packed cluster at the heart of which the capital of the Tarasts was situated.

Grag remembered that his captors had just mentioned an advance base to which they were now returning. He recalled also

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that Gerdek had referred to a base which the Cold Ones had established somewhere in this cluster, and from which they launched their frequent attacks.

"And when we get there, someone named Commander Njdd is going to look me over," Grag thought indignantly. "The idea of these bony horrors talking about me as though I was only a machine of some kind!"

HE WAS too occupied by resentment to feel any apprehension over his own fate. Grag never did worry much about his personal safety, anyway. He had sublime confidence in his ability to take care of himself.

"Though I'd better think of something soon," he realized worriedly, "or else the Chief will get anxious about me."

For hours, the Cold One raiders flew through the void at a velocity inconceivable for anything except vibration-drive ships. They approached the outer edge of the cluster. Beyond it lay dark and awesome deeps of space in which only a few scattered, dying stars relieved the gloom. This universe was, indeed, a dying one.

The raiders were now decelerating their speed. Their destination appeared to be a dead star at the edge of the cluster. It was a black, huge cinder whose fires were long since quenched. Around it revolved three small planets, all of which were sheathed in perpetual ice.

The space-sleds of the Cold Ones swept toward the third planet. They dropped rapidly through somber dusk toward its icy surface. There was no whistle of air, for this frozen world was too cold to have gaseous atmosphere.

"So this is their advance base," muttered Grag. "Wonder if the Tarasts know where it is. I suppose not, or they'd attack it."

He looked down, and saw with some surprise that upon the frozen white surface

of this planet of perpetual night there lay a large city. The Cold One raiders were descending to land in an open square at its center.

The queer ships came smoothly to rest upon level ice. The captors of Grag did not unbind the robot, but rolled him off their space-sled and then dragged him across the icy surface of the square.

"This is a fine thing — hauling me around as though I were a pile of junk metal," thought Grag disgustedly.

He managed to look around as he was dragged across the square. It was dark as night on this dead, icy world. The only illumination was that which came from the cluster of dying red suns that stretched in a great drift across the black sky.

There were hundreds of Cold Ones about. Scores of the low space-sleds were parked in the square and adjoining streets. And Grag now discovered that this city had once been a Tarast city. Its white marble structures were of the same architecture as that of Bebemos.

But it was a city of unutterable desolation and death, now. Long ago, it must have been abandoned by the Tarasts when the sun of this system had died. Ice was thick upon the marble roofs and upon the open spaces that had once been sunny, gracious gardens.

The unhuman, bony figures of the Cold Ones moving in it only intensified the somber effect.

GRAG was hauled into a marble building, which was obviously being used as the headquarters of this advance base. It was lighted by glowing bulbs, and in it a Cold One who wore a gleaming badge of office sat behind a table upon which was an unfamiliar apparatus.

"How went the raid on Bebemos, Ystl?" the creature asked the leader of Grag's captors.

Grag clearly caught the thought-impression of that telepathic question, and

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as clearly received his captor Ystl's answer.

"It was not very successful, Commander Njdd. Their patrols evidently warned them of our approach, for the Tarasts gave us a hot reception and we were unable to inflict any heavy damage on the city dome."

"Nevertheless," remarked Njdd telepathically, "these constant raids will wear down the Tarasts and influence them into accepting our proposed treaty."

The creature turned his hideously blank, bony white face toward the prostrate figure of Grag, inspecting him with unwinking eyes.

"What is that thing you have brought here, Ystl?"

"We don't know just what it is" Grag's captor explained. "It seems alive, though it's metal. It fought for the Tarasts with great strength, but we captured it. I thought we ought to bring it back to you for close inspection."

GRAG broke into the conversation, thinking angrily at the two Cold Ones who were staring at him with such infuriating superiority.

"You'll find out what I am when I get my hands loose! I'll mop up this base of yours so you'll think a meteor hit it!"

Njdd, the commander of the base, made a slight movement of surprise. "Did you receive that thought, Ystl? This thing not only has life, it also has intelligence of a sort."

The commander seemed to make a decision.

"I am going to call Supreme Headquarters about this. They'll know at Thool what to do about it."

Njdd went to the apparatus on the table. It was a compact square box upon the face of which was a single shining knob.

The commander touched switches. Then he leaned forward and appeared to be staring intently at the shining knob. In

reality, he was projecting his thoughts toward the object, for Grag was able to catch them.

"Commander Njdd at Advance Base in Cluster Two-twenty-eight, calling Supreme Headquarters on the world Thool!"

In a moment, there came a sharp thought-message that appeared to emanate directly from the shining knob.

"Headquarters answering. What have you to report?"

Grag began to understand. That square apparatus was a telepathic transmitter of some kind, designed to permit the transmission of ordinary telepathic messages across immense distances.

It was not hard for the robot to guess that Thool was the capital of the Cold Ones' power. It might lie far across this dying universe which the Cold Ones had almost completely overrun.

Njdd was delivering into the teletransmitter a concise account of the capture of Grag, and a description of the robot. There was a pause, and then came the reply.

"The captive you have taken is apparently a robot such as were manufactured by Tarast scientists in the past. It is not human but can be used to serve humans. It is possible the Tarasts mean to make many of them to use against us. Therefore, you

will ship the creature to us at Thool for examination, by the next patrol boat that you send in with reports."

Grag broke into an explosion of mental fury.

"What do they mean, I'm not human? I warned you fellows about making cracks like that!"

Njdd had turned off the teletransmitter. He paid no attention to the robot's mental outburst as he directed an order at Ystl.

"Put the creature in one of the empty rooms and keep it bound. A patrol boat

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leaves for Thool tomorrow, and we'll send the thing on it."

The commander added his cold commendation.

"You did well to capture instead of destroying it, Ystl. I shall see that your meritorious action is brought to the attention of the Highest, himself."

Grag was dragged out of the lighted room and through a corridor that was part of the ancient building. He was hauled unceremoniously into a dusky, empty room and left there.

He lay, swearing to himself. It would be worse if the Cold Ones took him away to their distant, mysterious capital of Thool. Grag bestirred himself to find a way of escape.

His arms were bound tightly against his body by the thick metal cable. But by herculean efforts, he managed to twist one arm so that his right hand reached a certain part of his metal torso.

"Ah, that's better," grunted Grag. "Now if I can only get it open —"

There was a tiny locker built into Crag's metal side at that point. It contained small tools with which he kept his mechanical body in repair. He squirmed now to slide open the door of the little locker.

He got it open, and his fingers drew out a small file. He used it ordinarily to smooth out small dents in his metal hide. Now, he hoped to cut with it the cable that trussed him. The difficulty was that with his arms so tightly bound against him, he could hardly move the file.

WITH his super-strong fingers, he clumsily drew the file back and forth against the cable. His movement was so cramped that he could hardly make an impression on the tough cable. But he kept it up.

Grag could hear no sounds on this airless world. But he did receive vibrations through the floor. They told

him of space-sleds landing or taking off outside the building, of Cold Ones moving nearby. None looked in at him, however. They assumed the heavy cable would hold him.

He had toilsomely filed half through the cable when he was startled by the appearance of a figure at the door. It was not a Cold One who looked in at him. It was a human — a young man in space-suit and helmet.

"Are you the prisoner the Cold Ones just brought back?" asked the man, staring in wonder at Grag's prone, mighty metal figure.

His question was audible to Grag. For Grag's electro-mechanical speech and hearing apparatus could receive from a space-suit phone.

"You're a prisoner, too?" Grag replied eagerly. "You must be one of the Tarasts." "Yes, I am a Tarast and my name is Lacq," the other told him.

"Good, we'll get out of here together!" Grag exclaimed. "Here, you can help file away the rest of this cable."

Then Grag remembered with sudden alarm:

"Say, won't the Cold Ones in the front of the building catch our thoughts as we talk?" he asked.

"No. A thought-impression can be received only by one who concentrates his mind upon it," Lacq assured him. The young Tarast then asked, "Do I understand you to say that you're managing to cut your bonds?"

"Yes, and in a few minutes I'll be free. Then we'll crash out of here and grab one of those space-sleds for a getaway," Grag exulted. "I think I can start one of those craft."

"Wait here — I'll be back in a moment," Lacq said suddenly, and disappeared from the doorway.

In a minute the young Tarast was back. And with him came four of the Cold Ones. Lacq pointed accusingly at Grag.

"You see, it is as I told you!" declared the young Tarast telepathically to the bony creatures. "Your new captive has almost cut through his bonds."

Grag was astounded, then enraged.

"Why, you dirty traitor!" he cried to Lacq. "You're not a prisoner of the Cold Ones. You're working with them!"

CHAPTER VIII

Trail to Danger

CAPTAIN FUTURE, in the midst of that mad melee on the city roof, had glimpsed Grag rashly charging after the retreating Cold Ones. At once, he had realized the robot's peril. He shouted a warning as Grag rushed onto one of the enemy's low space-sleds.

The warning came late. As Curt plunged forward in alarm, that space-sled took off with a rush. Almost at once, it was out of sight in the lurid red moonlight. The other surviving Cold Ones who had landed for the abortive attack on Turret Thirteen were tumbling into their craft and escaping also.

"They're breaking off the raid!" Gerdek shouted with heartfelt relief in his voice. "See, they retreat everywhere."

All across the vast domed roof of the city of Bebemos, the battle was dying

away as the raiders turned and raced back out into space. The turret guns poured a last volley after them.

"They've got Grag!" Curt announced dismally. "He was on one of those space-sleds when they took off."

Otho exclaimed in alarm.

"Chief, what'll we do?" he cried. "We can't leave old Grag in the hands of those skull-faced devils!"

"We won't, never fear," Captain Future declared resolutely. "We'll get him away from them, even if we have to follow them

across this whole universe."

It was the unswerving loyalty of the Futuremen to one another that now came to the fore, the one-for-all and all-for-one spirit that made Curt Newton's little band such a formidable quartet of adventurers.

"Otho, go down and get the Comet and bring it up here at once," he ordered the android urgently. "We may be able to overtake those raiders."

"I'll go with him," Shiri volunteered, "and show him how to get your ship out of the city through the airlock in the dome."

Otho and the girl raced away upon their mission. The Tarast soldiers who had taken part in the fight were now hastily forming repair crews and spreading out to fix the small punctures in the dome.

"Is it wise for you to leave Bebemos now?" Gerdek was asking Curt worriedly. "Remember, you're Kaffr. The people expect your leadership —"

"As Kaffr, the only way I can really help your people is to find some powerful weapon against the Cold Ones," Curt replied quickly. "You need some weapon that will counterbalance your enemies' great numerical superiority. That's the only way you'll ever really defeat them."

"The first step in devising such a weapon is to reconnoiter the advance base of the Cold Ones, ascertain the most practicable method of attack. That fits in with the necessity of rescuing Grag."

"But we don't know where the Cold Ones' base is in this cluster," said Gerdek helplessly. "All we know is that their raids come always from the western part of the cluster."

"That makes it tougher," Curt admitted. "Still, we may be able to overtake them before the trail is lost in this jungle of suns."

The Brain, who had been hovering over the broken bodies of the slain Cold Ones called to Captain Future.

"Lad, look at these creatures. I never saw anything just like them."

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Curt Newton joined him and examined the shattered bodies with intense interest. He realized at once that these inhuman creatures who could live in an airless void were of a startling new order of creation.

The broken white bodies and limbs were composed almost wholly of rigid bone. The only parts not of osseous tissue were elastic, cartilaginous ligaments inside the hollow limbs, and the eyes and brain. The eyes were lenses of transparent cartilage. And the brain exposed by the shattering of one skull-like head was an organ of hard gristle.

"We can look these over later," Captain Future said hastily. "Here comes Otho with the Comet."

THE small ship of the Futuremen was streaking across the dome toward them. It landed quickly, and the door swung open.

"You and Shiri come along," Curt told Gerdek. "I'll need you to guide us in this cluster of suns, as far as you can."

Gerdek was worried.

"Vostol will be challenging your identity during our absence," he said. "The people and many of the Council are convinced that you are Kaffr, but he is not convinced. Our absence may tell against you."

"We'll worry about Vostol when we get back," Curt answered confidently. "So far, my impersonation of Kaffr is succeeding all right."

The Comet shot up from the glittering roof of Bebemos, angling steeply skyward across the icy wastes that surrounded the hothouse city. Curt and Gerdek divested themselves of the space-suits and went forward to the control room, where Otho sat at the space-stick, with Shiri near him.

Otho's little mascot Oog was rubbing himself rejoicingly against his master's ankle. But the other pet, Eek the moon-pup, ran anxiously from one to the other in vain search of its own master.

"The little mutt misses Grag," Otho commented. He looked inquiringly around at Captain Future. "What course shall I follow, Chief?"

They were already out in space. Curt peered keenly into the drift of clustered dead and dying suns that spanned the black firmament.

"A little north of west, toward that pair of very faint stars," he directed. "I was watching Grag's captors when they disappeared, and they went in that direction. Use all speed, and we may overtake them."

Otho had switched into the high-speed vibration drive. The generators of the Comet were shaking the ship with their quivering drone. The little craft was now being hurled forward at a speed far in excess of that of light, by the powerful propulsion waves it jetted back.

Curt tensely scanned the vault ahead. They were flying almost due west into the great pack of clustered suns. Had they been young, living stars, it would have been a blaze of glory. But as it was the scene was depressingly somber with its vista of smoldering, old red stars and frigid worlds, and cold black embers of wholly dead suns.

Captain Future swept the void with the powerful telescopes of the control-room equipment but saw nothing of the Cold One raiders. It became apparent that they were too late now to overtake the enemy force.

"What'll we do, Chief?" Otho asked anxiously. "We can't very well search this whole wilderness of suns and worlds."

Curt turned to Gerdek and his sister.

"Tell me, what's the most desolate and least-visited section of this cluster?" Gerdek pointed a little to the right, where there was a region at the edge of the cluster composed completely of dead stars.

"That dead region there," he answered. "We Tarasts abandoned it years ago, for

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its worlds are too cold now even for our domed cities."

"Then head for that sector, Otho," ordered Captain Future. "It seems the most logical region for an advanced base of the Cold Ones. If their base is there, we may be able to pick up the trail."

As the Comet flew on a changed course toward the dark sector in question, little Eek pressed forward against the control-room window with pitiable eagerness. The moon-pup seemed to sense they were hunting Grag.

Otho swore to himself as he looked at the somber, lifeless vista of dead suns ahead.

"Only a bunch of cursed nightmares like those Cold Ones could live in such a place. What are the creatures, anyway? They don't breathe, they have no flesh, yet they somehow look human."

"The human resemblance was very strong in those dead ones I examined," commented the Brain in his rasping voice. "It seemed to me that the creatures might be a strange variant or mutant of ordinary humanity."

"Your guess is right," Gerdek told him. "The Cold Ones came originally from our own human stock in this universe."

Captain Future was astonished.

"The devil you say! You mean that natural evolution produced such a quasi-human race?"

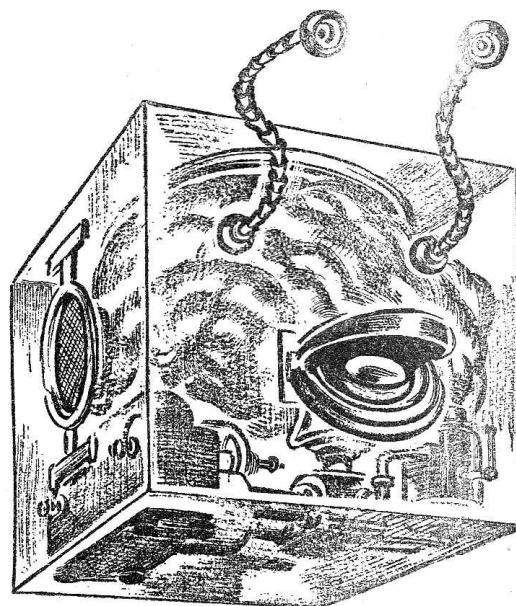
"No, it was not natural evolution that produced them," Gerdek answered gloomily. "It was artificial evolution."

CURT suddenly remembered something.

"Now that I think of it, old Igir said something at the Council about the Cold Ones being loosed upon this universe long ago, by the disastrous experiments of a Tarast scientist. Is that what you're talking about?"

Gerdek nodded.

"That was their origin," he said. "It



THE BRAIN

happened thousands of years ago. At that time the Tarast empire still held sway over almost all this universe. But already many of our suns were dying, and we were faced with the shadow of doom that has since become so dreadful. In those days Tarast science was still great. And our greatest scientists sought a means of combatting the growing menace of cold and night.

"One of those scientists was a man named Zuur, native of the world Thool that lies far across the universe from here. The sun of Thool was one of the first to die, and its people were transferred to other planets. But Zuur remained in his laboratories on frozen Thool, seeking a solution to the great problem facing our people.

"Zuur had a daring plan in mind. He foresaw that almost all our suns would soon be dead, and our planets cold and airless. He wanted to adapt the Tarast race to live under such conditions. His idea was to cause an artificial evolution of our human people into a new race which would be able to live on cold, airless planets.

"He was an expert in the technique of causing artificial mutations. He used that technique on certain Tarasts who had

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volunteered for the experiment, and produced thus a radical new mutation of the human stock. The mutants were humans completely fleshless and bloodless, their osseous bodies requiring only a few mineral elements for food.

"They could exist in airless space because they were not oxygen breathers. Cold meant nothing to them, for their bodies had no blood or liquids to freeze."

"So that was the origin of the Cold Ones," murmured Captain Future with deep interest.

"Holy sun-imps, you ought to have murdered that guy Zuur for turning loose such a bunch on you!" Otho exclaimed.

"Zuur met death at the hands of his own creations," Gerdek said somberly. "He did not realize what a malign species he had created until they turned and destroyed him. Their minds, like their bodies, were not really human, and they were dominated only by a cold lust for conquest."

"They multiplied swiftly on that world Thool, appropriating the scientific knowledge of us Tarasts," he concluded heavily. "Then they spread out to other worlds, conquering star after star until now they rule almost all this universe from their capital on distant Thool."

"If they're as numerous in this universe as you say, it's going to be hard to find a way of crushing them," Curt said thoughtfully.

"You must find such a way," Shiri told him anxiously. "The Tarast people feel that they are saved, now that Kaffr has returned."

CURT NEWTON felt the burden of impersonation heavier than ever. He began to comprehend the tremendous responsibilities he had taken upon himself in announcing that he was the ancient hero.

"We've reached that dark region, Chief," reported Otho at this moment.

"Which way now?"

Captain Future stared a little baffledly into the wilderness of wholly black star-cinders that occupied this edge of the cluster.

"There's no sign of the Cold One raiders who took Grag," he said. "We'll have to quarter back and forth through this sector and search for their base."

Gerdek was skeptical.

"It would take years to examine every frozen planet in this sector. And unless we search each planet, how will we ever find them?"

"If the Cold Ones have a base here, as we think, their ships will come and go from time to time," Curt pointed out. "Once we spot one of their craft, we can trail it."

He realized the slenderness of the chance, as well as any of his companions. But no other plan of action seemed to offer even a remote hope of success.

OTHO sent the Comet veering to the left, to begin the toilsome task of quartering through the somber dead region. The change of course appeared to upset Eek. The little moon-pup had until now been pressing eagerly forward against the window. Now he began to run back and forth and to evidence strong signs of distress. "Wait a minute, Otho!" Curt called suddenly as he observed the moon-pup's distressed excitement. "Turn back to the right. I believe that Eek is trying to show us the right trail."

"You don't mean to say that little creature has any idea which way the raiders went?" said Gerdek incredulously.

"Eek has some queer powers," Curt told him. "He belongs to a species that are non-breathing also, and that have developed extra-sensory faculties to compensate for their lack of speech. Eek is always able to find Grag, somehow. Maybe he can again, even at these distances."

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Otho had turned back to their former course.

"Well, what does the little mutt say about this direction?"

Curt saw that Eek had ceased his alarmed antics with the change in course, and again was straining eagerly against the window.

"This seems to be the right direction, if that moon-pup is to be believed," Curt reported. "Keep on this course for the time being."

"So now I'm piloting under Eek's orders," growled Otho disgustedly. "That's a nice state of affairs!"

The Comet flew deeper into the dark region. They passed majestic, black spheres that once had been flaming suns, and ice-sheathed smaller globes that long ago had been green with life.

After an hour's flight, Curt again ordered Otho to change course as Eek began to strain toward the right window. The moon-pup's queer homing-pigeon faculties seemed operating more positively now.

They approached a gloomy dead sun near the outer edge of the cluster. It had three small, icy planets, and Eek figuratively exploded with excitement when they began to draw near to the outermost world.

"That third planet is where Grag is, if the moon-pup is right," Curt declared. "Cut in gradually around it, Otho. If the Cold One base is there, we don't want them to sight us."

"If their base isn't there I'll boot that mutt clear out of this universe for leading us on a wild-goose chase," Otho muttered.

They swung in a spiral around the icy ball of the third planet. The surface of the world was shrouded in perpetual darkness relieved only by thin rays of distant stars. It was Gerdek and Shiri, whose eyes were accustomed to the dimness of this universe, who first drew attention to a dead Tarast city down on the distant

horizon.

"And I can glimpse ships parked in its central square!" Gerdek exclaimed. "It must be the Cold Ones' base!"

Captain Future could hardly see the city itself, but he had absolute faith in the keener vision of the two Tarasts.

"Drop down at once, Otho!" he ordered. "We'll have to land some distance from the place and approach it on foot."

The Comet hastily descended and landed in deep snow a few miles from the abandoned city. They had not been sighted it appeared.

Curt rapidly sketched his plan of action.

"Gerdek and I will reconnoiter the place, in our space-suits. We'll take Eek along. He ought to be able to lead us to Grag if they've still got him there. Otho, you stay here with Shiri in the Comet so you can get away if necessary."

CURT and Gerdek donned the space-suits, and then he picked up the frantically- excited Eek and strode out of the ship.

He and the Tarast found themselves floundering in deep snow that had lain upon this planet for centuries. It was frozen atmosphere as well as water, for this was now an airless world. The darkness was a little relieved by the white glitter of the deep snow.

They trudged forward in the direction of the distant city.

The snow was in many places over their heads, forcing the two space-suited men to dig their own tunnel through it. But they were not going fast enough for Eek, who squirmed frenziedly to escape Curt's grasp.

Curt's iron strength was feeling the strain, and Gerdek was staggering on his feet, when they finally reached the edge of the deserted city. With only their heads projecting from the snow, they peered across the place.

"This is the ancient Tarast city of Arara," came Gerdek's panting whisper. "I recognize it now — it's been abandoned for ages." "It looks it, all right," muttered Curt.

CHAPTER IX

Discovery

UNUTTERABLY dead and solemn was the snow-wrapped city, brooding beneath the dark sky. It was like an epitome of the somber history of this universe, of death and cold and night engulfing everything in their conquering stride.

Yet there was life here, at this moment, Curt could discern dozens of dark space-sleds parked in the distant central square. And he could vaguely glimpse the uncanny white figures of Cold Ones moving there.

"Your comrade would probably be in one of those buildings, if the Cold Ones are actually holding him prisoner," murmured Gerdek. "But which building? We can't search them all without being discovered."

"That's where Eek comes in handy," replied Captain Future. "He can lead us right to the building Grag is in. We'll have a chance to get him away without being seen by those bony horrors."

Eek was indeed now quivering with excitement, and tugging toward the distant square. The moon-pup sensed the nearness of its master.

Curt and Gerdek went cautiously forward through the deep snow, making their way through the deserted streets and approaching the square from the north. Using little Eek as a living compass, they found themselves guided toward a big marble building on the north side.

The Cold Ones who were using this

dead city as an advance base appeared to confine themselves to the square and the buildings which bordered it. Curt and the young Tarast were thus able to reach without detection the rear of the big building in which, they were now certain, Grag was imprisoned.

"Be ready for a fight," muttered Captain Future, drawing his proton pistol as he entered the rear door of the ancient structure.

He and Gerdek found themselves in a dark corridor. They could hear nothing, due to the absence of atmosphere. At any moment, they knew, they might step directly into a group of the uncanny Cold Ones.

Curt continued to use Eek as a living compass as they crept along dim passageways. He and Gerdek ducked back behind a turn of the corridor as they glimpsed lights and moving shapes up at the front.

Eek wriggled in an excess of crazy excitement, and squirmed out of Curt's grasp. The moon-pup scuttled into a nearby chamber.

Captain Future and the Tarast hastily followed. They entered a bare, dusky room in which Grag's mighty metal form lay bound by heavy chains. Eek was gamboling around his master in frenzied joy.

"Chief, am I glad to see you!" exclaimed Grag fervently, his electro-mechanical voice reaching their space-suit phones. "I didn't think there was any chance you'd be able to find me."

"You big bucket-head, you got yourself into this mess. I ought to have let you get out of it on your own," Curt growled. "I would have too, if we hadn't wanted to reconnoiter the Cold Ones at the same time."

He was working hastily at Grag's chains as he spoke, using little flashes of his proton pistol to slice through them. Gerdek was keeping a tense watch at the

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door to the corridor.

"Aw, I'd have been out of here long ago if I hadn't been double-crossed," Grag said defensively as he rose to his feet.

He told Curt briefly of Lacq, the young Tarast who had betrayed him to the Cold Ones.

"How was I to know he was working with those devils?" Gerdek turned, his face incredulous inside his helmet.

"I can't believe that any Tarast would join the Cold Ones!" he exclaimed. "We've never had a traitor like that in all our history."

"Well, you have one now," declared Grag. "That fellow Lacq is hand in glove with the Cold Ones."

Captain Future's face lit to a sudden inspiration.

"Listen. Could we get hold of this man Lacq and get him out of here?"

"Yes, let's seize the traitor and take him back to Bebemos for judgment," Gerdek agreed passionately.

"I'm not thinking merely of punishing the man for his treachery," Curt said impatiently. "You know we came here with the idea of learning as much as possible about the Cold Ones, so that we could try to devise new methods of attack on them. Well, if this man Lacq has been allied with the Cold Ones, he must know a lot about them. We could get him to divulge that knowledge, I'm sure."

"I think Lacq is somewhere in this building yet," Grag said. "He's looked in here a couple of times."

"We'll try to find him," Captain Future decided. "It's a devilish risk, but it's worth it if we can get hold of that traitor and learn all he knows."

THEY nerved themselves for the risky attempt. Both Curt and Gerdek held their weapons in readiness for instant action. Grag picked up Eek with one hand and balled his other into a fist, as they started cautiously back out into the

corridor.

Things suddenly happened with explosive swiftness. As they entered the dim corridor, they came almost face to face with three Cold Ones and a space-suited man coming along the passage.

"That's Lacq!" yelled Grag, plunging forward. "Take care of those devils and I'll get him!"

The bony Cold Ones drew their atom-shell guns with phenomenal speed. But they could not match the superhuman swiftness with which Captain Future shot.

Three bursts of blazing force streaked from his proton pistol faster than the eye could follow. The three unhuman creatures tumbled forward, their skull-like heads shattered before they could fire.

Grag had seized Lacq's throat and was squeezing grimly through the traitor's space-suit. The man went limp and unconscious.

"Don't kill him, you idiot!" Curt cried to the robot. "Out of here, quick!"

They ran down the corridor toward the rear of the building. But the fight had not gone unnoticed. Two Cold Ones appeared at the front end of the passage.

Captain Future turned and shot with the quickness of a wolf's snap. He and Gerdek and Grag, the latter carrying the unconscious Lacq like a child, burst out of the building and started through the dead, snow-wrapped city in a run.

Curt glanced back. Space-sleds were rising into the dark sky above the square, like hornets suddenly aroused.

"Hurry!" he yelled. "The alarm's out and all the Cold Ones there will be out looking for us."

They had reached the edge of the city, were floundering out through the great drifts of snow in the direction of the Comet. Up across the stars of the brooding sky came the searching space-sleds.

Grag led the way, his mighty form crashing a path through the high snow despite the unconscious burden he carried.

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But they were less than a third of the way to the Comet, when one of the space-sleds furiously quartering across the heavens came diving toward them.

"They've spotted us! Duck into the snow before they blast us!" Captain Future cried.

"They're not going to blast anybody!" Grag exclaimed. "Look at that!"

From ahead, a shining metal thunderbolt whizzed above them to attack the swooping space-sled. It was the Comet, and its heavy proton guns were belching deadly beams that smashed at the enemy craft.

The space-sled was ripped from stem to stern by those deadly rays. It fell, a whirling mass of wreckage and bony white bodies. Other enemy craft came rushing across the sky immediately. But the Comet was already swooping down toward the three fugitives in the snow.

"In with you!" Curt yelled as the open door of the hovering ship yawned beside them.

They tumbled into the air-lock and Future slammed shut the outer door. "Okay, Otho!" he cried.

Whizz — roar! The Comet stood on its tail as Otho flung it out of the path of the onrushing space-sleds.

Captain Future and his two companions were flung against the wall as they scrambled with their senseless captive toward the control room.

"Take the guns, Chief!" Otho cried from the space-stick. "Simon's been using them, but he's a little slow for this party."

Otho's slant-green eyes were blazing with excitement as he flung the Comet all over the sky to outmaneuver the attacking space-sleds.

"Quit playing around and haul tail out of here before those devils gang up on us!" Curt ordered him. "There's too many—"

HE WAS interrupted by the raging swoop of two enemy craft, that came in from the quarter with their guns spitting atom-shells.

Otho avoided the shells by a twist of the space-stick, and Captain Future let go with two bursts of the port proton gun. The beams caught one space-sled squarely, grazed the other closely.

Then the Comet zoomed skyward before the Cold Ones could attack again. Otho corkscrewed the ship's flight until the space-sleds seeking to pursue were thrown off by the ship's superior speed. By that time, they were far out in space from the frozen world.

"We've left them for good," Curt said, panting. He removed his helmet and mopped his brow. "Lay your course back to Tarasia, full speed." Otho was looking around at Grag.

"I see you hauled that big cast-iron idiot out of his jam, Chief," he commented sourly.

"No thanks to you, you misbegotten son of a test-tube," retorted Grag. "It was Eek who led the Chief right to me. Yes, sir! Eek's brilliant intelligence located me, just as he found the Chief for us that time on the comet-world. What would we do without him?"

"Oh, devils of space, now he's going to start bragging about that miserable moon-pup again!" exclaimed Otho in exasperation.

"What did Oog ever do to brag about?" demanded Grag. "That thick-headed little pet of yours can't do anything except sleep and eat."

Captain Future ignored the argument as he stared keenly back into space. They had definitely shaken off the pursuit of the Cold Ones. The space-sleds could not match the Comet's high-speed drive.

As the ship continued to throb faster than light through the great cluster of dead and dying suns, on its return trip to Tarasia, Curt went back into the cabin

with the Brain. Back there, Gerdek had stripped off Lacq's space-suit. The young traitor was regaining consciousness.

"What happened?" gasped Lacq, his pale young face dazed as he looked bewilderedly around.

"You've been captured and you're being taken back to Bebemos to meet the fate you deserve, traitor!" Gerdek burst out. "The Council of Suns will sentence you to the Unbodied indefinitely for your treachery."

"You mean that this man was working with the Cold Ones?" Shiri said incredulously. "Oh, no, that's impossible."

Lacq seemed crushed by despair.

"You've ruined everything by taking me prisoner!" he cried. "You've wrecked all my plans."

"We've ruined your plans to help the Cold Ones," spat Gerdek. "Even being condemned to the Unbodied is too good a fate for you!"

"What is all this about the Unbodied?" the Brain asked puzzledly.

Before Gerdek could answer, Curt Newton intervened. His eyes and voice were hard as he spoke to the abashed young prisoner.

"Lacq, I don't know what this punishment is that Gerdek refers to, but I gather it's unpleasant," Curt said. "Your only chance to avoid it is to cooperate with us. You must know a lot about the Cold Ones, and we want to hear everything you know."

Lacq looked up at Curt Newton for the first time. His eyes dilated in amazement as he stared at the red-haired planeteer and then at the unhuman, hovering shape of the Brain.

"Who — who are you?" he mumbled to Curt. "You're no Tarast —"

"He is Kaffr!" Gerdek said forcefully. "Kaffr himself, come back from the dead with his comrades. Ah, that unnerves you, traitor!"

Lacq had started violently as he heard

the name of the Tarasts' ancient legendary hero. He peered frozenly at Curt's face.

"It's true — you do look like Kaffr," he murmured in awe. A wild joy appeared in his eyes. "Kaffr, come back to help our people!"

"The Tarasts are no longer your people, traitor!" said Gerdek.

"But they are!" Lacq declared earnestly. "I am no traitor, really. I pretended to be one, yes. I joined the Cold Ones and offered to help them, but only because I had a plan to aid my own people."

"Lies!" said Gerdek contemptuously. "The fellow is trying to squirm out of his treachery. Didn't he betray Grag to the Cold Ones?"

"I didn't know the metal man was a Tarast ally," Lacq protested. "And I was desperate to gain the Cold Ones' confidence, to aid my plan. That is the truth!" Lacq went on. "My plan was to find the hidden secret of the Cold Ones, the secret vulnerability which would enable us to conquer them if we only knew it. It is the one thing in this universe of which they are afraid."

CHAPTER X

Disaster

CAPTAIN FUTURE was instantly alert.

"What's this you're saying? You claim that the Cold Ones have a vulnerable weakness that nobody knows about?"

Lacq's head bobbed excitedly. "Yes, Kaffr. It is so."

"Do not believe him," Gerdek advised Curt heatedly. "No Tarast has ever heard about any such secret weakness of the Cold Ones. How would he know anything about it?"

"I know," Lacq replied simply,

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"because I am a descendant of the man who first created the Cold Ones. Zuur, the scientist, was my remote ancestor."

Captain Future felt dawning excitement.

"Zuur, the man who produced the Cold Ones by artificial evolution on the world

Thool? You are descended from him?"

"That cannot be so," Gerdek declared. "For Zuur's family perished as he did when the Cold Ones he had created slew him."

Lacq shook his head.

"No, Zuur's family did not perish, though everyone thought they did. They had left Thool before the fatal experiments began. After the tragedy, they changed their family name.

"They did so," he added with a trace of bitterness, "because all the Tarast race blamed Zuur for creating the Cold Ones. They knew this universal resentment and hatred would extend to the dead scientist's family."

Shiri looked excitedly at Curt Newton. "It sounds like the truth to me, Kaffr!" Curt reserved judgment.

"Let's hear your story," he told Lacq. Lacq spoke with earnest eagerness.

"I will tell you, Kaffr. Perhaps my plan is not yet lost, now that you have returned."

He talked rapidly.

"We of my family have always kept secret the fact that we are descended from Zuur, of such unhappy memory. But some of the papers and notes of our unfortunate ancestor, we have always preserved. Recently, I examined those papers for the first time.

"I found little in them worthy of note. There were records of experiments, but these I could not understand; for you know how much our scientific knowledge has decayed. But I did find among the papers a last letter which Zuur had written to his wife from the laboratory on frozen Thool.

"Zuur wrote:

" 'My latest attempt to create a new mutant race of humans, to fit the changed conditions of our universe, has been a failure. These new mutants can endure cold and airlessness, as I had hoped. Their osseous bodies require only simple mineral

elements for sustenance. They are highly intelligent, too, though their intelligence is of a coldly malignant type. This leads me to think my process changed the human mind or soul, as well as the body.

" 'But despite their intelligence and capabilities, they are a failure. For though they can endure the most extreme conditions of cold and hardship, they have one hidden weakness in their makeup that would render them vulnerable to extermination by anyone who knew it.

" 'So I am going to destroy them and try again, in order to develop a different mutant of less malignant type who will not possess this dangerous and vulnerable weakness.' "

Lacq paused a moment, and then went on earnestly.

"That is what my ancestor Zuur wrote in his last letter. It was the Cold Ones he was writing about, and whom he meant to destroy. He never did so, however. The Cold Ones must have guessed their creator's intention — for they killed him first. Then they spread out from Thool, increasing in numbers and invading all the universe."

Captain Future felt a growing excitement.

"This vulnerable weakness or the Cold Ones to which Zuur referred — was there no hint of its nature?" Lacq shook his head.

"No, there was not. I searched through all the surviving papers of Zuur which my family possessed, but without success."

"Lad, if we could learn that secret, vulnerable point, we could destroy the

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Cold Ones!" exclaimed the Brain.

LACQ'S head bobbed.

"That was my plan! I reasoned that the secret might exist in records made by Zuur in his laboratory at Thool. If I could find and search Zuur's records there, I would hold power to eliminate forever the menace of the Cold Ones.

"But how was I to get to Thool to make such — a search? It seemed impossible, for distant Thool is now the capital of the Cold Ones' power. On that forbidding, icy world far across the universe lies the central city from which their king reigns. How could I reach and search that world?

"I decided that my only chance lay in subterfuge. I would become an ally of the Cold Ones, a supposed traitor to my own race. In that way, I might be able to reach guarded Thool.

"But though they accepted me as an ally because of false information I gave them, the Cold Ones would not permit me to go to Thool. Then you came and captured me, Kaffr."

Curt Newton asked a keen question.

"Even if you had got to Thool, how could you have much hope of finding the secret of the Cold Ones' vulnerability? Wouldn't Zuur's laboratory and records be gone, after all this time?"

"No, the laboratory of my ancestor Zuur still exists on Thool," Lacq asserted. "I learned from the Cold Ones whom I 'joined' that the laboratory is still there. I gathered that the creatures shun that place of their creation. They say the place is haunted by terrible danger."

Curt Newton's gray eyes gleamed.

"Lacq, I believe your story. And I think it gives us the chance I've been looking for. The chance to devise a weapon with which the Tarasts can hurl back the Cold Ones for good!"

Gerdek looked doubtful.

"You think the Cold Ones really have such a vulnerable weakness? But what

could it be?"

"I haven't an idea," Curt admitted. "But Zuur knew what it was. He created the Cold Ones; he knew more about them than anyone else. If we could go to Thool and search his records —"

"Go to Thool?" Gerdek repeated. "You talk as if it were easy! Do you think you can just speed to Thool in this ship without trouble?"

"I suppose it wouldn't be easy," Captain Future conceded. "But we've got into some tightly guarded places before this."

"You don't know of what you speak," Gerdek said emphatically. "You would not have one chance in a million of reaching Thool. That icy world lies far across our universe, countless leagues away.

"All those vast spaces and their dead suns and worlds are patrolled and inhabited by the Cold Ones. Their ships are everywhere. You'd never get through."

Shiri nodded troubledly.

"And even if you did by some miracle win through the Cold One patrols, you'd find Thool so guarded that you would be discovered and seized almost at once," she warned.

"I am afraid they are right," Lacq said discouragedly to Curt. "No Tarast ship for centuries has succeeded in even getting near Thool. It would take every star-cruiser we have to smash a way through to it." Captain Future's eyes flashed.

"Then we'll gather every Tarast star-cruiser for just such an attempt! We'll assemble a force and make a swift surprise raid across the universe to Thool. Once we overcome its defenses, we can find Zuur's ancient laboratory and search his records."

The three Tarasts seemed dumfounded by the suggestion.

"But my people never have dreamed of carrying the attack to our outnumbering enemies!" gasped Gerdek.

"That's the very reason why the Cold Ones won't be expecting a savage assault

on their capital," Curt retorted.

L ACQ'S face lit up.

"Kaffr, only you would have thought of such a daring plan! And it could succeed! Before the Cold Ones could rally their far-flung forces to the point of counter-attack, we would have had a chance to find my ancestor's secret. With it, we could repel all their hordes."

"But will the Tarasts agree to make such an attack?" Curt Newton asked anxiously.

"They'll follow Kaffr anywhere!" Shiri told him eagerly.

"Good!" Curt exclaimed. "Well soon be back in Bebemos. I'll propose the plan to the Council of Suns at once."

Taut impatience possessed Curt Newton as the Comet flashed through the cluster of dying suns, toward the heart of the shrunken Tarast empire. Curt felt the thrill of the offensive he had planned, the audacious, desperate foray that he would lead across this waning universe to the guarded citadel of the Cold Ones' power.

The risks would be great, he knew. But they were worth taking, when there was chance of finding the ancient secret that would give them power to destroy the treacherous enemy. For that would mean that the Tarast race could live in safety, until the future day when their universe was reborn and their cosmic empire once more expanded.

The Comet swept down through red sunlight toward the vast, gleaming dome of Bebemos that lay like a shining bubble on the snow. Day had come again to the Tarast capital, during the adventurers' absence.

"Land on the spaceport outside the city gate," Gerdek directed Otho. "There, where you see the star-cruisers parked."

There were a dozen of the Tarast star-cruisers, ancient-looking ships battered by much use. They were of the same general design as the Comet but were somewhat

larger.

"We can assemble a force of about forty star-cruisers from all our worlds," Gerdek told Captain Future. "It is all we have left."

Curt nodded thoughtfully.

"It won't be a very strong force, but it should be enough for the surprise raid on Thool."

They left their ship at the space-port and hastened through the bitterly cold air to the gate of Bebemos. The warmth of the hothouse city was exceedingly welcome.

"Now to the Council to tell our plan!" Curt said eagerly.

A party of Tarast soldiers approached them. Their officer's pale face was masklike as he spoke to Curt Newton.

"Stranger, you and your comrades, and Gerdek and Shiri also, are commanded to appear before the Council of Suns," he said. "My men will conduct you there."

"You can't mean that you're arresting Kaffr!" cried Gerdek. The officer's voice was stern.

"Vostol claims that he can prove absolutely that this stranger is not Kaffr. The Council will judge!"

CHAPTER XI

Checkmate

CURT felt a shock of dismay at this dire information. He had assumed that his impersonation of the ancient hero would not now meet serious challenge. When he had left Bebemos, the wild cheers of the Tarast people for Kaffr had still been ringing in his ears.

But it was now evident that Vostol had remained unconvinced. Determined to unmask Kaffr as an impostor, Vostol had apparently used the Futuremen's absence to gather evidence of some kind against them. And this disastrous turn of events

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came at the very moment when Curt was planning to use the prestige of his position, to lead the Tarasts in an expedition that might mean their eventual salvation!

"I knew it was unwise to go and leave Vostol to plot against us!" Gerdek was exclaiming, in a tense whisper. "What can his proof be?"

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Captain Future muttered. "Don't lose your nerve. Everything depends on our maintaining my impersonation of Kaffr."

The officer took a step forward.

"The Council is waiting!" he said shortly.

Curt murmured a hasty word to Lacq, who seemed stunned by this crisis.

"You leave us, Lacq — I'll get in touch with you later," he ordered. "And don't worry. We'll carry out our plan as soon as this is smoothed over."

Lacq nodded earnestly. "I'll do as you say, Kaffr."

Curt turned calmly to the others of his group. "We will go with these soldiers to the Council."

"Say, I don't like this —" Otho began rebelliously, but Curt silenced him with a sharp glance.

They went through the streets of Bebemos toward the distant, looming pile of the Hall of Suns, with the soldiers marching behind them. There were throngs lining the marble avenues, but from their midst came now no wildly enthusiastic shouts of "Hail, Kaffr!"

The Tarast populace watched the suspects pass in troubled silence. The people seemed stunned by the possibility that their miraculously returned hero of legend might be an impostor.

Curt Newton grimly resolved to carry through his impersonation at any cost. It was not for his own sake — it was for the sake of these people who now watched him in such stunned silence. Only with the

prestige of the legendary hero could he hope to lead the Tarasts to victory over the malign fate that threatened them.

As they passed beneath the gigantic statue of Kaffr and into the Hall of Suns, Otho whispered worriedly to Curt.

"Chief, we're walking into a trap! There's no telling what they will do to you if Vostol can really prove you're an impostor!"

"Yes, let's turn around and crash our way out of here to the Comet" Grag proposed uneasily.

"And give up all hope of helping those people, just when we've found a plan for doing so?" Curt retorted. "No, we're sticking it out. Vostol can't prove anything."

He wondered what kind of evidence Vostol had gathered. No time for speculation now! The moment of crisis was at hand, for they were entering the Council Hall.

Every member of the Council of Suns was in his seat. The tiers of dusty, empty seats loomed far up into the shadows around this group of hundreds who silently watched the Futuremen and Gerdek and Shiri, as they appeared upon the broad stage. Old Igir, the chairman, came forward.

But Captain Future was first to speak, for he meant to carry the fight to his enemies. His voice rolled out wrathfully to the Council.

"Is this the welcome you give Kaffr when he comes back from battle against your enemies?" Curt demanded. "Was it for this that I returned to my people — that they might arrest me like a common criminal?"

IGIR shrank back a little from Captain Future's thundering accusation. Doubt and lingering awe showed on his troubled face.

"If you are really Kaffr, we apologize," he said hastily. "But charges have been

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made that you are only an impostor who seeks to deceive us. We must investigate such charges."

"And who makes those charges?" Curt flared, his narrowed gray eyes sweeping the faces of the Council. "Who is it here that challenges my identity?"

Vostol promptly rose and stepped up onto the stage.

"I make them I I say that you are not Kaffr, and that you have conspired with Gerdek and his party to play this role."

Vostol's strong face had not a quiver in it as he faced Captain Future. The passionate determination in his eyes was unflinching.

The man's sincerity and strength were unquestionable. At another time, Curt would have admired him for so standing up against the influences of superstitious legend which had awed most of the others. But he realized the danger of this man's obstinate skepticism.

"So it is Vostol who still talks against Kaffr!" Gerdek was exclaiming angrily. "While Kaffr is out fighting our enemies, Vostol whispers baseless accusations against him."

"My accusations are not baseless," Vostol replied firmly. "I will prove them beyond doubt."

A chill feeling of uneasiness touched Captain Future. The confidence of Vostol worried him a little. But he did not show it outwardly.

"If you have proof that I am not Kaffr, why do you not present it?" he challenged the Tarast.

"I intend to do so," Vostol said grimly. "I shall prove that instead of being Kaffr, you are an adventurer from a remote world outside our universe, who has conspired with Gerdek and Shiri to impersonate our ancient hero."

Curt felt momentarily dumfounded. By some means, Vostol had penetrated the truth!

"Chief, he's found out!" Otho

whispered in alarm to Captain Future. "Let's get out of here while we can."

"Stay where you are," Curt muttered. "It's his word against mine. He can't prove it."

Vostol had turned and was making a signal. A pair of Tarast soldiers who had apparently been waiting in an antechamber now came out onto the stage. With them, they brought a prisoner.

The prisoner was a fat, plump-faced Tarast man of middle age. His features were gray with terror. Curt recognized the man at once, as the follower of Gerdek who had been with Shiri when the Futuremen had first arrived in this universe.

"It's Dordo!" Gerdek was murmuring in a strangled voice. "Gods, if he's told anything to Vostol —"

Their worst apprehensions were quickly confirmed. Vostol spoke to the fat, terrified Dordo in a ringing voice.

"Dordo, tell the Council everything you know about this stranger who calls himself Kaffr!"

Dordo's terror-stricken gaze wandered from the stern features of Vostol to the incredulous, horrified faces of Gerdek and Shiri.

"I didn't want to tell him anything, Gerdek!" wailed the fat man. "But he threatened me into it. He threatened to have me condemned to the Unbodied if I didn't!"

Captain Future realized instantly that exposure was at hand. It seemed doubtful that he could carry off his impersonation much longer. His hand dropped unobtrusively to the hilt of his proton pistol, and he made an imperceptible signal to Grag and Otho and Simon Wright.

Curt had instantly decided that if all else failed, they would force their way out of this situation. The fate of this whole human race depended upon Zuur's secret hidden somewhere on distant, forbidden

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Thool. He must not give up the plan to attain that secret, no matter what happened.

DORDO was pouring out his confession in a gasping voice to the astounded Council of Suns.

" — and so Gerdek and Shiri brought the red-haired stranger and his comrades from realms outside our universe, by that means. They wanted him to pose as Kaffr, so that the Tarasts would reject the proposed treaty of the Cold Ones, and —"

Curt Newton whispered an almost inaudible word to his Futuremen. "Now!"

His proton pistol flashed into his hand as he spoke, and its muzzle covered Vostol. Otho and Grag, tense and dangerous, had drawn their own weapons in the same instant.

"No one will move," Curt rapped. "We are going out of here. Gerdek — Shiri — get around here behind me."

The Council of Suns seemed petrified by the swiftness of the Futuremen's action. Vostol flushed an angry red.

"So you think that you can escape, now that you have been unmasked as a lying impostor!" he grated to Captain Future.

"I'm no impostor — I am Kaffr," Curt retorted, still dauntlessly maintaining his impersonation. "But I can see that you are persuading this Council otherwise. I don't intend to let my plans for helping the Tarasts be ruined by your stupidity."

"We are leaving here and we are taking you, Vostol, as a hostage," he continued shortly. "No one else will leave this building."

"Wait a moment, false Kaffr!" exclaimed Vostol, his eyes flashing. "I was expecting some such attempt as this on your part when we exposed you. And I prepared for it. Look up there!"

He gestured as he spoke toward the empty tiers of seats that rose in the shadows above the stupefied Council members. Tarast soldiers holding leveled

atom-shell guns had risen suddenly to their feet up there. And their weapons were trained upon the Futuremen and their comrades.

"You can doubtless kill me," Vostol was saying firmly to Captain Future. "But your own life and the lives of your fellow-conspirators will pay the price."

There was a moment of frozen silence in which Curt Newton realized that he had been effectually checkmated.

The soldiers up there in the shadows could pour a deadly hail of atom-shells down onto the stage. And while he and the Futuremen might be able to fight their way out, Gerdek and Shiri would die in the first crashing volley.

Nor could he get out of this by threatening Vostol's life. Vostol was honestly convinced that he was performing a great service to his people by exposing Curt's impersonation. Vostol, in his obstinate way, would let himself be killed rather than see the Futuremen escape. And Curt knew he couldn't really kill the man — that had only been bluff.

Otho's slant-green eyes were blazing and his voice came in a sibilant hiss. "Shall we fight it out, Chief?"

"No, please!" Shiri begged agonizedly. "There must be no bloodshed. These people simply do not understand —"

"Unless you drop your weapons, I will order the soldiers up there to open fire!" came Vostol's stern warning.

Captain Future knew that he was beaten, for the time being. He could not precipitate a slaughter of innocent men who were honestly doing what they thought was their duty. Even if he made the attempt, the chances of getting away in the Comet would be slim.

"Drop your pistols — we can't start a killing here," he murmured to the

Futuremen. "I'll have to talk our way out of this."

"But, Chief —" Grag started to protest strenuously. Captain Future repeated his

command.

"Do as I say, Grag."

CHAPTER XII

The Unbodied

THEIR proton pistols clattered to the floor. At once, Vostol made a signal and Tarast soldiers hastened out onto the stage. While the other soldiers kept their weapons trained on Curt and his friends, these men quickly bound the hands of Captain Future's party.

They used heavy metal cuffs capable of restraining even Grag. That Vostol had made his plans in advance was evidenced by the fact that the soldiers also brought a net of metal mesh, which they flung around the Brain. Effectually made a prisoner by the net, Simon sputtered wrathfully.

"Let me talk," Curt Newton said in a taut, low voice. "I've got to convince them that we're here as friends, not impostors."

Vostol had turned toward the petrified Council.

"Now you see that I spoke the truth when I said this man could not be Kaffr! You have heard a confession of Gerdek's conspiracy from the lips of his own follower."

"It is so," muttered old Igir dazedly. He looked crushed. "And only yesternight, we were rejoicing because Kaffr had returned."

The Council of Suns seemed to feel the same tragic shock of disappointment as the old chairman. Their pale faces mirrored despair.

"I tell you, I am Kaffr!" Curt Newton declared. "It is true that I came here from realms outside this universe. But it was in those outer realms that I spent the long ages of sleep of which I spoke."

He was not convincing them — he saw

that. Their faith in his superhuman identity had been shattered by Dordo's damaging confession.

"You must believe me!" Curt urged desperately. "I only came because Gerdek and his sister called on me to help your doomed people. And I can help you, if you will only let me.

"This universe will in time be reborn," he continued earnestly. "The Tarast scientists of old who prophesied that were right. And if you can defeat the Cold Ones, your race can live until the rebirth of this universe makes possible the reestablishment of your empire."

"Kaffr speaks the truth!" Gerdek cried appealingly to the incredulous Council. "And he has found a chance to defeat the Cold Ones decisively. There is a secret that will enable us to shatter them forever, if you will only follow Kaffr's leadership—"

"You talk of Kaffr, when we have just proved that this impostor is not Kaffr!" Vostol exclaimed harshly.

He addressed the Council with an earnest sincerity that was unquestionable. "I seek only the happiness of our people. And I say that we must accept the

inevitable fate that our race approaches the end of its history. In spite of vague and baseless claims to the contrary, we know our universe will soon be dead, for its last suns are dying even now.

"Therefore, the Tarast race can endure but a few more generations, in any case. Why should we inflict the misery of a terrible existence on those last few generations, people who will gradually freeze and die until the last wretched survivors are killed by the Cold Ones? Why not make this present generation the last, and with it bring the life of our race to a peaceful, happy conclusion?"

"We can do that," Vostol continued earnestly. "We need only agree to the treaty proposed by the Cold Ones, and promise that this will be our last

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generation and that we will have no more children. If we do that, the Cold Ones will stop attacking us and we last Tarasts will have peace."

Old Igir spoke in a slow, heavy voice.

"You are right, Vostol. There seems nothing else to do now that Kaffr, our last hope, has proved a fraud." The chairman addressed the silent Council. "Do you assent to make a treaty with the Cold Ones?"

In a dead silence fraught with the tension of a fateful decision, the Council members reluctantly raised their hands in affirmative vote.

"Don't do it!" begged Gerdek, agonized. "You're committing race suicide when you agree to make this treaty!"

They ignored his appeal. Reaction from the shattering of their faith in Kaffr had compelled their surrender to Vostol's plan.

OLD IGIR was addressing Vostol. "The Council has decided. Are you ready to negotiate the treaty with the Cold Ones?"

Vostol nodded.

"When the Cold One envoys first proposed the treaty, they gave me one of their telep-transmitters with which I could call them if we decided on acceptance. I have it here now."

He brought out the square apparatus that was used by the enemy race for long-distance transmission of telepathic messages. Vostol touched the switches of the compact instrument, and then seemed to stare in concentrated silence at the shining knob upon its face.

Several minutes passed silently, while the Council and the prisoners tensely watched. Then Vostol turned off the telep-transmitter and straightened.

"I established telepathic contact with the Cold Ones' capital at distant Thool," he reported. "Their ruler, Mwvr, spoke to me. When I told him we had decided to accept their proposal, he requested me to

come to Thool to negotiate the treaty."

"Mwvr promised me safe-conduct to Thool," Vostol added. "I am to go in a star-cruiser marked with a silver circle, and all patrols of the Cold Ones throughout the universe will be instructed to let that cruiser pass."

Igir nodded haggardly.

"A star-cruiser will be made ready for you at once. But what shall we do now with the false Kaffr and these other convicted conspirators?"

Vostol and all the members of the Council looked at Curt Newton and his fellow-prisoners. There was a momentary silence.

Then Vostol spoke heavily.

"We have no choice," he said. "They are too dangerous to be allowed freedom, and they have merited our heaviest punishment. They must be imprisoned with the Unbodied."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Shiri, with a little cry of horror. The same horror was reflected from the face of her brother.

Captain Future wondered puzzledly again what there was about this mysterious punishment of the Tarasts which so terrified people. As he wondered he was raising his voice in final desperate warning.

"You are sentencing your race to death needlessly when you reject my leadership!" Curt cried. "I tell you, you must not make that treaty!"

Igir, ignoring him, was speaking troubledly to Vostol.

"Many of the people still will believe that this man is really Kaffr. There may be riot and dissension if we announce that we've condemned him to the Unbodied."

"Then do not announce it yet," advised Vostol. "Announce merely that the charges against Kaffr are still being considered and that judgment has been deferred until later. Then, after I have returned from Thool with the treaty we can explain all to the people."

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"We will do that, then," Igir decided.

With pity in his eyes, the old chairman faced the soldiers.

"Take the prisoners down to the vault of the Unbodied," he directed.

Captain Future and his friends were conducted out of the great hall and down winding stairs that dropped, level after level, into subterranean chambers beneath the Hall of Suns. The stairs were hewn from solid rock, and there was no light except for a few glowing bulbs.

"Don't give up hope, Gerdek," Curt muttered to the crushed Tarast beside him. "Things aren't finished yet. Even if Vostol concludes the treaty at Thool, there'll still be time in which to fight against it"

"No, there will be no time then," Gerdek replied hopelessly. "For if the treaty is signed, then at once the whole Tarast race will be required to submit to self-sterilization which will forever destroy the power of my people to have children. That will mark the end of our race."

CURT NEWTON frowned at this information.

"That shortens down the time-limit, all right. It means we'll have to escape imprisonment before Vostol actually reaches Thool and signs the treaty."

"Escape?" echoed Gerdek incredulously. "You don't know what you're talking about. There is no escape from the Unbodied!"

"Don't you believe it," Captain Future retorted confidently. "I've been in lots of queer prisons in my time, and I escaped them all."

"But they're not going to put us into any prison!" Gerdek exclaimed. "You don't understand. The Unbodied are men and women whose minds are dissociated from their bodies."

Curt started.

"What in the world are you trying to

tell me?" he demanded. "Chief, it doesn't sound so good to me," Otho hissed uneasily.

"It's the truth," Shiri affirmed tragically. "Long ago in the great age of Tarast science, a machine was invented which could dissociate the mind from the physical body. The body then lies like dead, while the mind wanders as a bodiless phantom entity. We do not now understand completely the principle of the ancient machine, but we still can operate it."

"And it is used for the punishment of criminals," Gerdek added hoarsely. "Imprisonment would be impractical, in our crowded cities. So condemned criminals are sent into the Unbodied for definite terms, their minds expelled from their bodies to wander like homeless ghosts."

Captain Future felt an icy shock of dismay at this horrifying information. It seemed incredible, yet it was scientifically possible —

"So that's why all you Tarasts fear the very mention of the Unbodied!" Otho was saying, appalled. "And that's what they're going to do to us!"

CHAPTER XIII

Phantom Prisoners

THEY had now reached the lowest subterranean level. The guards, watchfully covering the bound prisoners with their weapons, halted them in front of a massive metal door with a complicated combination lock. "The vault of the Unbodied!" whispered Shiri, her great violet eyes wide with shrinking horror.

Curt's mind was in a turmoil. He had to think of something, and think fast. He couldn't let them put him into a horrible state like that.

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The old chairman, Igir, had followed them down the stairs and was now

touching the studs of the massive lock. The door clicked open. Captain Future and his fellow prisoners were thrust sternly through.

They found themselves in a dimly lighted space of forbidding aspect. It was a big, vaulted rock chamber whose chill was freezing. Most of its interior was occupied by tiers of transparent coffins, in which lay men and women whose faces were stony and unmoving.

"They are not dead — they are only frozen bodies whose minds have been wrenched out of them," Gerdek murmured hoarsely. "We'll soon be like them."

"Not much I will!" bellowed Grag. "Nobody's going to file me away like that!" And the big robot made convulsive efforts to break his metal wrist-cuffs. Curt

Newton and Otho were making equally fierce efforts.

It was in vain. The stout metal cuffs held even Grag. And the Tarast soldiers rushed in and seized them, holding them helpless.

"No use," Curt told the Futuremen. "It's my fault for getting you into this." Igir was giving orders to the Tarast guards.

"Put the helmet of the machine on the girl. She goes first"

The Tarast soldiers dragged Shiri toward a large, squat machine in the center of the vault. Complexities of electrical coils and tubes were covered by a round copper platform. From the high back of the machine bulged a big copper bulb, mounted on insulated standards.

Shiri struggled wildly as she was forced onto the platform. Her black robe was torn away, her slim young body unclad except for the white shorts and halter she had worn beneath. While the soldiers held her, a curious hemispherical glass helmet was forced down upon her head.

Gerdek was shouting in hoarse rage,

and Curt Newton was struggling furiously to go to the girl's help. But before they could accomplish anything, old Igir closed the switches and turned a rheostat.

"Gods of Space!" choked Otho, appalled by what followed.

A blaze of green force gushed from the copper bulb and struck the glass helmet that enclosed Shin's head. She reeled from the impact.

The mysterious energies striking her helmeted head flowed down through her body to the copper platform on which she stood. They bathed her in such fierce light that her skeletal structure was half revealed. The green rays gave an uncanny green tint to the Tarast guards around her.

Then Shin's body went limp and lifeless. Igir gave an order, and the girl's body was placed in a coffin. Captain Future was now dragged to the machine. And he felt a freezing horror as he vainly struggled.

He had divined the nature of this instrument of ancient Tarast science. The human mind was really a web of electric force imposed upon the neurons of the living brain. This machine wrenched that tenuous electric web from the brain and embodied it in a pattern of immaterial photons!

Grag was raging madly.

"If you do that to the Chief, I'll kill every man on your Council!" Igir's aged face was pale.

"I hate to do this to you all, even though your deception merits it," he told Curt. "But I must."

The glass helmet had been forced upon Curt's head. The green blaze of force struck Captain Future's helmeted head squarely as Igir turned on the mechanism.

Curt felt as though that stunning force was streaming through his skull, tearing with cruel fingers at his brain. His mind was a dazed whirl of roaring force. He had lost consciousness of his own body...

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GRADUALLY he recovered semiconsciousness to realize that the agonizing force had stopped. He seemed to be floating in silent, dim obscurity.

"It didn't work!" he thought with wild hope. "I'm still conscious —"

Then Curt began to realize that he possessed a changed perception of his surroundings. He could not really see, now. His mind received illusory sensations of things about him, by some other sense than sight.

He perceived vaguely that he was floating in mid-air in the gloomy vault of the Unbodied. Igir and the Tarast soldiers were taking a limp body off the machine. It was Curt's own body!

"God, it's happened!" Captain Future thought, appalled. "I'm just a mind — a disembodied mind living only in a pattern of photons!"

His body — his own body — was being put in one of the glass coffins. Yet he, the mind of that body, the real Curt Newton, floated here!

"But how is it that I can perceive anything if I'm just a pattern of photons?" he wondered wildly. "I have no eyes or ears now."

Curt soon guessed at an explanation of that mystery. He was now an immaterial electric entity, and as such was sensitive to all electrical vibrations. It was by the reflection of electric waves that he vaguely "saw" the outlines of things, just as a ship's crew can "see" through dense fog by invisible infra-red vibrations.

The strange perception of his disembodied mind was not really like clear sight. He perceived only the dim outlines of solid masses, yet it was enough for recognition of his surroundings.

"What am I going to do?" he asked himself, dazed by horror. "What can I do, as a bodiless, photon-pattern mind?"

Curt's attention was drawn to the fact that the Futuremen and Gerdek, one by one, had by now suffered the same fate as

himself. Their lifeless bodies were being placed in the glass storage coffins. Igir and the Tarast soldiers were leaving the vault.

"All of us — disembodied minds!" Curt thought tragically. "The others must be floating as phantom minds like myself, right here."

He could not "see" his comrades by his strange sense of electric vision. But he knew that all of them must be near him, transformed into ghostly photon-entities like himself.

Captain Future had an idea. Even if he couldn't "see" the rest, perhaps he could speak with them telepathically. Then at least the phantom prisoners would be able to discuss their situation.

"Grag! Simon! All of you — can you hear me?" he thought with great concentration.

He waited then, floating in the dim obscurity of the gloomy vault. But there came no telepathic answer.

"Shiri! Gerdek!" Again he uttered the telepathic cry. "Surely some of you can hear?"

There was no response. And Curt Newton's horror deepened as he realized that he was completely isolated even from those who had been disembodied like himself.

He could not "see" his fellow Unbodied ones, any more than they could perceive him. For all of them consisted now only of immaterial photons.

Neither could he contact the others telepathically. That, he knew, was because his tenuous new photon-body was unable to project a telepathic electric vibration of sufficient intensity to register upon another mind.

"This is worse than death!" Curt thought. "I'm like a bodiless ghost, that can dimly see but that can't be seen, and that can't speak to or be heard even by its fellow-ghosts."

Most dreadful of all to Captain Future, he would never now return to his own

universe. He thought of the familiar Earth that he would never see again. He thought of Joan Randall, waiting for him —

"Simon! Otho!" he uttered in a fierce telepathic cry. "You've got to answer me!"

BUT still there was no answer. And that, to Curt Newton, was almost the last straw. He felt madness close to him. And he rallied against it with supreme determination.

"I won't give up!" he thought with wild passion. "Somehow, there must be a way out of this. If I could only find help —"

But could he even move? He was a photon-creature floating upon the magnetic currents of this planet. Would it be possible to breast those currents by a concentrated effort of his electric being?

Curt essayed the effort. He found that the heightened pulsation of his mind's electric web did cause him to drift slowly in one direction.

He continued his experiments. It seemed that by concentrated thought, he could reverse the polarity of his photon-body and cause it to flow with or against the streaming magnetic currents on which he floated.

"If I can get out of here and find somebody —" he thought with a haggard gleam of hope.

He managed to drift toward the door of the shadowy vault. It was shut and locked from the outside. But Captain Future found himself drifting weirdly through the massive door.

That startled him, at first. Then he realized that his immaterial photon-being was naturally able to pass through solid matter. More than ever, it made him feel like a wandering ghost.

He drifted up through the stairways of the great Hall of Suns, seeking to reach the Council Hall. He made many movements in wrong directions, for control of this new method of locomotion was still very awkward and uncertain with

him. But Curt was learning fast, now.

He reached the upper level of the Hall of Suns. His strange electric perception "saw" everything vaguely and unreally. Yet, when he entered the Council Hall, he could perceive that it was quite deserted.

"Then Vostol has already left on the mission to Thool!" he thought despairingly. "I may have been in this existence for hours."

Hopelessness was crushing even his indomitable resolution. He felt that awful shadow of madness creeping closer upon him.

Curt suddenly realized that a man had entered the Council Hall. He had slipped in at a side door, in a peculiarly stealthy fashion, and was looking tensely around. With suddenly resurgent hope, Curt recognized him.

"Lacq!" he thought in a wild telepathic cry.

It was in fact the young Tarast, the descendant of Zuur whom they had brought back to Bebemos with them. Curt moved toward him.

"Lacq, listen!" he cried telepathically. "This is Kaffr speaking to you! I need your help!"

Lacq gave no sign whatever of having received the thought-cry, though Curt repeated it over and over again frantically.

Captain Future's sudden new hope swiftly died. He realized that his tenuous, immaterial photon-body could not project a telepath vibration strong enough for Lacq to hear.

CHAPTER XIV

Into the Darkness

LACQ had been startled and dismayed when the Tarast soldiers had arrested Captain Future and his comrades as they entered Bebemos. He had stood stunned

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until Curt had whispered to him to leave them, and wait until they got in touch with him.

That order, Lacq had dazedly obeyed. He had slipped away from Curt's group and the soldiers had not stopped him, for he was not on their list. In worried wonder, Lacq had watched the prisoners marched away by the guards toward the Hall of Suns.

"They arrested Kaffr!" Lacq told himself incredulously. "They must have gone mad."

Lacq had not a doubt in his own mind that Curt was really Kaffr. The young Tarast had been utterly convinced, not only by the red-haired planeteer's appearance but also by his determination and resourcefulness.

As the Comet had returned to Bebemos, Lacq had been filled with wild hope for the future. Kaffr's intention of leading an expedition to Thool promised to achieve Lacq's cherished plan — discovery of his ancestor's secret and the vulnerability of the Cold Ones.

Lacq had cherished that plan for years. It was the one great goal of his life. For its success would not only mean the smashing of the Cold One menace. It would mean vindication of his ancestor Zuur, whose memory had been hated by his people for the terror he had unleashed.

Now all these wild new hopes had been suddenly imperiled by the arrest of Kaffr and his comrades. Lacq could not understand. He ventured a question of one of the Tarasts, who stood in troubled silence as the prisoners were marched away.

"Why do they arrest Kaffr?" Lacq asked bewilderedly. "Has the Council gone crazy, to do such a thing to our returned hero?"

The man he addressed answered troubledly.

"It is said that charges have been made that Kaffr is not really Kaffr — that he is

an impostor."

"They must be mad indeed to listen to such charges!" Lacq said hotly. "Anyone can see that it is Kaffr!"

"That is my opinion too," said the man. He went on worriedly. "Kaffr's return gave us our first hope for years that we might defeat the Cold Ones. If they should prove now that it is not Kaffr at all, there would be universal despair."

That seemed to Lacq to be the attitude of all the troubled, tense crowds that filled the streets of Bebemos. All seemed to be praying desperately that the hope given them by the return of their great hero might not now be snatched away from them.

Lacq's uneasiness was great as he made his way through the throngs toward the Hall of Suns. And that uneasiness was not only for Kaffr, and for the fate of the expedition to Thool. It was for Shiri as well. Lacq had been strongly attracted by Gerdek's beautiful sister.

He waited with the tense crowds gathered outside the Hall of Suns. For a long time they stood there. Then a low murmur of voices went up as Vostol hurriedly emerged from the building.

"Vostol, has the Council made decision regarding Kaffr?" cried many eager voices.

"Igir will give you news — I cannot," Vostol answered, and hastened away before he could be questioned further.

Lacq was more uneasy than ever. He decided to follow Vostol. But he learned little by doing so.

For Vostol went directly to the spaceport outside the gate of Bebemos. There a star-cruiser had been made ready, and a silver circle had been painted boldly upon each of its sides. Vostol entered this ship and it sped rapidly out into space.

Puzzled and worried, Lacq returned to the Hall of Suns. Soon a cry rose from the crowd as the Council chairman, old Igir, emerged.

IGIR looked haggard as he spoke to the tense throng.

"The charges against Kaffr are still being considered, but no decision has yet been made," he told the people. "Return to your homes, and an announcement will be made to you later."

Unsatisfied and in uneasy silence the Tarast populace slowly dispersed from in front of the Hall of Suns. But Lacq remained.

"Something is very wrong," Lacq told himself with deep anxiety. "They've done something to Kaffr and his friends, but are afraid to announce it just yet to the people."

He continued to wait and watch. He saw the members of the Council of Suns leave the building. But Kaffr and his comrades did not come out. They were still in there somewhere, perhaps imprisoned.

"I've got to find out what's happened!" Lacq decided finally. "If Kaffr needs help—"

He put his decision into instant execution. Without attempt at concealment he hurried up to the entrance of the mammoth building. Tarast soldiers brusquely barred his entrance. But Lacq's fertile mind had already fixed upon an expedient.

"I bring important dispatches from the world Raskol!" he snapped, mentioning another Tarast planet in the star-cluster. "For the Council secretary!"

His assurance of manner and assumed impatience impressed the guards and they stepped back.

"You'll find the secretary in his office."

Lacq breathed more easily as he made his way through the dusky corridors of the great structure. He was past the guards. But now a new difficulty arose. Where in this vast pile would he search for Kaffr?

He decided to investigate the Council Hall first Slipping into it by a side door he

found the great amphitheater silent and deserted.

Lacq looked around, vainly seeking some trace of Kaffr's presence. Then his eye was caught by a small, square apparatus that rested upon a table on the great stage.

He approached and examined it wonderingly. Yes, he was right — it was a telep-transmitter such as were used by the Cold Ones for long-distance transmission of telepathic messages. Lacq was familiar with the instruments from his former association with the Cold Ones.

"But what's a telep-transmitter doing here?" he asked himself mystifiedly. "Did they capture this from the Cold Ones?"

He turned the instrument on, with a vague hope that he might catch something on it that would explain the mystery of its presence.

Next moment, Lacq received a staggering shock. From the shining knob of the telep-transmitter a frantic telepathic cry came to his mind.

"Lacq! This is Kaffr speaking to you!" vibrated that wild thought-message.

"Can you hear me?"

"Kaffr?" cried Lacq aloud in his amazement. Then he repeated it as a thought directed into the instrument. "Kaffr, where are you?"

The answer added to his stupefaction. "I am right here beside you, Lacq."

Lacq looked wildly around. There was absolutely nobody in sight in the vast, silent amphitheater.

"You can't see me," Curt Newton's desperate thought reached his mind. "I'm one of the Unbodied now."

LACQ felt a freezing horror.

"Gods, did the Council condemn you and your comrades —"

"Yes, they imprisoned us all among the Unbodied," Curt's thought answered. "I've been nearly crazy. I 'saw' you enter this hall, but couldn't reach you telepathically,

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because I could not project a strong enough electrical thought-vibration to affect your mind.

"I was hoping that you'd turn on that telep-transmitter," Curt continued. "Grag had described the instruments to me. I knew that since it was an apparatus designed to receive and amplify faint, distant telepathic messages it would amplify my own faint call so you could hear."

"Kaffr, this is ghastly!" Lacq answered wildly. "What shall we do?"

"You still believe I'm Kaffr?" Curt asked him. "Of course I do!" Lacq replied with utter faith.

"Then you must help me and my comrades escape from the doom of the Unbodied."

"But how?" Lacq asked bewilderedly. "I know nothing about the way in which men are made Unbodied, or returned to normal."

"I'll try to direct you," came Curt's thought. "Pick up the telep-transmitter, first. You'll have to carry it with you, for only through it can I maintain this mental contact with you."

Lacq shakenly picked up the compact instrument. Curt Newton gave him quick orders.

"You must go down to the vault of the Unbodied, where our bodies and the machine that transformed us are. It is on the lowest under-level."

Like a man moving in an unreal dream, Lacq left the silent Council Hall and went stealthily through the corridors to the stair. Following Curt's continuing directions he went down level after level of the stairs. More than once Curt gave quick mental warning of guards or other persons ahead of him.

Finally, Lacq stood in the gloomy shadows of the lowest level. Facing him was the massive door of the vault of the Unbodied.

"This door is locked, Kaffr," he

reported dismayedly. "And I do not know the combination."

"Neither do I, but I think I can find it out," Curt replied. "In this phantom state, I can pass through solid matter. I think I can penetrate the secret of the lock by entering and examining it."

Lacq waited tensely. It seemed nightmarish to think that Kaffr was close beside him, as an invisible, immaterial photon-being who was able to pass into the solid matter of the lock and examine its interior.

After what seemed a long time, Curt's mental voice reached him again through the telep-transmitter.

"I think I've figured the combination, now. Here are the figures."

Lacq mentally noted them down. Then he pressed the studs of the lock in that order. With a click, the massive door swung open! Lacq felt a surge of rising hope as he entered the gloomy, shadowy vault.

He looked around in awe. Near him loomed a squat, baffling complex machine. Beyond it towered tiers of glass coffins, each of which contained a lifeless man or woman.

The Unbodied! The bodies in those coffins were mere frozen husks from which the living mind had been expelled to roam in a new, immaterial photon-body like a homeless ghost.

"You will find my own body in a coffin on the last tier," came Curt's direction. "Put it on the top of the machine."

Lacq found the coffin in which the waxen-faced, lifeless figure of the red-haired planeteer lay motionless. Chilled by the uncanniness of the whole proceeding, he placed Curt's body atop the machine.

"Now what shall I do?" he asked into the telep-transmitter. "I don't know how to operate this mechanism."

"Neither do I," came Curt's mental answer. "I shall have to examine its design, to figure out how it can be used to

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draw the mind back from a photon-pattern into the brain."

There was another wait for Lacq, much longer than before. It seemed to him that the whole attempt was hopeless. How could anyone penetrate the secret of this ancient machine? Not even the Tarasts who now used it knew its principle — they merely operated it by tradition.

Perhaps Kaffr could solve a scientific mystery that was beyond anybody else? Lacq's faith in the greatness of his hero kept hope alive in him during that long, torturing wait.

At last Curt Newton's thought came again to him from the telep-transmitter. "I believe that now I understand the operation of this machine. Put the glass

helmet on the head of my body, and then reverse the two upper switches." Lacq obeyed. Then came the crucial order.

"Now turn the lower rheostat handle slowly toward the left, stopping at the tenth notch."

The young Tarast did so. As he moved the lever, the machine began to hum with power. White radiance streamed now from the copper bulb and hit Curt's head. Soon, Curt Newton's lifeless body began to stir!

Curt opened his eyes. Then with Lacq's help he staggered off the top of the machine.

"God, what an experience!" Captain Future said hoarsely.

CURT was shaken as he had never been before. He only now realized the awful mental strain he had undergone during the time in which he had been one of the ghastly Unbodied.

He steadied in a minute, and grasped Lacq's hand.

"You have saved us, Lacq. And you've saved the one chance still left for your people."

Lacq's eyes shone with the emotion that he felt at this high praise from Kaffr. He helped Curt transfer Otho's limp body to

the machine.

Otho leaped up with a yell when the re-transformation had been effected.

"Devils of space, did I dream all that or was I really a phantom? Chief, I seemed to be a cursed ghost —"

Curt hastily checked his babbling, and put him to work restoring their comrades. Grag and Simon and Gerdek and Shiri, one by one, woke to life as their disembodied electric mind-webs were drawn back out of the phantom photon-patterns into their own proper bodies.

The horror of the experience was stamped on the faces of all the humans. But it could not erase from Captain Future's mind one paramount consideration.

"Do you know whether Vostol has departed on his mission?" he cried to Lacq. "I do not know what mission to which you refer," Lacq answered puzzledly.

"But I saw Vostol leave hours ago, in a star-cruiser that was marked for some reason with a silver circle."

"He's gone!" groaned Curt to the others. "He's already on his way to Thool to conclude the treaty with the Cold Ones."

Gerdek's pale face was tragic.

"There is no more hope, then. For as soon as Vostol reports the signing of the treaty, my people will carry out the self-sterilization that means the end of our race."

Shiri was sobbing. Lacq's face was aghast as he began to realize the significance of Vostol's departure.

"We're not beaten yet," Captain Future gritted. His gray eyes flared with indomitable resolution. "There's still a chance, if we can get to Thool and find Zuur's secret before Vostol concludes the treaty."

"But we can't go to Thool now," Lacq said despairingly. "Since the Council has condemned you, Kaffr, they'll never agree

to your leading a force of Tarast star-cruisers to attack Thool."

"I know that," Curt said grimly. "It means that we'll have to go without any

Tarast fleet. We'll have to get to Thool on our own." Lacq was stunned.

"You mean — just the seven of us to attempt to reach Thool in your ship and find the secret? But that's impossible!"

OTHO shrugged coolly.

"We Futuremen have done a few things before this that people thought could not be done."

"But you can never do this!" Lacq burst. "Thool is far across this universe and there are whole networks of the Cold Ones' patrols to block the way. We'd never be able to get through!"

"And even if we did," Gerdek said hopelessly, "what could our little band hope to do at Thool? That mysterious world is the very citadel and core of the Cold Ones' power. How much chance would we have of searching out Zuur's ancient secrets before we were captured?"

"I've an idea that might possibly get us through the Cold Ones' patrols," Curt rapped. "When we got to Thool, we'd have to take our chances. It's risky, I know. But it's the only chance we have left. Are you with me?"

Gerdek's face suddenly flamed.

"Of course! I think it means our death, but I'd rather die out there fighting a last fight for my people, than to stay here and be thrust back into the Unbodied."

Lacq's eyes too were glistening. "Kaffr, I'd follow you anywhere!"

"Then we must reach the Comet and start at once," Curt said coolly. "At all costs, we must get to Thool before Vostol."

Shiri had donned the black robe that had been torn from her when she was thrust into the Unbodied. Lacq took the arm of the trembling girl as their little band moved rapidly up the shadowy stairs.

They reached the ground level of the Hall of Suns without detection. But the guards at the entrance turned to shout an alarm when they saw the party. Grag's great fists stunned the men into silence before they could give the alarm or use their weapons.

Night lay over Bebemos now. The streets of the hothouse city were almost deserted. Gerdek led his band by little-used ways to the main gate of the city. They emerged into the freezing air outside the domed metropolis, and ran at once toward the Comet.

A few seconds later, the Comet rose steeply from the spaceport and shot up through the light of the red moons into the void. Almost at once it was out of sight, racing out into the darkness of the dying universe on its desperate flight toward distant, mysterious Thool.

CHAPTER XV

Graveyard of Suns

OUT from the cluster of dying suns that was the last stronghold of the Tarast race, there stretched the awesome darkness of a blacked-out universe. Only a few scattered red sparks of faraway, perishing stars broke the boundless gloom. Everywhere else reigned the brooding blackness.

The Comet seemed to hesitate in dread as it emerged from the cluster into this vast realm of death and night. Curt Newton was at the controls, and he brought the little ship gradually to a halt. It floated motionless in space.

"Why are we stopping here?" Gerdek cried worriedly. "Cold One patrols may run upon us at any moment."

"That's why I'm stopping for a moment — so we'll have a better chance of getting through those patrols," Curt replied,

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getting out of his pilot's chair. "You remember I said I had an idea that might do it."

"What's your idea, Chief?" Otho asked alertly.

"The Cold Ones," Captain Future reminded him, "gave Vostol's ship a safe-conduct to Thool. They ordered him to paint a silver circle on its side, and said their patrols would be instructed to allow such a ship to pass. Well, we're going to mark the Comet in the same way."

"Jumping sun-imps, I get it!" Otho exclaimed excitedly. "The Cold One patrols will think this is Vostol's ship, and let us by."

"But Vostol's ship is ahead of us, Kaffr," Lacq protested. "The patrols will have already seen it pass, and will know we're a fake."

"We'll curve out on a different course to Thool than the direct course Vostol will be taking," Captain Future explained. "By not following him directly, there's less chance of our being sighted by any enemy patrols that have already seen his ship."

"But it will take us longer to reach Thool by an indirect route," Shiri said worriedly. "Vostol will get there long before we do."

"Not if we snap into it and quit talking," Curt declared impatiently. "Grag, get a can of liquid chromium while I get into my space-suit."

Presently Curt Newton, in his protective suit, and Grag went out through the ship's air-lock door and hastily began the task. Their magnetized shoes held them to the Comet, as they rapidly painted a shining circle in liquefied chromium upon each side of the ship.

Curt clambered back inside with the robot, and quickly divested himself of the protective suit.

"That should get us through any patrols that haven't already seen Vostol pass."

Now let's get out of here."

He took the pilot's chair again. Once

more the small ship leaped forward in space. Curt turned the full power of the high-speed vibration-drive generators into the drive-ring at the stern.

The Comet built up velocity with incredibly rapid acceleration. Only the cushioning protective stasis, which Curt had learned was also standard equipment in the Tarast and Cold One ships, enabled their bodies to withstand the acceleration. They were soon traveling faster than light itself, yet still the space-speed needle crept across the dial.

Captain Future laid the course at Gerdek's directions. The world Thool lay many light-years across this universe. Curt learned its exact coordinates, then plotted their course to take them in a broad outward curve to the distant capital of the Cold Ones.

Racing, rushing, humming through the vast void at ever-increasing speed flashed the Comet. Its occupants seemed hurtling into a chartless darkness. There was no gleam of stars or nebulae to serve as sky-marks. There was almost nothing except the somber blackness.

"At last," said the Brain in satisfaction, "I'll have opportunity to take some data on the exact dimensions of this spherical universe."

And Simon, in whose chill, strange mind scientific considerations were almost always paramount, applied himself to the battery of powerful telescopic and other instruments back in the ship's main cabin.

CURT NEWTON remained in the pilot's chair, anxiously scanning the detectors that might at any moment give warning of the approach of Cold One craft. These vast reaches were crisscrossed by the enemy's patrol and traffic routes, he knew. He hoped fervently that his stratagem would get them through to Thool.

"But the time is short — so short," Curt murmured forebodingly to himself. "It

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won't take Vostol long, to conclude that treaty."

The Brain came into the control room then, to report the results of his investigation to Captain Future.

"Lad, I've made an approximate appraisal of the dimensions of this spherical universe. It is more than two billion light-years in diameter, many times larger than our own. And it's still rapidly expanding."

"I do not understand that," said Lacq hesitatingly. "Does our universe really expand?"

The Brain explained briefly.

"The diameter of a tri-dimensional spherical universe depends directly upon the amount of matter in it. For matter tends to warp space in a closed circle around it, by the Einstein gravitation effect. The more matter there is, the more space is warped inward and so the smaller its diameter.

"As a universe grows old and its suns melt into free radiation, there is less and less matter in it. Consequently, the gravitational warp of space is weaker. Thus the curved space of that universe continually expands. It expands until it reaches a critical point, at which the continuum of space can no longer stand the strain. At that point, the bubble of curved space bursts and collapses into a much smaller sphere."

"And that is when our own universe will begin to be reborn, is it not?" cried

Gerdek eagerly.

"Yes, it is so," agreed the Brain. "The sudden collapse of the spherical universe, into a much smaller sphere, causes the welter of free radiation in it to be transformed slowly back into solid matter."

"But I don't see how radiation could be turned back into matter," Lacq frowned puzzledly.

"It's quite simple," Simon answered a bit irritably. "The sudden compression of

that vast amount of electric radiation into a much smaller enclosure crowds that welter of force into whirling maelstroms. Those whirls of energy coagulate particles of electric force, or electrons. These join into atoms of dust, which in time gather in nebulae that spawn new stars."

"To think of our own universe being revived by new suns and worlds like that!" exulted Lacq. "How soon will it happen?"

"It will happen very soon, by my calculations," the Brain said. "I estimate that within five thousand years, this universe's expansion will reach the critical point. It will then collapse and slowly be reborn."

"Five thousand years!" repeated Lacq, dismayed. "You call that very soon?"

"It's only a moment in cosmic time," put in Captain Future. "That's what Simon meant."

Lacq's face fell.

"I had hoped that I myself would live to see it happen. But it makes no difference. Our descendants will see it."

"If we have any descendants," Gerdek reminded him soberly. "That's why we must keep the Tarast race alive at any cost. If it can hold out on our last worlds till that future day of rebirth, its glory will live again. When that day comes —"

A bell ringing sharply from the instrument panel interrupted. Curt Newton's eyes flew to the panel. The needle of one of the detectors was bobbing nervously.

"Two objects approaching us from the left quarter!" Captain Future exclaimed. "They must be Cold One patrol craft!"

HARDLY had Curt spoken, when out of the black vault of space on their left came rushing the two craft his instruments had detected.

Their identity could not be doubted. They were long black space-sleds, open except for a low wall around their decks.

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Heavy atom-shell guns were mounted on swivels at prow and stern. And the decks were occupied by the hideous, bony white figures of Cold Ones.

Otho had jumped to the proton gun.

"I can blast 'em before they know what's hit them, Chief!"

"No, don't — there must be others about and the alarm would go out," cautioned Curt. "We'll gamble on our stratagem getting us by."

A blinker was flashing from the prow of one of the approaching space-sleds, in long and short flashes.

"It's in the universal code — they're asking us to verify our identity," said Gerdek quickly.

Curt handed him a torchlight.

"Signal back that this is the ship of Vostol, on his way as ambassador to Thool." Gerdek obeyed. The two Cold One patrol craft, satisfied by the answer and the sign painted on the Comet, turned back out into space.

"So far, so good," rumbled Grag. "It looks as though your trick will take us through, Chief."

"It will unless we meet patrols which have already sighted Vostol's ship," Curt reminded him. "Keep your fingers crossed."

The Comet sped on and on through the great shroud of the dying universe. As vast distances fell behind, the somber gloom of this nightmare journey oppressed everyone's spirits.

For the only suns and worlds they passed were dead, black, ashen bulks with planets that were balls of glittering ice circled by haunted moons.

To the Futuremen, this seemed a universe of ghosts. To their Tarast companions, this endless empire of death and night brought heart-breaking memory of days long dead, when their conquering race had flourished on thousands of smiling worlds.

Now the spreading hordes of the Cold

Ones were inheriting it all, planting their swarming cities on the frozen planets and webbing the darkness with their routes.

Time dragged on and on. Hours and days seemed meaningless measurements out here in the drear infinite. The strain of terrible suspense told upon them all — all except the Brain, who continued his imperturbable investigations, and Grag, who played fondly with Eek.

They were challenged again by Cold One patrols, but again their stratagem let them pass. Now, however, Gerdek began to get anxious.

"We are approaching Thool," he said, looking nervously ahead. "The danger from the Patrols will be greater now."

Captain Future understood.

"Yes — the patrols near Thool will be much more likely to have seen Vostol's ship already pass."

They peered into the dark abyss. It seemed a black blankness, yet their instruments disclosed that it was a region singularly crowded with dead black stars. There were scores of such cosmic cinders ahead.

"It's a great graveyard of suns," murmured Curt Newton. "Which of them is the system of Thool?"

"Thool lies deep in this region," Gerdek answered. "It is the single planet of one of the largest of the dead stars."

Dread haunted his eyes as he spoke. All the three Tarasts seemed oppressed by uncanny fear as they drew nearer to the mysterious, forbidden capital of the Cold Ones. For generations, the very name of Thool had been to their people a synonym for horror.

Curt was at the controls as they flew deeper into this great graveyard of suns. He made every effort to give wide berth to the dark stars and worlds they passed. For the Tarasts had told him that most of these were inhabited by populations of the Cold Ones.

On many of them could be seen the

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glimmering lights of enigmatic cities.

Yet, Curt's precautions to avoid all enemy traffic proved a failure, for two more Cold Ones patrol craft suddenly rushed on them from ahead.

"Give them the same signal — that this is Vostol's ship," Captain Future told Gerdek quickly.

GERDEK did so, but as he interpreted the blinker flashes of the patrols' reply, his face stiffened in alarm.

"They say: 'Vostol's ship passes us many hours ago on its way to Thool. Either that ship or your own is misstating identity. Stand by while we come aboard to investigate you, or we will attack.'"

"That does it!" exclaimed Grag. "Our trick didn't work this time."

"Grag — Otho — action stations!" yelled Captain Future. "Here they come!" The two space-sleds of the Cold Ones, as the Comet refused to slacken speed,

came racing toward it with their guns pumping fused atom-shells that exploded in a blaze of dazzling force.

The shells did not find their mark. The greatest space-fighter of his own universe was at the controls of the Comet and he had flung the ship into a dizzy corkscrew space-spin an instant before. Curt hurled the craft right between the space-sleds in the crazy maneuver.

Grag and Otho were pumping the heavy proton guns like mad. The blazing bursts of beams stabbed to right and left. The space-sled on the right was sliced in half as Otho's gunnery found its mark. And Grag's unerring marksmanship shattered the other.

"Got 'em both!" exulted Otho. "I guess they didn't know the old Comet carries a sting."

"I hope to heaven we got them before they flashed an alarm," Curt Newton said worriedly. "We'd better try to make Thool as fast as we can."

They were all keyed to highest pitch of

tension as they flew on and on into the great labyrinth of dead suns.

Finally, Gerdek pointed ahead with a hand that quivered a little. "Thool!" he whispered.

Here, in the heart of the great graveyard of stars, there loomed a dead sun of enormous size. Around that colossal cinder circled a single large icy planet.

It was the mysterious world that was their goal. Thool, the capital of an alien race, the core of the Cold Ones' power! Hostile and forbidding, it bulked huge in their telescopes. Wrapped in dusk of perpetual night, its surface was a glittering white waste of ice and snow from which protruded the menacing black fangs of naked rock mountain ranges.

"The city Thool, which the Cold Ones call by the same name as the planet, lies halfway between equator and north pole," murmured Gerdek.

"Yes — I see the lights," Captain Future nodded tautly. "How near to it were the laboratories of Zuur?"

Lacq answered that.

"Zuur's laboratories were in caverns in a deep gorge that cleaves the mountain range north of the city."

"That's too near the city for comfort," Curt said grimly. "But we'll go in low from the north to avoid being sighted."

He brought the Comet down fast toward the far northern icefields of the frozen planet.

Then he sent the ship scudding low through the dusk, toward the black range of cruel peaks that towered north of the capital.

As the Comet swung down over the mountains, the Futuremen glimpsed the lights of a great city miles away on the southern plain. The infra-red telescope clearly disclosed a metropolis of starkly square black structures, dominated by a mammoth cubical building which rose from the edge of an ancient, snow-filled

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river bed.

"That is Thool, the city," breathed Gerdek, with mingled hate and dread.

"It must be swarming with the cursed Cold Ones," muttered Otho. "Look at the space-sleds flying above it."

Captain Future perceived that the snowy river bed which bisected the distant city led northward into the mountains over which the Comet was now flying. The river that long ago had flowed in that bed had eroded a deep gorge through the tumbled ranges.

Curt steered toward it.

"This must be the gorge," Lacq affirmed. "There's no other in sight, Kaffr."

CURT swung the Comet down between the fanged black peaks into the deeper dusk of the gorge. It was a wide, winding chasm, walled by rock cliffs, its floor covered deep with snow or frozen air.

Captain Future sent the ship flying deliberately along the chasm, while they all watched tensely for some clue to the location of the ancient scientist's laboratories.

They had followed the gorge for several miles before Shiri cried out and pointed.

"See — those holes in the western cliff! Could they be the cavern laboratories of Zuur?"

"It fits the description in my ancestor's papers," Lacq said excitedly. "We'll soon find out," Curt declared, and slanted the ship down toward a landing.

The apertures Shiri had discovered were artificially squared openings in the base of the west cliff. They were partly blocked by the deep snow. The Comet sank almost out of sight in that snow when they landed.

"Put on your space-suits," Curt warned as they prepared to emerge for

exploration. "The tester shows no atmosphere at all on this planet."

When they had their suits on, Grag opened the door. Masses of snow fell into the airlock. They floundered out through it, and started in awkward progress toward the nearby openings in the cliff.

The darkness was thick here at the bottom of the great gorge, though the white sheet of glittering snow made vision possible. As they struggled forward with their heads barely above the snow, they unexpectedly encountered recent trails of several other creatures.

The trails were big, wide ones, as though heavy bulks had been dragged somehow through the white drifts. The adventurers stopped, amazed.

"What left those trails?" Otho exclaimed sharply. "Do you suppose the Cold

Ones have just been here?"

"No, these are trails of creatures much larger than that," Curt declared. "Are there other forms of life here?" he asked Lacq.

"I don't know," Lacq answered. "Maybe there are. The Cold Ones who spoke of this gorge said that they always avoided it because it was haunted by danger. You remember I told you that, Kaffr."

Curt did remember. And it added to the uneasiness he had felt ever since they had approached this dark, forbidden world.

"It's perilous to stand here," he told them. "Come on."

They struggled on toward the nearest opening in the cliff. They could see now that it was a high doorway in the solid rock. It was a little above the floor of the gorge, and carved stone steps led up to it.

"Zuur's ancient laboratories!" cried Lacq. "It must be!"

Suddenly out of that open door in the rock lumbered a monstrous creature, the sight of which froze them with incredulous horror.

It was of elephantine bulk, a dark, furry

mass on huge legs, with a hideous snouted head armed with a single heavy horn.

It glared at them with stupid, unwinking eyes. Then it charged down upon them.

CHAPTER XVI

World of Dread

CAPTAIN FUTURE and Otho flashed their proton pistols with all the phenomenal speed for which they were famous. The two narrow, brilliant beams of force stabbed together to strike the creature's massive, snouted head as it charged through the deep snow.

They saw the beams burn into the thing's skull, yet it came on as though it did not feel them. Otho was so stupefied by this that he stood gaping at the onrushing monster in ludicrous surprise.

"Its eyes, Otho — aim at its eyes!" Curt yelled, flashing his own beam at that target.

The creature was less than ten yards away and coming like an express train, its horn lowered. Two proton beams flashed out and shattered the unwinking eyes.

Curt grabbed Shiri's arm and plunged aside with her into the snow. He yelled for the others to do likewise. They did so barely in time to escape that terrible horn as the blinded beast charged past.

It turned and came floundering back through the snow, as though groping to find them. Again, Curt loosed his driving little beam at the eye-sockets. This time, it drilled deep into that massive, bony skull. The lumbering horror collapsed in the snow and lay still.

"Howling devils of space!" cried Otho. "What kind of a bad dream is that thing?"

Curt was examining the lifeless body.

"It's a non-breathing species. It must use that horn to dig up mineral food-

elements. Yet I can't quite understand how such a species could evolve naturally here."

"I think I understand, Kaffr!" exclaimed Lacq excitedly. "My ancestor Zuur made many experiments with new mutant species, in this place. They were part of the research that preceded the creation of the mutant humans, the Cold Ones.

Descendants of those artificially developed beasts must still exist here."

"That," commented the Brain keenly, "would explain just why the Cold Ones shun this gorge. It's because of the fierce creatures which have lurked and bred here ever since then."

"Then there may be a lot more nightmares like that one you killed, or worse hanging around in those caverns," Grag said uneasily.

"We can soon find out if there are," Otho commented acidly. "Just bring Eek here out of the ship. If Eek falls stone dead with fright, we'll know there's danger around."

Captain Future, ignoring the robot and android, was shouldering determinedly through the snow toward the nearest of the doors in the cliff. It was that from which the weird monster had so suddenly charged.

Curt and his companions had their weapons tensely ready for action, as they climbed the rock steps and stepped through the aperture. They found themselves in a square passageway hewn by atomic force out of the cliff's solid rock. It was pitch dark in here.

Captain Future's hand-torch flashed a bright beam along the gloomy passage. It disclosed a maze of squared caverns or chambers that long ago had been blasted out of the cliffs interior. The first room they looked into convinced them that they had reached the end of their quest.

"This is Zuur's laboratory, all right!" cried Lacq eagerly. "See, there are

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instruments and parts of machines."

The room was the wreck of an ancient chemical laboratory. There had been racks of instruments and receptacles, but during the centuries they had been smashed and scattered by prowling beasts.

They went on from one great cavern to another. Here was a battery of what seemed once to have been a series of big atomic-power generators, which had been torn apart by beasts seeking certain mineral elements for food. Another chamber held the ruins of apparatus that had been used for oxygenation. Still other chambers seemed to have been living quarters.

"This is the place of creation of the Cold Ones," breathed Lacq. "In these caverns, after everyone else had abandoned this world, my ancestor labored until he had developed his human volunteer subjects into a mutant race of osseous creatures. Then they turned and killed him."

TREMBLING eagerness was in Lacq's bearing as they searched on through the maze of gloomy chambers. And Curt and the others felt a tension hardly less great.

They sensed themselves near the object of their desperate quest. At any moment, they hoped to come upon the records of the ancient scientist where lay the secret of the Cold Ones, hidden vulnerability.

"Look out! More trouble!" yelled Otho suddenly.

Two weird, wolflike animals had darted suddenly out of a chamber whose door the Futuremen were approaching. Curt fired swiftly, but the incredibly swift animals vanished down an intersecting passageway.

"Nice place, this," grunted Grag. "No wonder even the cursed Cold Ones leave it alone."

From Lacq, who had entered the chamber from which the animals had

darted, there came an exultant cry.

"Kaffr, come here! I've found the records!"

They hastened into the rock-hewn room. Lacq, by the light of his torch, was kneeling excitedly over a metal chest. The chest contained more than a dozen small books, whose leaves were of imperishable metal foil covered with faded black writing.

"Zuur's records!" Lacq said hoarsely. "Here are the notes of his experiments. Now if I can locate the notations that cover his creation of the Cold Ones —"

He was frenziedly examining the books, one after another. Curt and the others waited in taut silence.

Minutes passed. Lacq was going through all the books of notes again. Finally he looked up. His face, inside his transparent helmet, wore a dazed expression.

"I can't understand it! These books are numbered, and two of the last books are not here. And they're the ones that cover all Zuur's experiments in creating the Cold Ones!"

"Look again — maybe you overlooked them in your haste," Captain Future urged.

"No. I didn't," Lacq asserted. "They're just not here, Kaffir."

He seemed stupefied by the disastrous realization that the plan of his whole life had met this unexpected, tragic disappointment.

"The devil!" swore Otho. "Those two books have been destroyed by some of those lurking beasts."

"Animals couldn't get into that chest," Curt Newton pointed out sharply. "Animals wouldn't choose books which contain the secret of the Cold Ones' hidden weakness."

Gerdek looked at him, startled.

"You mean that you think the Cold Ones themselves took those two books?" "It's obvious, isn't it?" Curt countered. "It must have been done when they first

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rebelled against Zuur and killed him. That first generation of the Cold Ones would know of his records."

Lacq's face was gray and tragic inside his helmet. His voice was a hoarse, hopeless whisper.

"It must be so. The Cold Ones would not leave here a secret which could be used to destroy them."

He stared into their faces, heartsick.

"I'm sorry that I drew you into this futile quest. It was the dream of my lifetime. But now that there is no hope —"

"What do you mean — no hope?" challenged Captain Future crisply. "The secret isn't here. But that doesn't mean it's beyond reach."

GERDEK stared.

"Surely the Cold Ones who found that dangerous secret would have instantly destroyed it?" he said.

"Would they?" Curt retorted. "I don't believe they would. Just figure it out for yourself. The individual among the Cold Ones who would have the decision as to the disposal of the secret would be their ruler, wouldn't he? What would their ruler decide to do with it?"

"Wouldn't he say to himself, 'Here is a secret that gives me absolute power over the whole Cold One race. If ever my rule is challenged, I can use this secret to destroy the challengers, to crush any rebellion.

"The very fact that my subjects know I possess such a power will keep them from ever getting mutinous. So, I won't destroy this secret but will keep it in a safe place for possible future use.'

"Wouldn't the Cold One ruler reason thus?" Captain Future concluded.

"I believe he would," Gerdek answered slowly. "It fits the whole psychology of that cunning, malign race."

"Then," Curt pointed out, "the records of Zuur which contain the secret were not destroyed. They were passed down as a

heritage of power and authority from one

Cold One ruler to another, down to the present."

"If that is so," Shiri exclaimed excitedly, "the records must now be in the possession of Mwvr, the present overlord!"

The faint hope that had gleamed on Gerdek's face died.

"Yes, they would be guarded somewhere in Mwvr's citadel, down in the city of Thool. Which means that they might as well be destroyed, as far as we're concerned." "Don't talk that way," Captain Future said coolly. "If the secret still exists, we've got to get it. The city of Thool isn't so far from here." Gerdek was aghast.

"You're surely mad if you're thinking of going into Thool after it!"

"Kaffr, we wouldn't have a chance!" Lacq added, appalled. "Hundreds of thousands of Cold Ones swarm in that black metropolis."

"All right, it's too dangerous, so we won't try it," Curt replied with deceptive readiness. "We'll go back home and let Vostol conclude the treaty. That will be the end of the Tarast race, but it'll be the safest course for ourselves."

That crushing rejoinder impelled the three protesting Tarasts to silence. At last Gerdek spoke.

"You are right," he told Curt. "We must make the attempt, no matter how suicidal it may be. We'll go with you."

"Oh-oh, I saw it coming," muttered Otho. "Grag, do you feel like taking a little stroll into Thool?"

"We're not going to 'stroll' in there like idiots," Curt said sharply. "We wouldn't last a minute if we did. I've an idea that might have some possibilities."

He shot a question at Lacq.

"That biggest square black building we glimpsed in the city — is that the palace of the rulers?"

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LACQ nodded.

"That's the palace of Mwvr. I've heard the Cold Ones discuss it more than once. It's a great, guarded citadel."

"It would be," Captain Future admitted. "Still, that's where Zuur's secret records would be kept. We have to get into the city and into that citadel without being seen."

"A mere nothing, Chief," Otho assured him. "I'll do it with my magic wand, in a flash."

"Shut up," Curt told him. "And listen: That citadel stands on the edge of the ancient river bed that runs through the city. The river bed is filled with deep snow, like this gorge of which it's a continuation."

"The snow in it should be almost everywhere over our heads. So I propose that we go down this gorge of the ancient river and right into the city, by walking under the surface of the snow."

"Say, that is an idea," Otho admitted. "But supposing we get into the city that way, what then?"

"We'll take tools to dig our way into the citadel of Mwvr through the foundation walls, beneath the snow," Curt answered. "Once inside the citadel walls, we must somehow search out the secret records."

"I feel that 'somehow' covers a lot of grief for poor old Grag," rumbled the robot forebodingly.

Lacq and Gerdek were enthusiastic. The revulsion from absolute despair to new hope had sent their confidence soaring.

"It's a precarious scheme of action," the Brain commented dourly to Captain

Future. "What about the Comet?"

"You'll have to stay to guard it, Simon. You couldn't make much progress under the snow, anyway. Shiri will stay with you. I want you to sink the ship in deep snow, so passing Cold One ships won't sight it down here."

The Brain objected acidly to remaining

behind, and Shiri was even more strenuous in her resistance. But Curt's firmness prevailed.

Otho and Grag had already taken from the Comet the compact atomic tools which Curt judged necessary for their scheme. Now, after a word of farewell, the party started southward through the snow.

The snow everywhere in the gorge was up to Curt's neck, and in long stretches it was completely over his head. And there was nothing soft or yielding about this snow, which was partly composed of crystals of frozen air.

"You lead the way, Grag," Captain Future ordered. "You're the only one with strength enough to break trail for the rest."

"Yes, Grag, put that strong back of yours to work for a change," flipped Otho. "I might even let you carry me when I get tired."

Grag ignored the remark as he started breaking the way. His mighty metal body plowed through the deep white drifts, step after step, like a tireless machine. The four others, in their space-suits, followed.

The snow was soon over even Grag's head, for the ancient river bed became deeper as they moved southward. They now marched weirdly beneath the surface of the white expanse. There was nothing for Captain Future to see except the blank whiteness around and above them, and the broad metal back of Grag ahead.

They were, Curt knew, quite invisible now to any space-sleds that might cross the sky overhead. Hour after hour, they tramped on through the tunnel forced by the robot leader. Curt's compass guided them, and in any case there was no danger of their losing the way, for the river bed ran right to the distant city.

"This is tough going, Chief," complained Otho when they stopped for the fourth time to rest.

"You think it's tough going?" said Grag wrathfully. "How would you like to lead the way for a while?"

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"I think we must be near the city by now," Captain Future cut in thoughtfully. "Grag, lift me up so my head is out of the snow and I'll see."

Grag obeyed, lifting Curt to stand on his metal shoulders. Curt's helmet protruded from the surface of the snow. Instantly he drew his head back down in a sharp recoil. And he muttered a swift warning to the others.

"We're already inside the city!"

Curt raised his head more carefully until his eyes were above the white surface. He looked around with mixed interest and trepidation. They were well within the city of Thool, all right. Its black, square structures loomed on both sides of the deep river bed in whose snow Captain Future and his comrades were concealed.

The alien metropolis was weird in the eternal dusk. The lights that shone in its streets only accentuated the starless gloom. Space-sleds were taking off from a big spaceport nearby. And Curt Newton could descry numbers of the hideous osseous inhabitants as they came and went across black bridges that spanned this deep river of snow.

A HALF mile southward through the city loomed the citadel of the Cold One kings, a titanic black bulk dominating Thool like a thundercloud. Captain Future keenly estimated its distance before lowering himself back down into the snow.

"We're almost to the place," he told them. "Move more slowly now, Grag. We mustn't make any disturbance on the surface that would give away our presence."

They were all strung up with suspense as they followed Grag onward beneath the white blanket. At Curt's direction, the robot veered to the eastern side of the river bed. The palace was on that side.

Curt estimated that they had reached

the citadel.

Some minutes later, he advanced gently through the snow, until he was stopped by a solid rock wall. But this was not the rough natural rock side of the bed. This wall was of seamless synthetic black stone.

"The foundation wall of the citadel!" he muttered. "Unlimber those tools, Otho.

Here's where we get to work."

Curt cleared out a small cavity in the snow to give them room for labor. In this little burrow in the deep snow, entirely unsuspected by the hordes of Cold Ones so close by, the five comrades began work.

Using the smothered flash, of a hand-torch for illumination, Curt Newton attacked the wall with the flame of a compact atomic blaster. The dazzling little white flame cut easily into the black synthestone. Curt's purpose was to cut out a four-foot circle.

"Once through this wall, and we should find ourselves in the lowest levels beneath the palace," he said as he worked. "There shouldn't be many Cold Ones about down there. We'll have to take the chance."

"Maybe their dungeons are down there," Grag grunted pessimistically. "For all we know, we're just breaking into jail."

Then —

"We're through!" Curt exclaimed a moment later. "The wall wasn't nearly as thick as I expected."

He had cut a round hole completely out of the synthestone wall, which appeared to be only moderate in thickness. With his hand-torch in one hand and his proton pistol in the other, Captain Future tautly scrambled through the opening.

He flashed the torch's little beam around, ready for instant action in case they had run into a nest of Cold Ones. But there was nothing to be seen except another stone wall that exactly paralleled the outer one. There was a space of three feet between the two walls, and Curt was

standing in that dark space.

"I get it now!" he said. "This explains why the wall wasn't so thick — it was

only the outer half of a double wall! They used this construction to combine structural strength with economy of materials."

"So now we have to cut through another wall," grunted Grag.

"No, we're not going to cut through the inner wall yet," Curt said excitedly. "We'll stay inside the wall and explore as much as possible of the citadel, without detection. Bring the tools, Otho."

They were soon all inside the double wall of the great building. Curt and his little band started exploringly along the narrow space.

Gerdek's whisper was heavy with dread.

"Is there really any chance that we can locate the secret records this way? I feel somehow that we are being drawn deeper into a horrible trap."

Captain Future himself could not help feeling that oppressive emotion, as he led the way in indomitable search through the secret ways of this massive fortress, unquestionably the most dreaded spot of a universe.

CHAPTER XVII

In the Citadel

CURT turned presently and spoke to Otho. He had to press close to the android to be heard, for they had cautiously turned down the range of the interphones embodied in their space-suits.

"Hand me that drill, Otho. I'm going to see what's inside the wall here."

He took the slender atomic drill and applied it to the inner wall. It began biting into the black synthestone.

"Probably there's a Cold One sitting

right on the other side of that wall," Grag predicted pessimistically.

The long, thin drill had soon penetrated completely through the inner wall, which was of less thickness than the outer. Captain Future withdrew the drill and peered through the small aperture.

He saw nothing but a black space. Venturing to flash a tiny beam from his torch through the hole, he descried a musty storeroom.

"What do you see, Kaffr?" asked Lacq tensely.

"Nothing worth investigating," Curt replied. "We're too deep down in the citadel. Everything important would be in the upper levels."

"We could climb by means of those trusses between the walls," Otho proposed. The inner and outer walls, for greater structural strength, were joined at regular intervals by integral trusses of synthestone. Though several feet apart, they formed a

possible ladder up inside the walls.

"Come on — we're going up," Curt declared.

He slung the drill over his back by a strap and proceeded to climb up onto the trusses.

Grag muttered his dislike of the whole proceeding as they clambered up after him. Captain Future's hand torch lit the way. They went upward between the walls, cramped by the narrow space, until Curt judged they were level with the main ground floor of the great palace.

He proceeded to bore another hole through the inner wall. When he withdrew the atomic drill, a ray of white light came through the aperture.

"Quiet, all — there's a lighted room on the other side of this section," Captain

Future cautioned.

He applied his eye to the opening. The others saw his space-suited figure stiffen as he looked.

Curt was peering through the little

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loophole into a startling scene whose meaning and importance he instantly recognized.

"The throne room or audience chamber of the Cold Ones is on the other side of this wall!" he whispered. "For God's sake, don't move —"

He was looking into an oblong hall of great size. It was lighted by flaring radioactive bulbs, but its somber black walls rose into the shadows. In this hall stood scores of the hideous Cold Ones. The osseous white semi-human creatures were ranged in formal rows, like a nightmare assemblage of ghastly skeletal apparitions.

These creatures were facing a dais at the far end of the hall. Upon that dais in a black stone throne sat a Cold One. The mutant-man's bony body was incongruously hung with jeweled ornaments. Around his fleshless neck he wore a wonderful collar of blazing white gems. His skull-like face and unwinking eyes seemed to be staring straight at Curt Newton. The creature on the throne, Curt knew, could only be the ruler Mwvr.

The Cold One ruler was actually staring at a space-suited man who stood before his throne. That man's pale hair and strong, firm face were recognizable through his glassite helmet. It was Vostol.

"Kaffr, what's going on?" Lacq was asking in an urgent whisper.

"Vostol is apparently conferring with the Cold One king about the treaty," muttered Curt.

No one in that dusky throne room was speaking, he saw. The conference in there was being conducted in an uncanny silence.

For the Cold Ones could not speak. They used telepathic conversation exclusively. Captain Future had not a doubt that it was telepathically that Vostol and the hideous Mwvr were now conferring.

AS CURT watched tensely, Mwvr arose to his feet. The Cold One ruler and

Vostol advanced to a table near the throne.

Mwvr gestured with his fleshless arm toward a document of metal-foil sheets upon the table.

"Good heavens, Vostol is going to sign the treaty now!" Captain Future exclaimed.

"We've got to stop him from doing that!" Gerdek whispered agonizedly. "You know what it means!"

Curt did know with dreadful clarity what the signing of the treaty would mean. Vostol would return at once to distant Bebemos. By the terms of the treaty, the Tarast people would be obligated immediately to submit themselves to the sterilization which would seal the doom of their race.

He must stop this somehow, Captain Future knew. Desperate, he raised his proton pistol. If he killed Mwvr, it would at least delay the conclusion of the treaty. But it would mean that the five adventurers would soon be captured. Then all hope of securing the lost secret of Zuur would be gone.

Curt had a better idea. He turned up the power of his space-suit interphone, so that it would transmit to a greater distance than the few feet to which he had restricted it. And he spoke in a sharp whisper.

"Vostol!" he whispered urgently. "Vostol, can you hear me?"

He saw Vostol turn startledly in the great hall. His voice was now reaching the Tarast envoy, whose own space-suit had the universal interphone.

"You must not sign that treaty, Vostol!" Captain Future was saying tautly. "Help is at hand — there is a chance that we can save the future of the Tarast race. You must delay, stall for time —"

"Chief, won't the Cold Ones in there hear you?" Grag muttered in alarm. "How

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can they, when none of them has helmets or interphones or even ears to

hear with?" said Otho excitedly.

There came to them upon the interphone a hoarse, startled whisper from Vostol. "Who is speaking to me?"

"We're friends — right here in the citadel wall," Captain Future answered tensely. "You must do as we say and make some excuse for not signing. We are after a secret that will make the treaty unnecessary."

Mwvr was glaring at the startled, irresolute Vostol as though made impatient by this delay. The Cold One ruler glanced toward two of his fleshless officers. The two left the hall.

Was Mwvr going to bring pressure on Vostol to make him sign? The Tarast envoy still seemed bewildered. Mwvr was now pointing toward the metal-foil document on the table, in an angry gesture.

"But who is it that's speaking?" Vostol's whisper demanded again.

Curt hesitated. If he answered that it was Kaffr, he would turn Vostol against him at once. The Tarast firmly considered him a fake.

The decision was abruptly taken from his hands. Bright lights flashed inside this cramped space in the wall. Otho yelled a warning.

"Chief, the Cold Ones are coming into the wall! There below us —"

Things happened with explosive rapidity. Dozens of armed Cold One soldiers had poured into the space between walls by some door. Now they were clambering up the trusses all around Curt's little band.

"We're trapped!" Gerdek's thin cry sounded. "They're all around us!"

The Cold Ones were closing in upon them. The osseous creatures carried metal chains and were obviously under orders to capture rather than kill, for they did not use their atom-shell weapons.

CAPTAIN FUTURE and his comrades were so jammed together in the narrow space that they could not use their own weapons without hitting each other. In an instant the Cold Ones were all around them, grasping them with fleshless hands and seeking to fling the chains around them.

A cramped, furious fight ensued. Struggling, wrestling, falling from truss to truss until they were at the bottom of the wall, Curt and his band resisted the horde of attackers. Grag did the most execution, even hampered as his great body was by the narrow space. His metal fists smashed open bony skulls, exposing queer cartilaginous brains.

Curt Newton's pistol butt hammered a devil's tattoo on other hideous skull-faces. But this battle of the trapped adventurers could have but one conclusion. The horde of osseous attackers bore them down, bound their arms to their bodies with the light, tough chains. Then they were hauled roughly along the narrow space to a door in the inner wall.

"Chief, are you all right?" Otho was asking anxiously. "How the devil did they know we were inside the wall, anyway?"

Lacq answered that.

"Mwvr was concentrating on reading Vostol's thoughts, as the two conferred telepathically. When Vostol whispered to us on his interphone, Mwvr would catch Vostol's thought."

"Of course! What a fool I was not to realize that," Captain Future accused himself bitterly.

They were being hauled through the door into a gloomy corridor. Their captors immediately forced them along this toward the big throne room. As the five bound captives were dragged in front of Mwvr's throne, Vostol recognized them and uttered an incredulous exclamation.

"The false Kaffr and his friends!" he exclaimed. "But you were supposed by

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now to be among the Unbodied, back in Bebemos!"

Mwvr was glaring down at them with his unwinking, expressionless eyes. That the Cold One ruler read Vostol's thoughts was apparent from the gesture of rage he made. Mwvr "spoke" telepathically — projecting a powerful thought which Curt and all of them were able to receive also.

"So these strangers who dared enter our palace are your friends, are they?" the hideous ruler charged.

Vostol's urgent telepathic reply was also clear to the captives.

"No, they're not my friends!" Vostol was denying. "I know nothing of how they came here or why they came."

"You are lying!" came Mwvr's furious thought. "It is all clear to me now. The Tarasts sent you to negotiate the treaty, merely to play for time while their secret emissaries came here with a deadly purpose. You are all in this plot together."

Vostol frantically denied this, but the enemy monarch had turned his attention toward Captain Future.

"I was able to intercept your utterances from inside the wall by telepathic concentration," Mwvr informed him. "You spoke of a secret you were seeking. What secret are you looking for here?"

Curt Newton coolly returned the ruler's unwinking glare.

"That's something you'll never know," he retorted with a clear thought.

"I feel sure that I already know," Mwvr returned ominously. "But I intend to find out how you learned of the existence of that secret. You are going to tell me everything you have learned."

His glaring gaze swung back to Vostol.

"And you, false ambassador, will pay the penalty for your lies at the same time." Cold One guards sprang forth. They seized and bound Vostol like the other captives, as he protested his innocence.

Mwvr rose to his feet. Red rage

colored the telepathic declaration that he addressed to the throng of Cold One officials and soldiers.

"My people, the Tarasts have been trying to trick us! They have sought to take advantage of the truce which we offered them. When I proposed that we would cease attacking their worlds if they would agree to racial sterilization, I believed they would be glad to accept.

"I thought such a compromise would save us the great losses we would suffer in a final attack upon them, and that within a generation we would inherit their worlds anyway.

"But their attempt to trick us will now bring our vengeance on their heads, no matter what our losses! I order an assault in force upon these last Tarast worlds! Call up every available space-sled and dispatch it to the Tarast cluster to take part in the attack. The attack is to continue until Bebemos and their other cities are utterly destroyed!"

IN OBEDIENCE to this furious order, officials and captains of the osseous throng sped from the hall.

Mwvr turned his attention now to the captives.

"As for these prisoners, take them down to my treasure chamber," he ordered an officer.

"But we cannot take them into the treasure chamber," the guard officer reminded him telepathically. "You alone possess the key to it, Highness."

"I am coming with you," Mwvr declared. "I intend to find out just how much these men know of my secrets and how they gained the information."

Captain Future and his comrades, and the unlucky Vostol, were hauled out of

the great room and down a corridor and stair to the level immediately beneath. Bound tightly, they could offer no resistance.

Curt's thoughts were a chaos of tragic

realizations. All chance of ever finding Zuur's ancient secret seemed lost now. And worse, their attempt had precipitated an all-out enemy attack upon the Tarast worlds.

Vostol's bitter voice came to deepen Curt's dark depression.

"I hope you are satisfied now, you who call yourself Kaffr. You've brought final destruction on the people you professed to be helping."

CHAPTER XVIII

Escape

THE captives were halted in front of a door that was a single huge slab of synthetic stone. It had no knob or keyhole, but a dull jewel was mounted near its edge.

Mwvr approached and extended his hand toward the gem. Upon his fleshless finger was a ring set with an exactly similar jewel. As the two gems touched, both glowed with fierce red brilliance. A resonance of some kind had been set up which actuated the door lock. For massive metal bolts slid back and the great door swung open.

The treasure chamber into which Curt and his comrades were pushed was a long, windowless stone room lit by white bulbs. It contained nothing that looked like treasure. The only contents were some metal cabinets and several tables upon which sat dusty, queer-looking pieces of scientific apparatus and receptacles full of assorted chemicals.

"Secure the prisoners to those rings in the far wall," Mwvr's harsh thought directed the guards.

In the farther wall of the chamber were heavy metal rings embedded in the synthestone, for support of some hanging cabinets. The cabinets were removed and

Curt and his comrades secured.

They were, Captain Future realized, completely helpless. Even Crag's furious strength could make no impression on the chains which bound their upper bodies to the embedded rings.

Mwvr was now giving telepathic instructions.

"Withdraw and await orders outside the door. But leave me an atom-pistol." "But Highness," the guard officer objected, "we cannot leave you alone with these enemies."

"Do as I say," Mwvr ordered angrily. "They are safely tied up. And I do not wish you or anyone else to hear the secret things about which I am going to question them."

"Oh-oh!" muttered the irrepressible Otho. "So we're going to talk secrets? I don't much like this little tea party."

The guards had withdrawn, closing the door after them. Its massive inner bolts were shot home by Mwvr. Then he turned to the captives. His glaring gaze ran over them — the mighty figure of Grag and the five space-suited men, Curt, Otho, Gerdek, Lacq and Vostol.

Mwvr appeared to recognize Captain Future as the leader, for he addressed Curt telepathically. The whole exchange that followed was purely telepathic, for the Cold One ruler was able to project his thoughts at will and also seemed perfectly able to receive his prisoners' answering replies.

"You and the metal man do not look like Tarasts, but undoubtedly you're working with them," Mwvr's harsh thought came to Curt. "You came to Thool in search of the secret of Zuur, did you not?"

"If you're so sure of it, why ask me?" Curt Newton thought back coolly.

"I am sure of it, stranger," Mwvr replied grimly. "You told Vostol you were seeking a secret here. The only secret that could make you dare such perils is the one

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here in this chamber."

Captain Future stiffened at that information. And the effect of the telepathic statement upon Lacq was galvanic.

"Did you hear, Kaffr?" cried Lacq, in overpowering excitement. "The lost notebooks of Zuur are in this very room!"

Instantly came Mwvr's triumphant thought.

"Ah! So it is Zuur's notebooks for which you are searching!"

The Cold One ruler was no fool, Curt began to realize. He had neatly trapped them into admitting their purpose.

"The question that interests me," Mwvr continued incisively, "is how you came to learn of the existence of this secret. Nobody else, not even among my own people, dreams that we Cold Ones possess a dangerous hidden vulnerability. We rulers have guarded that secret in each generation, ever since the first ruler of our race took it from the dead Zuur who originally created us.

"We have preserved it to use only in case our own people should revolt against our rule.

"But now you strangers appear here, knowing all about its existence!" Mwvr went on with mounting rage. "How could you possibly learn that it exists? Who else knows about it?"

CAPTAIN FUTURE had been thinking with the superhuman clarity and rapidity that characterized his mind in moments of supreme stress. He had assessed the Futuremen's predicament in desperate search of a way out.

There seemed none. The six of them were all quite helpless, their upper bodies chained each to a solidly embedded ring. It was impossible to get their hands free. Yet a shadowy plan began to form in Curt's mind.

He answered the vengeful monarch's telepathic question.

"No one else knows that there is such a secret," said Captain Future. "Then how did you learn of its existence?" demanded Mwvr.

It was the question for which Captain Future had been waiting. His reply was in line with the tenuous scheme he had formed.

"Lacq, one of my Tarast comrades here, is a remote descendant of Zuur," Curt declared. "He had some of his ancestor's papers, which he showed me. In one of those papers, Zuur had hinted at the secret."

"Where is that paper now?" Mwvr asked instantly.

"I don't have it!" Curt answered hastily. "I destroyed it after I had read it."

He purposely made his denial too hasty and emphatic. As he had hoped, Mwvr immediately disbelieved the too-vehement denial.

"You are trying to deceive me!" charged the enemy king. "You undoubtedly have the paper in your possession. It must be destroyed at once, for not even my own officers may see it."

Gripping his atom-pistol in one bony hand, Mwvr advanced toward Captain Future. Had the Cold One king been able to read the hidden plan in Curt's mind, he would nastily have recoiled.

But he could not read Curt's hidden thoughts. The telepathic faculty of the Cold Ones was only an ability to project concentrated thought-messages or to detect such concentrated mental messages when projected by others.

Mwvr came close to Captain Future and reached toward the helmet of his space-suit.

"I shall have to remove your helmet and thus end your life, before I can search you. But you would never leave this chamber alive anyway —"

Mwvr never finished that coldly cruel thought. The opportunity for which Curt had desperately played had arrived.

Curt's upper body was tightly bound to the wall. But his legs were free. And he lashed out with them now in a carefully calculated kick at Mwvr's bony shanks.

The Cold One's osseous limbs were kicked from beneath him. He fell, just as

Curt had planned he should fall, directly in front of Grag. "Grag, kill him!" yelled Curt at the same moment.

Grag acted. The mighty robot's upper body was bound, like the rest of them. But his huge metal legs were free also.

He instantly raised one of his massive metal feet, brought it down with all his force upon the head of the sprawling Mwvr. There was a crunching sound. Mwvr's osseous body lay suddenly unmoving.

Grag raised his foot to disclose that the hideous skull-like head had been shattered, laying bare the pulped cartilage-brain.

"Chief, that devil's dead!" cried Otho exultantly. "What an ideal And I thought we were done for!"

Curt Newton felt shaky from reaction.

"The credit is Grag's," he declared. "He acted in the one instant that action was possible. I hadn't dared warn him what was coming, lest Mwvr should pick up my projected thought."

"But what good does it do us?" Gerdek asked hoarsely. "We're still tied up here. We can't get away."

"And Zuur's secret is somewhere right in this room!" raved Lacq.

"Take it easy, now," Curt commanded. "One thing at a time. Grag, can you reach that atom-pistol with your foot?"

The atom-pistol Mwvr had held was still in the Cold One's hand. Grag extended his foot and pulled the bony corpse closer; then with his toe tugged the weapon out of the dead, fleshless hand.

"Good!" Curt approved. "Now kick the pistol over to Otho."

GRAG carefully kicked the weapon and Otho adroitly caught it with his foot, as it slid along the floor. He drew it in with his toe.

"What's the idea, Chief?" the android asked Curt anxiously.

"The idea," Captain Future said, "is to use the atom-pistol to get one of us free. You'll have to do it with your feet, Otho. I chose you because you're the deftest of us all at such tricks. I want you to try to blow out the wall ring-bolt holding Grag."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Grag protested. "No crazy android is going to let fly with an atom-gun at me, aiming with his feet!"

"Otho will be careful, Grag," reassured Curt. "The shells in these small pistols make a flare of force only a foot across. The flare may scorch your back when it burns out the bolt in the wall, but it won't do you much real damage."

"Why not let somebody else get his back scorched?" Grag cried.

"Because if the space-suit of any of us is burned through, we'd die at once in this airless world," Curt explained.

Grag reluctantly acquiesced. He strained forward as far as he could, as Otho tensely maneuvered the pistol between his two feet.

Otho was unhumanly clever at such tricks of manipulation. But the heavy space-suit that covered his feet hampered him. At last he got the pistol between his toes. Gripping it there, he carefully turned it until it pointed up at the wall behind Grag's back.

Now Grag called a last caution.

"If you don't care anything about my life, Otho, just remember that if you miss the wall you'll probably hit the Chief!"

"Be quiet," growled Otho. "You're distracting me."

The android seemed for an endless time to change the aim of the pistol imperceptibly.

"Here goes!" he muttered finally.

He squeezed hard on the pistol gripped

between his feet, thus squeezing the firing button on the hilt. From the pistol flew a tiny atom-shell that struck the ring in the wall to which Grag was bound.

The tiny shell exploded in a little flare of dazzling force. Grag plunged face-forward onto the floor. The ring-bolt to which he had been tied had been blasted from the wall by the flare of force.

"Are you all right, Grag?" Captain Future asked sharply.

Grag's metal back was scorched and partly fused in places, but the robot was getting to his feet.

"I guess I'm not much hurt, though it'll take a lot of work to put some new plates in my back," he grumbled. He added more brightly, "Say, I think that flare fused through my chains too."

He expanded his mighty arms. The half-melted chains around him parted beneath the strain. Grag stood free.

CHAPTER XIX

Deadly Secret

IN a few moments, the robot had completely freed Captain Future and Otho and the three Tarasts. At that moment they all became conscious of a vibration from the floor. It was from a sharp knocking outside the door.

"The Cold One guards out there!" hissed Otho. "That shell going off must have made a tremor that they caught. They're alarmed now."

"They can't get in very easily with those bolts holding the door," Curt declared. "We have a little time, at least."

Vostol, who had remained in stupefied silence during all this tense action, was now staring at Curt Newton with a wild expression.

"I almost believe that you are Kaffir, to have accomplished all this!" he said

hoarsely.

But Lacq, the moment he was freed, had sprung excitedly toward the cabinets and apparatus at the other end of the room.

"The notebooks of Zuur!" he exclaimed, panting. "Mwwr said they were in this treasure chamber. If only he wasn't lying —"

Terrific tension held Captain Future and all the others as they searched through the cabinets. They hardly heeded the fact that the alarmed Cold Ones outside the door had now begun to batter heavily on it. They had reached the crisis of their desperate plan.

It was Lacq himself who cried out with crazy exultation as he feverishly drew three small bound books from one of the cabinets.

"The three missing notebooks!" he choked. "They're here! And in them, the secret of the Cold Ones' vulnerability that my ancestor wrote down —"

Lacq was possessed by such emotion that his shaking hands could not open, the notebooks. Curt could not read the Tarast writing. It was Gerdek who took the books and tautly ran through their pages.

"The secret is here!" he cried in a moment. "Listen to this! It's perhaps the last entry that Zuur ever made."

He read the ancient writing.

I have decided to destroy the colony of osseous mutant-humans whose development cost me so many years of labor. My hopes have ended in tragic failure. This osseous race which I evolved can never continue man's civilization into the future, as I dreamed.

They can withstand the cold and airlessness of our dying universe, it is true. My manipulation of the genes evolved a race capable of that, as I hoped. But their psychology is alien to that of ordinary humanity, and they are so coldly cruel and ruthless that I cannot entrust to them the future of civilization.

Even if I did so, they would in the

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future be all destroyed by the vulnerability to inherit them. It is a fatal defect which I entirely overlooked when I planned their evolution. It is a defect which does not

harm them in the least, under the present conditions of our dying universe. But it would become lethal to all of them when our universe is reborn, as it will in some future time.

This fatal defect of the Cold Ones is their susceptibility to ultra-violet vibrations. Ultra-violet rays have a terrific damaging effect upon any living tissues not properly conditioned. Human beings, who evolved long ago when our universe was young and its suns poured forth much ultra-violet radiation, naturally developed protection against that radiation in the form of pigmented skin. This makes humans able to withstand a high degree of ultra-violet without harm.

But the Cold Ones have not developed protection against such radiation, for they have been evolved in our present dying universe, in which there is almost no such thing. Dying suns like ours emit hardly any ultra-violet rays. So it is natural that the Cold Ones have no protection against such rays, for they do not need such protection now.

But when our universe is reborn, as it some day will be, then hot young suns will be pouring out floods of the ultra-violet rays. The Cold Ones would have no protection against those fierce rays. The radiation would almost instantly slay them all, shattering their cartilage-brains and riddling their osseous bodies. They would perish.

So the future of civilization cannot be entrusted to them. And as I have written, their malign and alien natures make that impossible, in any case. Therefore I have decided to destroy them before they try to turn on me and kill me. I shall use ultra-violet rays to exterminate them quickly.

Gerdek looked up from the ancient notebook.

"That's the last entry," he said hoarsely. "It seems that the Cold Ones killed Zuur before he could carry out his plan of extermination."

Captain Future was stunned.

"That's the hidden vulnerability of the Cold Ones, then? Ultra-violet radiation!"

CURT'S eyes blazed with excitement. "Why in the world didn't I think of that? I should have realized that the Cold Ones, having been evolved in this dying universe, would have no inherited resistance to a type of radiation such as hardly exists here now. We humans have developed that resistance, but they lack it utterly."

"Then we can use ultra-violet radiation to smash the Cold Ones forever?" Lacq cried eagerly.

But Otho's thoughts were elsewhere.

"Come back to reality!" he exclaimed. "Feel that pounding on the door? The devils out there will be breaking in, in a few minutes!"

"That's right," muttered Grag. "We've got the secret, but how in the world are we going to get out of here with it?"

Curt Newton was feverishly examining the dusty scientific apparatus that lay upon the tables. It, like the notebooks, seemed to have been brought originally from Zuur's laboratory.

"If we had an ultra-violet generator, we could cut our way out of Thool with it," Curt was saying tautly. "There's a chance—"

Otho interrupted pessimistically.

"Sure, we could do just that little thing — if we could build a generator. All we need is a lot of assorted materials, and a good workshop, and several hours of time. Instead of which, we've got about two minutes before those devils break in!"

"You don't understand, Otho. There ought to be an ultra-violet generator somewhere here," Curt flashed.

"Who would leave it here — Santa

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Claus?" Otho countered.

"Mwwr would have one here, if my calculation is right," Captain Future retorted. "Mwwr, like the Cold One rulers before him, kept the secret so that he could use it to quell any possible rebellion against his regime.

"Suppose a rebellion did suddenly break out. Just knowing that ultra-violet was fatal to his people wouldn't do Mwwr any good in an emergency. He'd have to have an ultra-violet generator ready for action."

"Say, maybe there's something in that," Otho admitted. He joined them in a hasty search of the cabinets. In a moment he uttered a cry. "Hey, Chief, look at this!"

"This" was a heavy instrument whose chief feature was a broad quartz lens, mounted on the face of a square lead box around which was a hemispherical lead reflector.

"You've found it!" Curt said eagerly. He examined the instrument. "It has a chemical battery that seems okay. This was designed to throw ultra-violet radiation in a broad beam forward, so that the operator of the thing wouldn't absorb any of it."

He pointed it across the room and depressed its switch. A fan of purple light sprang from the lens.

"Okay, open the door to those guards, Otho," he ordered.

Otho hesitated.

"You sure that'll work, Chief? We've got only Zuur's word on it. Maybe the old guy was wrong."

"I'll stake my scientific reputation that the ultra-violet from this generator will shatter the brain structure of any living creature who has no natural protection against it," Curt assured him. "Go ahead!"

Otho went to the door, which was vibrating wildly from the battering outside. The android suddenly released the massive bolts.

The door swung sharply open. The

horde of Cold One guards outside seemed petrified for a moment by its opening. They stood, their hideous skull-faces peering in as they raised their atom-guns.

Captain Future loosed the purple beam. The ultra-violet radiation and its accompanying light bathed the skeletal figures in the doorway in a weird glow.

And the Cold Ones in that doorway died! It was quicker than the telling. They fell as though struck by lightning, as that fierce radiation cleaved into their unprotected brains.

"Jumping space-imps, it works! And how it works!" Otho exulted.

LACQ'S eyes were shining wildly.

"My ancestor's secret — it will save the Tarast race. People will revere Zuur's name now, instead of cursing it."

"They will if we can get back to Bebemos in time," Curt rapped. "Remember, Mwwr ordered an attack on the city in full force. We've got to get out of here and back to the Comet."

They emerged into the corridor. Two Cold One officers were hastening along it. The violet beam dropped them in bony heaps.

"Quick! We must find a way into the wall. Then we can escape from the city under the snow in the same way we came!" Curt urged.

It was Grag who found the passage into the wall: one of the doors designed to give entrance into it in case repairs were necessary. The adventurers crowded hastily inside and made their way to the hole they had cut through the outer wall. In a few moments they were emerging from this, beneath the snow of the ancient river bed.

Keeping beneath the concealing snow as before, Captain Future and his comrades pressed back northward along the river bed. The going was easier now, for they followed the tunnel in the snow they had made in coming.

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Curt raised his head above the snow to look back, when they had almost reached the mountains. The distant city of Thool now looked like an aroused hornet's nest. Space-sleds were swarming wildly over it, and lights were moving. Captain Future and his friends pressed on up the gorge.

When they stumbled exhaustedly into the Comet, Shiri came running toward them with exaltation on her face.

"You got the secret!" she cried. "I know you did — for you wouldn't have come back without it."

"We got it, but perhaps too late to avert a catastrophe to your capital," Curt Newton said, panting. "The Cold Ones may already be concentrating their forces for a full attack on Bebemos. We've got to get there quickly!"

The Comet rose a few moments later from the snowy gorge. It climbed rapidly through the somber darkness of frozen Thool, and arrowed out into space.

Captain Future built the velocity of the little ship to its utmost limits as they flew out through the graveyard of dead suns. Far across the universe lay the Tarast worlds, which might already be fighting an invasion.

The Futuremen were racing against time. The dragging hours of their homeward flight were an agony of torment to all of them. As they flashed through the gloom of the dying universe, they were not challenged by Cold One patrols. But that added to their anxiety rather than allayed it.

"It means that all their patrol forces have been gathered to take part in the attack on Bebemos," said Gerdek fearfully.

Curt nodded without answering. He and Otho and the Brain, while Grag piloted, were busy upon a tense labor. They were building a powerful ultra-violet generator, which would operate from the ship's power supply and give off a powerful radiation in all directions.

The hours seemed endless, as the Comet dashed like a thunderbolt across the waning universe. To the anguished Tarasts, even their incredible present speed seemed slow. The Futuremen labored on at their task. They did not finish the big new ultra-violet generator until the dying star cluster of the Tarasts loomed large across the sky ahead.

Captain Future took the controls as they rushed into the cluster toward the capital planet of the Tarasts. He decelerated expertly.

"Not a Cold One ship in sight," he muttered. "That doesn't look hopeful."

Again he cut speed, and again. Now at last they were sweeping down toward the central red sun and the capital world.

"Look!" yelled Gerdek in agony. "They're breaking into Bebemos!"

Down there upon the planet, the hothouse city seemed to be in its death throes. An armada of hundreds of enemy space-sleds was hovering vultuously over the capital, wrecking section after section of the great dome with atom-shells.

THE turret guns of the Tarasts were making valiant reply. But many turrets had already been smashed, and others had been overwhelmed by parties of Cold Ones who had landed on the dome.

"What are you stopping for?" cried Lacq wildly to Curt. The Comet had slowed down, high above the battle. "We must strike, Kaffr!"

Curt ignored the frantic Tarast's cry.

"Get into those ray-proofed space-suits, all of you," he ordered crisply.

He and the Futuremen had prepared garments scientifically proofed against even the most powerful radiation. They hastily donned them now.

"Now the generator, Otho," Curt directed.

The big ultra-violet generator began to hum as the power of the ship's cyclotrons

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was largely channelled into it. The radiating sphere of metal mounted on the generator blazed with blinding purple light.

From the Comet there pulsed outward a spherical nimbus of pale violet radiance. It swelled bigger and bigger until it formed a half-mile halo of powerful ultra-violet radiation completely enclosing the ship.

Those in the Comet felt nothing, in their ray-proofed garments. Without that protection, even they could not have withstood the damaging effect of that terrific ultra-violet barrage.

"Now," said Captain Future grimly, "we are going down."

Gently as though in peaceful summer skies, the Comet glided down toward that desperate battle that raged over Bebemos.

Captain Future's comrades were sighted. Space-sleds came rushing savagely up toward them, with enemy crews leveling their atom-guns. Those space-sleds of osseous attackers entered the gigantic violet nimbus around the Comet —

"Gods!" whispered Vostol shakenly, a moment later.

The space-sleds were veering, falling, tumbling away! The Cold Ones on them had died instantly when they entered the violet nimbus!

Curt Newton's lean face was hard and set as he guided his ship on downward. He deliberately sent it into the thick of the enemy armada.

All around the Comet, space-sleds fell and crashed as their crews perished from the withering clutch of a lethal radiation their bodies could not resist. It was as though the Comet was the center of a great, invisible sphere of death as it moved back and forth amid the swarming space-sleds.

It was not a battle — it was a grim execution. Half the Cold Ones were gone already. Three-quarters of them were gone before the survivors ceased their vain

attempts to reach the Comet, and broke wildly for space.

"They are shattered," said Gerdek slowly and unbelievably in the thick silence that followed. "The Cold Ones' power is smashed."

He repeated it as though he still could not believe his eyes.

"So softly, so swiftly — smashed forever!" Gerdek marveled. "We can drive them from every world they have conquered. We can insure the future of our race —"

Tears began to trickle down his cheeks. Shiri was sobbing with happiness in

Lacq's arms. Vostol was staring with awe at Curt Newton's drawn, tired face.

"I know now that I was wrong, no matter what the evidence," Vostol choked. "You are Kaffr. Only he could have done this thing!"

When they landed outside Bebemos and entered the city, they found its people still dazed by the incredible miracle that had snatched them from the very shadow of doom. But a swelling roar mounted as Curt and his band went through the crazily rejoicing throngs.

"Kaffr!" echoed the mad cry, over and over. Curt spoke troubledly to Gerdek.

"Can't I tell them the truth about my identity now?"

"No, do not tell them," begged Gerdek. "The tale of how Kaffr returned to champion his people will be an inspiration to my race for all time to come. Do not destroy that inspiration."

Even beyond the Solar System, Captain Future was now a legend.

ON THE terrace before the Hall of Suns, beneath the shadow of the gigantic statue of Kaffr, old Igir greeted Curt Newton hoarsely.

"Can you forgive us of the Council for doubting you, Kaffr? It was only we — the people did not doubt."

The people — tens of thousands of

them gathered in front of the great building — were shouting their faith and pride at this great moment. They hushed as Curt

Newton began to address them.

"Tarasts, you have now a weapon that will enable you to drive back the Cold Ones and reestablish your domain over this universe. But you must not think that your tribulations are over. Many generations must still pass before this universe will be reborn to new life and youth. You must struggle and toil and endure until that time arrives.

"But that golden era will come, finally. And when it does, the days of your former glory will return. Again the stars and worlds of an entire universe will be ruled from this Hall of Suns."

Captain Future paused, and then concluded simply.

"My comrades and I are leaving you. We are going back to the realms from whence we came. But you will not need us. You have men among you who can guide your future, and without whose help we could have done nothing. So this is — farewell."

There was a long, hushed pause of absolute silence, a stillness in which there seemed no slightest movement in the whole vast throng. Then up to Curt Newton crashed a rolling, deafening shout, a thundering tribute such as kings might have been proud to receive.

"Hail, Kaffr!"

Shaken by it, Curt looked up at the giant stone figure and face of the real Kaffr. "I did the best I could, in your name," he whispered.

CHAPTER XX

Revelation

THE Comet lay inside the big ovoid chamber in Tarasia's matter-transmitter, ready to hurtle back across the dimensional abyss to its own universe. Outside, Curt Newton and the Futuremen made their farewells.

Shiri was crying. And Gerdek and Lacq seemed under the stress of equal emotion as they wrung Curt's hand. Otho looked uncomfortable.

"Let's get going," he said. "I never did like good-bys."

"That's because you don't have a sentimental nature like us humans," Grag remarked.

"Must you go now?" Lacq was asking Curt earnestly.

"There's nothing more for us to do here," Captain Future answered. "And — we're homesick for our own universe." Shin's violet eyes were understanding.

"The dark-haired girl back there — she will be waiting."

With a last wave, Curt followed the Futuremen into the ship. He paused as the

Brain pointed to a new, square apparatus in the cabin.

"I've been fitting up this automatic recorder during the last few days," Simon Wright explained. "It will record certain data on the coordinates of our flight back across dimensions, even though we ourselves are too overcome to take notes."

Otho laughed.

"Stubborn old Simon!" he chuckled. "He's still trying to prove that the fourth dimension isn't spatial, even after we've flown across it."

"I still don't believe that all the principles of relativity in physics are wrong, if that's what you mean," Simon retorted sourly.

"You can pore over the theory of it

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after we get back," Captain Future told him impatiently. "It's time to start now."

They watched from the control-room window as Gerdek threw the switches of the great matter-transmitter.

Again, the Futuremen seemed to feel a stunning shock of unleashed energy that hurled them into a bottomless abyss. Again, there stretched around them that nightmare vista of unreal, super-geometrical space.

Sickness shook them all as the Comet seemed to hurtle amid foaming spherical universes in a complicated course. Once more their eyes were baffled by the impossible perspectives of alien dimensions around them.

Then a sharp shock of impact, a roaring in their ears. And they found the Comet inside the matter-receiver on the sunlit surface of Deimos.

"Curt!" The silvery cry was tremulous as Joan Randall came running with old

Tiko Thrin across the garden toward them. "Oh Curt!" He held her in his arms.

"Joan, we've been through a lot. But it's worth it all, just to come back to you."

Tiko Thrin was tugging at his arm. The old Martian scientist's withered face was eager with excitement.

"You found a way to help the people of that universe? Tell me all about it!" "That'll take more than a minute," Curt answered. "Come on into the house."

Coming, Simon?"

"No, lad. I want to study the data that was transcribed by my mechanical recorders during our return journey," the Brain replied.

It was late night, with the pink planet-glow of Mars shafting softly into the windows of Tiko Thrin's little house, before Captain Future finished the tale to which Tiko and Joan had listened breathlessly.

Not until then did the Brain join them. And there was something about the speed

of his gliding entry and the sharpness of his rasping voice that betokened excitement. It startled them, for none of them had ever seen Simon Wright show excitement before.

"I've been studying the data in my recorder," said Simon, his lenslike eyes fixed queerly intent on Curt's face. "I've found out that the principles of relativity in physics are not wrong. The fourth dimension across which we flew is not a spatial dimension at all."

"But that's impossible!" Curt Newton protested. "We could see that we flew a tremendous distance through that dimensional abyss."

"That was merely illusion born of the ungeometrical perspectives of alien dimensions," the Brain contradicted. "The coordinates recorded in my apparatus show that we did not move even one mile in space!"

OTHO was incredulous.

"I don't get this," he said. "That other universe was supposed to be twenty billion light-years away from ours. We went to it and came back. Yet you say now we didn't move in space at all!"

"That other universe," Simon said trenchantly, "is not twenty billion light-years away. It is twenty billion years away. The fourth dimension is not a space dimension — it is, as relativity asserts, the dimension of time"

"Good heavens!" Captain Future was shaken mentally as never before by the implication. "You mean that we were really hurled far forward across the time-dimension? That that other universe —"

"Yes!" exclaimed the Brain. "That other universe is our own universe, as it will be twenty billion years in the future! And those Tarasts are the descendants of our own human race. Language and names would change, in that time. 'Terrestrial' could easily become 'Tarast'."

A great awe held them all in silence as

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the astounding revelation of their epic adventure was brought home.

Then Captain Future spoke bewilderedly.

"But in that case, the Tarast legends of their remote past refer to our own present time. According to those legends, the great hero Kaffr who first led them in conquest of other worlds should be living right now. But there's no great hero of that name in this age of ours."

"You're wrong," replied the Brain.

"There is such a great hero of space-conquest living right now, one whose

fame will go down in future legend. His name, like other names, would be corrupted by the passing of ages. 'Captain Future' would be corrupted in time to 'Kaffr'."

Curt Newton jumped to his feet as though he had received a galvanic shock. His eyes were dilated by a wild surmise.

"You mean that I —"

"Yes, you are the real Kaffr of legend!" cried the Brain. "You went twenty billion years into the future of our universe in order to impersonate — yourself!"